



Vasyl Makhno

Enlightenment and Insight

(An excerpt from his yet to be published novel)

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The journey from Trieste to Alexandria took approximately four days. After twelve years of life in Germany, it was a different Shmuel Yosef who sailed to Palestine. He does not doubt that the rumors of his arrival in Jerusalem have already flown by telegraph to local newspaper editors and that they will publish short notices about this event. Moreover, he was firmly convinced that his books, written and published over these years, are kept in the homes of Jerusalem or Jaffa. Sand drifting from the Negev Desert rustles over those in Jerusalem, and in Jaffa, books dampened by the maritime air are dried on windowsills, like laundry.

Back when he first left the Buchach rains, after arriving in Trieste, he had conjured the land of Palestine exclusively from books.

Now, as he boards the night train to Cairo to Jerusalem, gliding by small stations and Arab settlements, he will recall the Jewish quarter in Jaffa and a multicolored Jerusalem lane overflowing with horse-drawn carriages and pedestrians.

At the time, he twisted the brittle necks of his poems, as was done with sacrificial doves.

Now, from the rains that fed the Strypa River, the satin Jaffa sky, the Leipzig shops, the smoker's cough, and the scent of Esther's body adorned his writing, seasoning it with mystical ideas about the world and the Creator.

Back then, with a small suitcase purchased in a Buchach shop, which was nearly snatched away at the port ticket offices, in a third-class cabin with several of his counterparts, traversing the Adriatic, Ionian, and Mediterranean seas, he reached Jaffa harbor faster than the interminable winds.

Now, he returned in his thoughts to the ashes of Bad Homburg, to his manuscripts and books befouled with carbon monoxide, whose odor disappeared only after the downpours but did not air out of his memory.

After arriving in Alexandria, the utterly unremarkable traveler will transfer to Cairo and from there, by night train will race along the Palestine railway, originally laid by the Ottoman administration

and completed by the Egyptian Expeditionary Force, disembark at the Jerusalem Station, and find his first lodgings in West Jerusalem.

Agnon's arrival in Jerusalem was announced, but the main articles in the local press were devoted to the war for electrification. Pinhas Rutenberg, a graduate of the Petersburg Polytechnic University, decided to build the first power station and bring light to Jerusalem, Haifa, Jaffa, and the small village that Tel Aviv was at the time. Some places in Jerusalem at the beginning of the century were powered by installed generators—the hospital, the Dominican Institute, and the Palestinian pharmacy—but it was a long road to complete electrification. Grand plans for the construction of a power station and the laying of a streetcar line in Jerusalem were discussed, and Rutenberg proved useful in time. But not everything was going smoothly, as some people supposed. Even though he had funds from the Rothschilds to build a power station, it was necessary to request permission from the British Empire's Colonial Office. Then, just like in a bad play, Rutenberg encountered the antihero, some Greek businessman named Euripides Mavromatis. That Greek had received a franchise back in 1914 to supply water and electrical power and to build streetcar tracks.

The lawsuits began, and while the hearings were taking place, Rutenberg decided to attempt to electrify Jaffa, to which Mavromatis had no access because he owned rights only to Jerusalem. Frankly speaking, the matter was complicated by the effort to reach an understanding with City Hall, where seats were held exclusively by Arabs and Christians, who in equal measure refused to give the Zionists electrification, suspecting them of harboring duplicitous intentions. At first, the company electrified Tel Aviv. The inhabitants of Jaffa could observe the illuminated streets of Tel Aviv from the top of the hill that loomed over the bay, along which all the construction was taking place. At night, the streetlights and individual lights in houses were reminiscent of the period of ripening oranges.

After the first categorical refusal, Rutenberg proposed forming a three-person commission that would include a Muslim Arab, a Christian Arab, and a Jew. The commission went no farther than this. But traders, many of whom were Arabs, rated the advantage of trading by light. So, some of them got hooked up to the generators offered by Rutenberg's company. And although walls were still covered with leaflets calling for a boycott of electrification, City Hall nevertheless gave its agreement. And in order for this not to look like a defection in the eyes of the Arabs, they cited the frequent nighttime robberies and the absence—during the period when the decision was handed down—of a mayor. It was claimed that the acting mayor did not understand the issue and gave his permission.

In his first letter written three days after his arrival and addressed to the Königsberg address of Esther Chachkes, Agnon, succumbing to the emotions of separation and the absence of his wife's body and his children's voices, will write so many warm words to his wife and sketch out unbelievable plans for their future that Esther, reading between the lines of her husband's longing, will immediately want to set out. True, their correspondence, like their separation, will stretch out for one year. In 1925 they will arrange for Esther and the children's move. Just as with every couple, a period of separation leaves its mark, spoiling long-distance correspondence with misunderstandings. This was the same for the Chachkeses, who, from their very first letters, interspersed with sweet and loving words, switched with the passage of time to a clarification of their relationship and mutual reproaches.

Thus, alighting from the train, he stood in front of the station, not knowing where to rest his head, but evening was approaching, and the newcomer headed to the Warszawski Hotel.

Translated from the Ukrainian by Marta D. Olynyk.

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