

## **On The Emptiness of a House Full of Strangers**

James Robinson / EWP Practicum

Viewed from across a large museum gallery, Gerhard Richter's nine-foot-square "Townscape Madrid" (1968) seems simple enough; a stark black-and-white aerial view of a ten-block-square city neighborhood. Two main streets stretch from the top to meet in a flatiron intersection in the lower left, opening again to reveal a small park on a concrete island beneath. Another small diagonal road runs parallel to the right. All around lie apartment blocks and office buildings; the horizon is nowhere to be seen.

Move closer, though, and it becomes evident that the canvas' huge dimensions mask a highly impressionistic work. Rooftops and streets are mere smudges, each a slightly different shade of mottled gray. Ordinary building windows reveal themselves as irregularly oblong ellipses daubed on monochrome boxes, teetering along trembling, rough edges. Standing just a few inches from the painting even this structure disappears; at this scale, the strokes – once small enough to create the illusion of an orderly grid – now loom large as abstract, muddy Rorschach blots.

When I first saw the painting a year ago, my baffled eyes couldn't help but vacillate between the blurred resolution of these colorless, chiaroscuro strokes and the structural realism of the whole, evoking the same oddly cool, sun-drenched glare I remembered from Eastern Europe seven years ago: a sharp, piercing glaze unencumbered by the humid haze of heat; a false warmth that barely masked the frost beneath.

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The short train ride from Krakow to Auschwitz is uneventful but wrenching, especially for someone whose childhood was filled with grainy newsreel images of Jews packed into freight trains during the Holocaust. Most of the foreign tourists who visit choose to arrive in sleek, modern tour buses instead. I cannot help but wonder if they are here to mourn, or remember – or simply to bear witness, as if visiting a place of cataclysmic tragedy confers a certain transcendent wisdom; a solemn humility, perhaps.

So, Oswiećem's visitors speak in whispered mumbles, as they would in any museum, and the brief, unavoidable social interactions that arise are unbearably awkward, eyes averted and lips pursed. Their deference muddles sadness with awe, as if the grounds are not simply a human memorial but a sacred site, consecrated not by happiness but by horror, in which silence and solitude are the only ways to confer respect on the mass graves underneath one's feet.

These strict conventions do not exist in the places where my ancestors lived, though the chill of Auschwitz is there too. In fact, these old Jewish neighborhoods, as busy and ordinary as any other, bear a deeper sadness for me. The synagogues in each city are the only reminder of what was once there, still standing as tombs of a dispersed and destroyed culture. Hitler had ordered them preserved as museums of the extinct Jewish race – and in some perverse, posthumous victory, they are now filled with kiddush cups and prayer books and silverware, all under glass and bathed by a cool halogen glow.

Is it a mark of shame that these ordinary spaces made me well up in tears, while the dull hush of Auschwitz washed over me like a bad dream? After all, one knows how to behave in a cemetery, even if one's only companions are gravestones. Elsewhere, my emotions must fend for themselves; trudging back and forth through Riga and Warsaw and Vilnius and Minsk, crossing the same streets from square to park to cemetery and back again, wishing that my eyes would 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.

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Mick Robinson, my grandfather, died forty years ago this Saturday, the twenty-sixth of Av on the Hebrew calendar. His ancestors were from Telš, or perhaps Telšai; a shtetl in Latvia, or possibly Lithuania. Maybe even Poland. Exactly where is a matter of half-remembered conjecture for my father's family. Whenever they gather for holiday meals, atlases invariably appear so that guesses about our origins can be passed around the table like olives. Telš or Telšai, it is all the same – they left a century ago, escaping Eastern Europe decades before Auschwitz became a Jewish graveyard. And to where? My father explains it this way: when my great-grandmother decided to move to New York, her husband (unable to recognize English words) mistakenly bought two steamer tickets to New Zealand.

So Mick Robinson, my grandfather, died forty years ago this Saturday, the twenty-sixth of Av on the Hebrew calendar, in Auckland, New Zealand. He was playing cards with the boys, as he did every Friday night, when he collapsed. And so I find myself listening to my father and my uncle as they read *Kaddish* in his memory, surrounded by Chassids in black hats and white shirts swaying to the soft, turbulent rhythms of whispered prayers. My uncle, who after Mick's death stayed in New Zealand, is in Brooklyn visiting my father, who instead moved to a city with a place in its heart for the inherited traditions that my great-grandparents had left behind. Even though my father is not a religious man, visiting this synagogue is his way of reclaiming his grandparents' *Yiddishkeit*; he wears blue jeans and a green shirt, but is at home in the sea of black and white and gray.

Although I do not speak Hebrew, I usually know enough of the important prayers to follow the service. Here, I am easily lost; the hectic, purposeful Chassidic pacing is too much for me. So during the silent meditation I gaze at the page of the prayerbook, losing myself in the stark black-on-white lettering of unfamiliar words as I am myself subsumed by the silent, quivering passion of the room. The murmurs of those around me inhabit the page; I may not know what they are saying or what it means but it is enough for me that it means something.

"Where are you from?" a Chassid asks my father during a brief break.

"Brooklyn," he replies in his Kiwi accent. "Can't you tell?"

And so a warm conversation is kindled. It turns out that the man is from London and that he knows a distant cousin of ours. Not surprising – we are all cousins, in some sense. We

are all Jews.

"Sharon does not understand," says another Chassid, hoping to steer the discussion towards Israel. "The more land he gives up the more violence he will encourage."

But my father is no longer listening, although he nods; he is smiling, thinking how nice it is that he honors Mick Robinson's secular memory amongst the ultra-Orthodox, finally correcting in some small way an illiterate mistake that his grandfather may or may not have made a century ago.

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Grief has avoided me, for the most part, and for that I am thankful. Yet within my heart festers a fear that someday it will arrive without warning, out of the blue, and a perfectly normal day will be shattered by the news that my life has irrevocably changed. I know this happens because it happened to a good friend of mine from high school a few years ago, out of the blue, without warning, and although he never told me those emotions I've seen them in his eyes.

That day was a perfectly normal day for most, and close enough for us high school pals, although we'd all been shaken by the news. Sailing up north in my father's minivan, joking and laughing, glad to share each other's company again, just like old times, except that this time we were older, grown men in fact, and we were off to sit *shiva* with Andy because his father died.

We got lost on the drive up to Co-Op City; lost and late, and a good thing too, because I was terrified of what awaited us – covered mirrors, Andy's mother, Andy, death and tears and grief. They were all there, all right. His mother smiled as soon as she saw us. "Oh, you lovely boys," she murmured, happy to see us again – and then burst out crying. Someone held her hand and led her to the couch. Only a few lights were on, low fluorescents in the kitchen, Andy standing there awkwardly amongst the cookies and celery stalks and dip, adjusting to the emptiness of a house full of strangers.

Walking in that door, seeing Andy there, lost, we didn't know how to mourn; it's one of those things you'll never understand until you have to, and thankfully it was something we'd all avoided. Instead, we did what we knew how to do; we laughed and joked and told bad jokes and laughed some more. I don't know whether we were trying to cope with that grief or avoid it, but it worked; for three hours, Andy was alive, unencumbered by the death that surrounded him.

Elie Weisel relates a story told by the Chassidic sage Reb Nachman of Bratslav':

Once upon a time there was a country that encompassed all the countries of the world. And in that country, there was a town that incorporated all the towns of the country; and in that town there was a street in which were gathered all the streets of the town; and on that street there was a house that sheltered all the houses of the street; and in that house there was a room, and in that room there was a man, and that man personified all men of all countries, and that man laughed and laughed – no one had ever laughed like that before.

And who was that man? asks Weisel, puzzled. He does not know.

But I have a guess; it was Andy. No, it is each of us, lost, surrounded by a grief that seems to extend to the end of the world and back again; when, like Reb Nachman, we have nothing else to do but throw up our hands and revel in the fact that we are not alone.