



הרי אריאל אריאל סיוח אעז איוו

Ho, Ariel, Ariel, the city where David encamped (Isaiah 29:1)

אריאל ariel

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Front cover: Montfort, general view (see page 15). *Back cover:* caper bush growing on the Western Wall, Jerusalem (see page 29)

DROHOBYCZ



The Green, Moss-Covered Stone

Erwin Schenkelbach

Suspended amidst swirling, white infinity, I peer through the small, rounded, double-paned window. Noiselessly, the beak of the steel bird cleaves a path through the cocoon of space surrounding it. The engine's vibrations send slight tremors through the fuselage. Of all the passengers on board I alone know that I travel in a time machine. In just a few moments I will push the hands of my clock fifty years back. The black line of the river along the border creeps backward underneath us, to be replaced by a tilted horizon filling the window frame. The earth looms larger, until the dull thud of the landing gear on the runway announces our landing. The flight has lasted less than an hour.

I step down from the old twin-prop plane and enter the passport control and customs terminal. Military uniforms and the familiar sing-song sounds of the language. My passport is the object of special interest. The official leafs through it very slowly, carefully scrutinizing each and every page. Seconds seem like hours. At last he swings an arm and affixes a stamp almost the size of the passport page. Without a word he hands me back the passport. I put it in my pocket and, suitcase in hand, step out of the terminal.

I have crossed the Rubicon.

In front of me stretches the dark land of time long gone, which envelops the goal of my voyage: a large irregularly-shaped stone, covered with green moss. I shall search for it, so that I might press my face to its cool surface, just as I did then, after running through the

front of the hotel stands a huge, almost two-story high bronze statue of a man holding a book. Beyond stretches a grid of streets lined with old houses, built before the war. Very few cars. I decide to go for a walk. After crossing a little square facing the hotel, I enter a broad street. On the other side, a narrow winding alley leads up the hill, which pulls me with magnetic force. Rows of two-storey houses enclose it on both sides. Behind them I can see well-tended gardens; the recently turned-over black earth gleams. All around are apple and cherry trees, in full bloom.

Intoxicated by the explosion of scents and colours of May, I climb up the narrow street, and am suddenly overcome by a sense of déjà-vu. I know this street from somewhere; I must have been here before. A few more steps, and I find myself in front of a house where one morning I saw men in uniforms taking away my parents for their last journey to nowhere. I watched the scene from a hiding place strewn with old newspapers, where my mother, acting on pure instinct, had concealed me earlier. Slowly, the layers of time peel away. As if in a hypnotic trance, I touch the cracked wall of the house, and caress the railing of the stairs leading to what was then our apartment. The world around me is spinning... the clock hands are turning back with dizzying speed. I am standing stock still, on the borderline between waking and dreaming... Now I walk down the streets of my childhood. Slides of memories move across the wall of its dark box. More and more images of lost time flash on the screen of memory.

A tall, athletic man with a magnificent, black straight-trimmed, Assyrian beard, and next to him a small boy with light hair — my father and I. A moment later, we both glide on skis down the steep slope of one of the Carpathian peaks, plunging headlong towards the valley filled with swirling blue mist... During one of my countless chemical experiments, a test tube filled with reagents blows up. The source of supplies for these experiments is a large roller-blind cabinet where my father keeps innumerable jars, bottles, and retorts containing fascinating substances and multicoloured liquids that he uses in the darkroom... One of the jars is luminous with a mysterious glow... My parents are out. I open the cabinet and, entranced, fix my eyes on the shaft of greenish luminosity emerging from the darkness... I watch it,

wheat fields, trampling over their carpets of red poppies, cornflowers, and wild carnations. **I shall then set on the stone** the scales assembled from sticks, upon which I will weigh flower seeds or small crystals of salt and sugar, and white rice, snatched earlier from the kitchen where mother was busy cooking dinner. My playmates, gathered around the stone in the yard, will buy them, paying me with multi-coloured coins cut out from carton, or with shiny brown chestnuts. Like me, the boys live on Bednarska Street, where I was born.

That green, moss-covered stone is me, Drohobycz, my shattered childhood. From the moment it was taken away from me, it keeps revealing itself to me in brief, uneasy dreams — cool, tangible, and very near.

I shall find it, I must find it.

I am driven in a car headed south. From time to time we pass blue road signs with names of familiar localities. The magical land is drawing closer. Finally the sign "Drohobycz."

"In a moment, I shall recognize every street, every house," I say to myself. With mounting excitement I gaze at the streets we pass through, but find absolutely nothing to remind me of my native town.

"Around the next corner, in the next alley, I'll feel at home." But the town remains opaque and alien. Finally, the car pulls up in front of a three-storey, grey, arched building, the hotel, "Tu Stań." The driver helps me in with my suitcase, and drives off.

After the usual formalities I am presented with the key and retire to my room. It seems I have reached the limits of my endurance: the flight, the long car drive, the formalities, and the sleepless night have all taken their toll. I put my suitcase on the table, and without removing my shoes or clothes, throw myself on the bed, and sink into a bottomless oblivion. When I open my eyes I feel completely disoriented. Groping in the dark, I head toward the bathroom, turn on the tap and put my head under a stream of cold water. I towel myself and open the window wide. Warm air flows into the room, inundating it with a torrent of scents — blooming trees and flowers. The day is almost over. The last rays of sun ignite crimson-red flames in the windows of nearby houses. I take a closer look at my surroundings. In





Drohobycz in the early 1930s, photographed by Bertold Schenkelbach, the writer's father

spellbound, long into the night... A spring morning, I run alongside a girl named Anya. She overtakes me, and her thick plaited braid of light hair swings in front of my eyes like a pendulum. The smell of recently collected honey wafts in the air... The doorbell rings. My father's friend pays him a visit. It is a close neighbour whose strange face always seems aslant; he reminds me of a bird getting ready to take wing... As usual, father has prepared for him a box of used, expendable glass photographic plates. The man-bird needs them to etch the illustrations for his new book... The clock hands are pushed back further still... Our neighbour hands my mother a book; a trace of a shy, timid smile plays on his drawn cheeks — mother opens the book and reads the title page: Bruno Schulz: "Sanitorium Under the Sign of the Hourglass," and a dedication inscribed in dark green ink. Mother smiles, thanks him and offers her hand which he kisses, bowing deeply...

It is late at night when I return to the hotel. The next day I set off for the nearby marketplace. The stalls are piled high with fresh fruit, vegetables, cheeses, rectangular blocks of butter dyed with carrot



The Corso, Drohobycz, 1992

juice, tin canisters with sour cream. I buy some sour cream which the seller pours from the canister into the glass I have brought with me. Later I purchase a loaf of black bread, paying for it with light brown banknotes with the strange name of “coupons.” Back in my hotel room I cut a thick slice — the bread and the sour cream so redolent of my childhood. It’s almost noon. I walk down a broad boulevard thronged with elegantly dressed young people. It is here, at the so-called “Corso,” that members of the town’s elite meet each other... Fashionable hats are tipped. Proud, provocative sidelong glances from under half-closed eyelids... Smiles, knowing gestures. A small boy sneaks past them, trying to unlock the secrets of the adults. Suddenly the Corso is deserted. All that remains is a parade of empty vases of white marble, once filled with flowers, and the same trees, now taller. Filtered through the stained glass of their branches, sun rays caress the pavements with streaks of gold. I approach the house of my childhood. I recognize it from far off — it hasn’t changed at all. Through the dark hallway I enter the backyard and pace up and down.

I push aside the tender leaves of vegetables, lovingly planted in



straight lines. I set aside the objects strewn about. I peer into every nook and cranny. I promise myself I shall come back every day. But the time machine reverses its course. Again we fly over the black line of the border river.

I shall never find the green, moss-covered stone.

Translated from Polish by Jerzy Mikhaelovitch / Sagir International