

The snow of 1957

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In early February 1957, heavy snow fell on Jerusalem for three days. There were long power outages and I remember sitting by candlelight around the dining room table with my mother, father and sister, listening to the snow. It was the warmest night of my life. Several months earlier, there had been fedayeen raids and mother covered the windows with pieces of cloth left over from the War of Independence. The house across the street was an anti-aircraft position. A war was going on, but I have never felt more secure.

Nearly fifty years after that snowstorm, I realize how much I did not understand about that night. After all, it was inevitable that the snow would transport my father and mother back twenty years, to their long snowy nights around the dining room tables of their childhood, sitting together with their parents and siblings, all of whom had “only yesterday” disappeared from the world.

After the snow melted, M. Z., a representative of Yad Vashem, came to our house. It was soon after Ben-Gurion had declared the Third Kingdom of Israel. The same day, Eisenhower threatened Israel with sanctions if it did not withdraw from the Sinai. Of course, the Third Kingdom of Israel and Eisenhower’s threats failed to stir any interest in my mother. The official came to collect “pages of testimony” from her with the details of close relatives. Her parents Leibel and Basha. Her brother Baruch and his wife Feigel. Her brother Eli and his wife Rachel and their children Moshe and Gedaliya and Chaya and Dvora and David. Her sister Sarah and her husband Wolf and their daughter Bela. Her brother Yaakov and his wife Chana and their children Bela and David. I recognize from the handwriting that my father was the one who filled out the forms. When they reached the place for the signature, the official added my mother’s personal details. And when the forms were ready, the official presented them for her to sign. Her “lamed”

stands out prominently and connects with pride to the letter “aleph,” followed by a very shrinking “heh.” One form after another, after another, after another.

The instructions for filling out the pages of testimony in 1957 were precise, as if the signatory were about to testify in the court of Heaven. The signatory was required to declare – “The testimony I provided here, with all its details, is correct and true according to my best knowledge and recollection.” The signing of the form constituted a sort of request for granting the Holocaust victim “citizenship of memory on behalf of the State of Israel.” But the part of the form where citizenship was supposed to be conferred remained blank. The forms were numbered by hand in the margins by a diligent official.

The term “death” is mentioned in the form three times, with considerable restraint. One is in the title, which refers to “the Holocaust martyrs and heroes.” Another reference is in citing the legal authority – the Yad Vashem Law – which stipulates: “The role of Yad Vashem is to bring to the homeland the memory of all of the members of the Jewish people who fell and gave their lives...” Item 11 on the form asks the signatory to describe the “place, time and circumstances of death” if known. Mother and father left this space blank in all of the forms. The instruction to “record the children on the testimony page of one of the parents, but not more than one time” was carefully followed.

When Yad Vashem’s Hall of Names site went online, I hurried to search for them. It was very moving, very emotional. But the emotion was marred when I noticed that there was more than one page of testimony for most of my relatives. I did not really worry about the possibility that Holocaust deniers would use this to refute the “fact” that three million names have been collected and use this to cast doubt about other numbers. I think that I felt that someone had confiscated the sacred memories belonging to my mother. Here, one of mother’s brothers was “memorialized” in at least three pages of testimony. Two pages of testimony were filled 40 years after mother by someone who responded to an emergency appeal from Yad Vashem. Besides the details about the persons who filled them out, the forms are only partially completed, as can only be expected when someone with good intentions makes an effort to memorialize what he cannot know. One of these

well-intentioned persons, an Israeli who completed the form in 1999, stated something that I never heard my mother say – circumstances of death: “Murdered in the Holocaust.”

No one loved these people more than my mother did. My mother would see her mother in a dream every night, even after she had cut herself off from the rest of the world. She loved Bela so much that she tried hard to give birth to a replacement. When I traveled to visit the city of her birth, my mother told me “you have nothing to look for there” and she grew impatient when I nagged her to try to recall the numbers of the houses where she lived in Fabrichna and Dabrowskiego. “What difference does it make already?” she said, and rightfully so. She never attached the title “of blessed memory” (ז"ל), not to speak of “may God avenge his blood” (יהי"ד). She never planted trees in their memory in JNF forests and did not frame their pictures. On Yom Kippur, she lit a single memorial candle and that was much more of a reminder than she ever needed.

My mother understood that the departed are gone and that remembrance of them is short, lasting only as long as her own lifetime. When she died, their remembrance was over. The Hall of Names is a declaration and not a remembrance. I look again and again at the pages of testimony. I cannot remember those who are mentioned there because I did not know a single one of them. I cannot commune with their memory because I never met them. I only have a memory of my mother’s signature, my father’s handwriting and the Jerusalem snowstorm of 1957. Memorials commemorate the commemorators, and this too is only temporary, until the commemorators also disappear from the world. “How right mother was again this time,” I say to myself, noting that my words here constitute nothing more than a small, private memorial prayer.