

Truth is in the river. And the river is in Buchach, of course

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Sometimes we discover what we're not searching for at all. Perhaps we would never have started the search if we did not feel that we would find something, some revelation. After all, you never know what it might be. The Agnon Literary Residency in Buchach was supposed to resonate somehow with the intention to broaden an understanding of cities and towns scattered throughout the territories of Eastern Europe; towns that are somehow very similar to each other, but which traveled their separate ways owing to the events of the twentieth century.

In wandering around Buchach, I came to a place where I shouldn't have recognized anything like that: to the river. An ordinary little river, where there was nothing more and where nothing was happening. This very river however may have been my greatest revelation.

Everything started when I was crossing the small suspension bridge spanning this river. You stand and look at the fallen leaves floating by. You turn away, and countless leaves will float by unnoticed. But in standing for some time above the river, staring down from the little bridge, you grasp a principle: You will see enough leaves to describe their flow. And thus, it is with the flow of history. Countless lives sail by in the current; someone was noticed, someone was not.

A writer — or the historian — is someone who stands on the little bridge and does the work of recording. Thanks to his work, others acquire these optics. (Of course, anyone can wish to become a writer and become one; perhaps someone who simply walks across this little bridge

every day). Perhaps the constant ambition to grasp something and record it so it captures the attention of various writers to the flow of time, the current of a river that they are compelled to savor what they have seen. *"I looked down at the river again. A fine odor rose from the water, I breathed in deeply and savored the air,"* Agnon wrote about this same river in Buchach.



Bridge for observing time.

Just downstream is the approach to the water. There, a large tree drops its branches into the water and catches the leaves. People have an incredibly strong desire to become enrooted in the world. Is it, perhaps, because of cerebration unique to an individual and the emergence of questions that a person felt alien in the world? It is because of the aspiration to prove to oneself that a person is also enrooted in the world that cave paintings, the gods of antiquity, and philosophy came about, and the eternal quest for meaning took place.

A gigantic, old tree, overgrown with moss and brushwood, was standing nearby, like humanity's striving to become enrooted in the world. Striving gives birth to the need to remember. The accumulation of memories is increasingly implanting humanity in the world, where the branches of memory penetrate the flow of the river of history, where memory plucks out and supports people-leaves (all political, quotidian, and other types of history are connected with

people, well-known or not). Islands of culture emerge there from the interlacing of stories-memories. Fished out of the current by the tree branches, the leaves bunch up here and there. Islands of leaves accumulate, although something is eventually lost. Below the islands, ripples are formed in the current. After the creation of islands, the flow of history cannot be as it once was. It has changed.

A question occurred to me involuntarily. Is the Agnon residency in Buchach not the imperative to remember? Was it not a branch of this imperative that snatched me out of the current of history? After all, it could have been someone else. Are we and other residents — accidental ones from the standpoint of history — not creating a small island out of the interweaving of stories and memories? And are the ripples that are formed downstream not the result of this, that is, the result of these ripples — in this case, ideas that perhaps might never have occurred to me under different circumstances and would never have been formed as a text and spread farther? Standing there, I thought: How strongly connected are place and thought, context and atmosphere? Is there a dearth of such trees above such small rivers in the world? Would I have experienced something similar had I done a residency in another place, at another time?

If I had not been there, would that idea have surfaced? Was it supposed to be that way? Was this a happy coincidence? Are there ideas hidden inside of you, some of which can be

revealed in specific places? And this: to wander or return to the same places and see what you had not seen earlier? These are different paths: Which to choose? Thoughts emerge at the intersection of place and myself, the certain flow of my condition as well as time and context.

Then on the river, I observed stones and a root. They continued my search for the essence of an understanding of history. When there is a foundation, like a stone, leaves attach themselves to it easily, but history proceeds smoothly. When there is no tree or rocky history, there is no certainty, and there is no remembrance either, only a trivial desire to recall, also, then this root grabs at leaves, swirls, but history there does not proceed smoothly (memory wars, the rewriting of history, thefts of history).

Farther downstream, a tree has fallen into the water. Such a tree is ancient history that has an exsanguinated memory and little strength. There are many leaves on it; at the same time, it does not make any noise, but it doesn't seem to let go of the ripples either. Leaves become lost because living history is being erased. When Agnon returned to interwar Buchach, which had been destroyed by the Russians, he was not happy to see the whitewashed ceiling and newly plastered walls as this erased the traces of soot that was created by the hundreds of candles of the hundreds of people who had prayed there over the years. Now that the community has been diminished, that sterility has only underscored the void, the erasure.

So that memory is not silted up, we need to revive it somehow; otherwise, the islands of culture will crumble away, and the traces on the flow of history, these ripples, will be smoothed out. In order to revive memory, it is necessary to regenerate the striving to be enrooted. One time I was traveling to Kharkiv, and my two Kharkiv peers did not know that the Slovo building existed. I told them that Bahriany, Khvylovy, and Vyshnia had lived there. When they were at Ukrainian school, they only "recalled something" about Vyshnia.

A conclusion suddenly appears: When strivings to be enrooted and involved disappear from a community, then, like muscles that you do not use, remembering oneself in the past, from which stems understanding of the present, fades away. In forgetting about the caught leaves, from which entire islands are formed, a community loses culture, because culture is continuity, and continuity is also remembrance. And without this, disorientation and confusion occur. In this situation, it is difficult to achieve something.

So let us go to the Buchaches and Hadiaches, to the Lvivs, Kyivs, and Kharkivs, and manifest the desire to become involved in the place where we live. The rich strata of an amazing culture will then be revealed to us in an unexpected way. And you will see that these strata are not local; they are flowing smoothly into the strata of other communities all over the world.

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Translated from the Ukrainian by Marta D. Olynyk.