

James G. Robinson
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EWP Orientation
Pat Hoy

Assignment II: Scene

Cold weather has a glare too; a sharp, piercing glaze unencumbered by the humid haze of heat. It's a subtle warning, that light. If the winter sun seems ever so slightly too bright for your eyes, odds are that the air whipping around your overcoat is most likely just a bit too cold for your hands.

If the sun shines in Eastern Europe in January, it is usually too bright. And even when the sun is not shining, the wind is usually too cold. I discovered this seven winters ago, traveling in an arc from St. Petersburg to Kiev, down the Baltics and through Poland, across the Danube (to Vienna) and back again (to Budapest), finishing with an icy tour of the Ukraine before heading back to Russia to complete my junior year abroad.

The trains I rode were warm, surprisingly so, given the frost that crept up windows and across railings to settle on the hats and coats of those brave souls riding between cars to smoke their *papirosi*. I preferred to sit inside, chewing bits of garlic to keep the flu away, sipping tea to keep the garlic smell away, a futile cycle which was as much a ritual for me as unfiltered cigarettes before bed was for everyone else.

But wherever the train took us, I walked, no matter how cold it was. I walked in the glare and the wind and the frost without even a cigarette to warm me; trudged back and forth through Riga and Warsaw and Vilnius and Minsk, from square to park to cemetery and back again, crossing the

same streets over and over again, from all different directions; hoping that my eyes could somehow glimpse a certain building from a certain height and a certain angle and the city would suddenly be revealed to me as it was when my great-grandparents or great-aunts or great-uncles lived there a century ago. It was, of course, a naive and unhappy hope. Buildings last, but neighborhoods are fragile. They come and go, evaporating across generations in even untroubled cities.

Traveling to Auschwitz, a place where countless Jews had died, was a difficult decision and even more unsettling experience. As it turns out I was just as saddened to see the places where my ancestors had lived. The chill of Auschwitz was there too. The old Jewish neighborhoods were busy but ordinary, no different from any other, although the synagogues in each city that Hitler had ordered preserved as museums of the extinct Jewish race still stood, the last residences of a dispersed and destroyed culture. They were filled with kiddush cups and prayer books and silverware, all under glass and bathed by a cool halogen glow.

All over, I met people braving the cold to search the same paths as me. Rabbis opening kosher soup kitchens; sons of forced converts to Christianity hoping to rediscover a long-lost faith; American tourists looking for a sense of where they were from. For that, a map is useless; what they seek is more easily found in a family's warmth than in a gust of cold.