

Göran Rosenberg
Ascent

At the end of April 1962 we ascended to Israel. The ascent, *aliya*, is the figurative term for the emigration of Jews to the Promised Land. In our case it not only meant that Jerusalem was a higher place, but also that we were departing from a low point. At only thirty-seven, my father had left us two summers before, finally caught up by the disaster that he had been trying to outmaneuver for fifteen years. On the outside he was handsome and lively, with fine features and a warm smile, but on the inside wires were fragile as glass. A stroke of bad luck, a few disappointments, and it all shattered. Father was sick, very sick. He tried very hard to conceal it from us, but at night I heard him call out strange names. A few months before he died, he was given a provisional leave from the hospital in Strängnäs, during which time we all stayed at the summer house of good friends at the side of a beautiful bay on the sea south of Södertälje. Maybe the doctors thought that a large dose of bright Swedish spring would drive out the darkness in his soul. In the early mornings, when the sun was up but no one else was awake, he would get up silently and row out on the bay. I asked him to take me along, but he never woke me up. The third or the fourth time he came back with a large pike-perch, which was left to swim around in a bucket all morning – like the rapidly fading memory of a dawn's forgetfulness. After lunch the pike turned its belly up. A few days later Father was brought back to the hospital and we never saw each other again.

I was thirteen years old when we left Södertälje, where fragments had begun to heal, and where roots were slowly reaching soil. With desperate determination two survivors had decided to hold on to anything that seemed to give support, and to hold off anything that seemed to open the abyss again. I was given a name, that my parents never learned to pronounce, and spoken to in a language they had not yet mastered. At the age of two, I was put in one of the first day care centers of the welfare state. I quickly learned to become a supporter of Södertälje Hockey Team and to steal apples from the neighboring villa gardens. I began to long for the Lucia festivals in the assembly plant of the large truck factory, for the midsummer holidays in the small boarding house at Näset, and for the walks to the still-fashionable seashore hotel beyond the forest. I saw my father fulfill his military service in a quartermaster's uniform and watched my tired Mother hurry off to her job as a seamstress at Tornvalls. Slowly but surely a place was being formed that could have been anywhere and by any realistic calculation should not have existed at all, into

something that at times seemed strangely reminiscent of a home.

One summer I found a dead swift on a neighboring villa lawn and learned that swifts cannot lift themselves into the air while standing on the ground. One winter some of the neighborhood kids threw snowballs at our window yelling "Jews", wherever they might have gotten that word from. Jews were about as common in Södertälje as blacks, and I was as ignorant as the kids outside, but Mother's face had turned white. For another few years my parents could sometimes still laugh as if the world were new again and Södertälje were their home on earth. How could I have known that the thing that looked like home was a state of unreleased shock??

Father's death was the end of the fiction. The path through the forest leading to Torpa and the sea shore, where I knew every blueberry shrub and every patch of cowslip like the back of my hand, turned into an alien trail of unfulfilled memories. One day, the baths, smelling of salt and tar, with their ten-meter trampoline, creaking boardwalks and separate pools for men and women, burned to the ground. Or actually was set on fire by Lång-Erik who apparently had a screw loose and who lived at the far end of the rowan-tree alley, until they locked him up at an institution for juvenile delinquents at Hall. By that time the water in the bay had been contaminated by city sewage, and swimming was at your own risk. The wooden dance pavilion fell into disrepair. The mini-golf course was closed. The beach became silent. For the precarious remains, fate and city hall had an oil harbor in store, while the forest gave way to warehouses and mini-malls.

Most of my dreams and plans had been tied up with Father. He was the one who brought home the great travel books, the exciting adventure stories, the boyish surprises. One evening he took me to the Roxy and we saw Charles Lindbergh fly over the Atlantic in "The Spirit of St Louis". Another time we went to the Castor and saw Danny Kaye in "Up in Arms". I really liked Danny Kaye who somehow belonged to us and whose real name was Daniel Kaminsky. Father looked like Danny Kaye. Especially when he laughed.

Father was our tie to the outside world, to friends and fellow-workers, to grand dreams and wild plans. But it was a tie with the most fragile of attachments. And when the attachment broke, our ties broke with it. A few months later the remainder of the family, a widow and her two children, left Södertälje for Stockholm. After yet another year, with our suitcases barely unpacked, we ascended.

How far down were we? We were probably a bit more rootless than most people around us, but we weren't really in such a bad spot. Our grief was great, but grief can be overcome. The ties broken could have been restored and restored again. Many that we already had would prove to be for life. In our case, emigration was not a final desperate choice, but one of many possibilities. Materially and socially, Sweden actually seemed to promise more.

But who has never dreamed about beginning a new life in a higher place? Seemingly deep-rooted Swedes emigrated too – to Australia or USA. Restlessness was not a Jewish monopoly, and at this particular juncture of my life I was restless for other than historical reasons. Mother was getting reports from her Jewish neighbors that I had taken up with a bad crowd down at the kiosk near the Hägersten subway station. Which in one sense was true, but not really. We were thirteen and in the seventh grade and smoking on the sly and discovering our bodies and fondling our curiosity, in the expectation that something different and better was on its way. On the other hand, we weren't all that certain what that something might be. And even more uncertain about what that was which we actually had. Sweden was already pregnant with that great existential tension which was to be released a few years later and bring forth a whole new generation of rootless beings. Of course nobody saw it coming back then, but it must surely have had some impact on a young boy's dreams and yearnings. In any case, there were very few of those expectations which I could not rather painlessly transfer to a new country and a new life.

So when all is said and done, maybe it wasn't the low starting point that seemed to make our ascent so steep. Perhaps it was the height after all. We were supposed to climb to the top of the collected dreams of the West, where the air was so thin that you could see whatever you wished to see. To the mountains of Zion, the gates of Jerusalem, the fields of Saron, the house of David, the walls of Jericho, the garden of Gethsemane, the deserts of Judea. To a meadow flowing not only with milk and honey, but with millennial dreams of divine justice and human redemption. To the mother of Utopia, the cradle of Messianism, the soul of Salvation, the fulfillment of prophecy. This was The Promised Land, and no other land had ever promised so much, to so many, for so long.

I will come back to what had been promised to the Jews. What had been promised to generations of Christian non-conformists is described with incomparable brilliance and sensitivity in Selma Lagerlöf's epic about the pilgrimage to Jerusalem

by a group of Swedes from the parish of Nås in Dalarna:

The call reached them one after the other, and at the same time all fear and want left them. There was a great, great joy, which came over them. They no longer thought about their lands and their kin. They thought only about their community that would bloom anew, they thought about the splendor of having been called to the City of God.

I was of course still as ignorant about most of these promises as I was of the disappointments that inevitably followed in their wake. But I was nevertheless mythically prepared. Not for nothing had I spent five consecutive summers in the Jewish children's colony at Glämsta, where the glittering swimming bays and lush football fields were eventually to be surpassed by even more striking vistas. Almost every week we were assembled at nightly gatherings to look at pictures and listen to stories about the latest and greatest of miracles upon the height – the Jewish state of Israel, *Eretz Israel*. I probably didn't quite understand what was supposed to be so fantastic about it, and it didn't really seem very real and urgent to me. But the people in the pictures were all muscular and lean, and their eyes were always directed at a point slightly above the horizon. And it didn't matter whether they were carrying a gun or a shovel, since it was made perfectly clear that they were above all on a Mission. Ascending to Israel, we were led to understand, was to assume one's responsibility for the fate of the Jewish people, to insure its survival in the face of further persecutions, to prevent its final physical and spiritual destruction, and to bring to fruition two thousand years of national and spiritual yearnings. And if you didn't make the ascent personally, which hardly anybody in Sweden seemed willing to do, there was no question that you had the undeniable duty to support those who did with all the means at your disposal. In between pillow fights and athletic tournaments we learned to dance the *hora* and to sing the melancholy and stirring songs of the new Zion.

I think most of us reacted with skepticism, if not pure disinterest. Ten years after the Shoah, a new faith in progress and the emerging institutions of a benevolent welfare state seemed ready to embrace even little Jewish kids. We could make out the limitless horizon of the modern secularized society through the still-smoking ruins of Auschwitz. Whatever a twelve-year old Jewish boy could

possibly dream of, could suddenly be dreamt of freely and uninhibited, here and now. Especially when the dreams were small and had to do with blonde-haired Brittmarie up front in class or about a spot on the hockey team. Or about getting on that express train, which made a daily stop outside our window on its way to somewhere else.

Later, when the dreams became more demanding, and history once again began to darken our sight and senses, and it no longer seemed so obvious who we were, a few of us returned to the Israeli dream. Some eventually emigrated, others started to supplement their fragile Jewish identity with that of the Jewish state. If there still wasn't any clear answer to the question "Who am I?" at least now there were some ambiguous ones.

The concept of Israel was of course charged with considerably greater expectations than I at that age was able to understand. When I now in retrospect go through the memoirs and writings from the decade after the war, I discover that paradoxically the expectations were larger among the non-Jews than among Jews. Not that Jews lacked in expectation; on the contrary. During these years Israel became the crucial instrument for receiving and sheltering the scattered and homeless remnants of the war, the belated rehabilitation of Jewish dignity, the guarantee of sorts against the return of history, the natural center for Jewish cultural and religious renaissance. In most Jewish homes a little blue-white savings box with the map of Israel was prominently displayed. Into most Jewish homes now flowed letters and greetings from surviving relatives and friends in the new country. News from Israel was followed with great interest. During the Sinai war in October 1956 Father sat glued to the radio, deeply worried about what would happen, and not only about what might happen in Tel Aviv.

To many non-Jews, the State of Israel soon assumed a different and more complex meaning. The early Swedish writings on the subject were charged with mythical overtones, lacking all criticism and distance, and were permeated by an unctuous sentimentality obviously nurtured by the still unspeakable and taboo-laden significance of the Jewish catastrophe. The survivors were quickly induced to silence, the newsreels were stowed away, as a new world wanted to forget and go on as if nothing had happened.

In this context, Israel is actually perceived as a happy ending of sorts, or at least the promise of a new beginning. Through Israel, one could come to terms with the past and foresee a legitimate future. Through Israel, the new world would prove itself different from the old. Through Israel, European civilization would be absolved from

confronting its own moral numbness. The early images of Israel were formed by a combination of the shame and utopian yearnings of non-Jewish Europe.

In 1957 Herbert Tingsten, (the influential editor-in-chief of *Dagens Nyheter*, who ten years earlier had been critical of both Zionism and Israel) wrote the following in the preface to his book Israel Under Threat: "Through research and my recent travel I have become convinced that the founding of Israel is one of the great positive developments of our time. I am so absolutely convinced of this that I can't believe that anyone with approximately the same general values and more than a little bit of knowledge of the topic, must not come to the same conclusion."

With almost religious passion, Tingsten depicts Israel as nothing less than an earthly utopia, a state whose "learned people" are not only making plans for their own country, but for "humanity" as a whole, and where "a restless activity is exalted and made holy by a pathos of mystical and religious conviction. . . . Our culture has never reached a higher level of synthesis and power."

This is not very far from the openly biblical interpretations of the founding of Israel that at the same time are emerging in Christian circles. An envoy from the Pentecostal church travelling to Israel, Johan Hagner, eagerly looks everywhere for the anticipated signs of the world's forthcoming salvation and the founding of a "future theocratic age". According to certain interpretations of the prophecies of Ezekiel and Isaiah, the Kingdom of God will be preceded by the return of the Jews to the Promised Land and their collective conversion to Christianity. And Hagner of course finds what he is looking for: "The tool for God's great victory is created by God himself, and what a tool! If Saul of Tarsus could shake almost the entire known world after he had met Jesus and become Paul after his conversion on the road to Damascus, what could He not accomplish when an entire people was at his command!"

Equally noticeable these years is the emerging role of Israel as a socialist utopia, not the least in the eyes of Swedish Social Democrats and co-op activists, whose various delegations enthusiastically reported on the triumph of union-owned enterprises, the implementation of far-reaching cooperative ideals and the establishment of miraculously-functioning agricultural collectives characterized by "a simple, healthy and strengthening life without the class differences that have created so deep-seated conflicts in the western societies, and without the central coercion that is so inherent in authoritarian states."

The new Israel is now expected to deliver both religious and social salvation. It is perceived as a fresh path, away from egoism, materialism, urbanism, capitalism; a cure for the human social sickness which the reformers of the West have tried in vain to cure for so long. A new morality, a new man, and a new society will go forth from Israel. Israel's cause is rapidly becoming the cause of the whole Western world, and the Jews, in their Israeli guise, are being transformed from its pariahs to its social and moral alibi. "It is the absolute duty of western civilization to extend to this people all the assistance it needs for a peaceful and prosperous future in its historic homeland," concludes an envoy from the Swedish cooperative movement in his confident description from 1957.

Analyzing the various non-Jewish visions and utopias that were being connected to the Jewish state, it becomes clear that they are all based on the emergence of a wholly new Jewish man: blond, blue-eyed, stub-nosed, harsh, practical, strong and not intellectual. The books of the time are filled with Riefenstahl-inspired portraits of young, muscular men and women in sharply contrasting light, standing next to a tractor or a gun. In his book, Murslev och svärd (Trowel and Sword, 1955) Swedish journalist Agne Hamrin makes a great effort to find some biological and environmental explanations for the phenomenon of the un-Jewish Jews, or as he provocatively puts it, "the anti-Jewish Israeli." The desirability of such a mutation is however beyond dispute. He finds the "small, pale, bearded East European Jews" appalling, but is slightly shocked when he soon thereafter realizes that Jews and non-Jews alike are all idealizing a Jewish type looking distinctly like a German: "When you time and again run into this paradoxical ideal, you begin to ask yourself whether this is not the reflection of an unconscious 'anti-Semitism' among the Israeli Jews."

The expectation in those years was that the Jews were all on their own solving "the Jewish problem", not by changing the world's stereotyping of Jews and Jewishness, but by radically changing what was considered to be stereotypically Jewish. The European "Ghetto Jews", the ones who were persecuted and exterminated, had apparently been of a different breed, and if not actually deserving extermination nevertheless an understandable object of hate and disdain. Anti-Semitism had had its dark sides, but there were reasons for it nevertheless. The new Israeli Man, the resurrected Hebrew, had now freed himself from the shackles of his ghetto-Jewish past – and his former persecutors from guilt. Israel had opened the way out of the past, to the

delight of those who wanted to forget it as quickly as possible. Israel was the mortgage payment, or perhaps even the final installment, of the West's debt to the Jews. Israel was the culmination of an historical sacrificial drama where the Jews were "the lambs to be slaughtered, six million sacrificial lambs: an awful sacrifice that freed the Jews of all imaginable guilt and created a new balance in their favor. Through this sacrifice Israel has been safeguarded as the land of the Jews. The world owed this to the Jews as a compensation for the great ritual murder. Before all mankind they won the moral right to Israel, to their own state."

It was not only a few occasional emigrants from Sweden who in these years aimed too high.

I think that our step was considered to be bigger than it really was. Emigration from Sweden to Israel was still an exception, especially at a time when most survivors had more or less settled down, or at least didn't want to open up the wounds again. In the early the fifties, the restlessness was still more apparent. In the summer of 1953, my father had traveled to Israel to explore our prospects, but had found food coupons, overfilled immigrant barracks and people shaking their heads. You want to come now? Are you out of your mind?

So we stayed in our mind as long as we could. Which is to say until the earth shook and the move to Israel seemed safer and more secure than many other things. In Israel lived the only surviving remnants of my once numerous family: one uncle on my father's side, one aunt on my mother's side, my grandmother's sister and brother on my mother's side, and four cousins. In Israel they were waiting for us with open arms. So what were we waiting for?

On September 23, 1961, on the thirteenth day of the month of Tishri, in the five thousand seven hundred and twenty-second year of creation, I stepped up in the great synagogue of Stockholm, to let my trembling voice follow the silver-plated hand's journey across the Torah, and thus become a *bar mitzvah*, a man ready to fulfil his Jewish duties and his covenant with God. As a saying to take along the journey, my rabbi, Emil Kronheim, had chosen a passage from Deuteronomy (32:4):

The Rock, His Work is perfect;
For all His ways are justice;
A God of faithfulness and without iniquity,
Just and right is He.

On Easter Sunday, the 22nd of April, 1962, we boarded the train for Venice with no intention of ever returning, or so we thought at the time.

During any trip to a high and preconceived goal, there are many things that can go wrong on the ascent. The goal can prove to be a mirage, or the first view can give rise to something other than love at first sight. For a long time you reached the Promised Land through the port of Jaffa, where centuries of Ottoman lethargy had left their mark and where consequently many feverish fantasies had ended in insanity and resignation. Not that Jaffa was a particularly ugly or unfortunate city, but it was also no paradise. Neither was it Jerusalem. Which not even Jerusalem always was. Selma Lagerlöf tells about the Jerusalem-traveler Birger Larsson who dies a few days after his arrival in the city, out of sorrow and disappointment for not having reached his goal. Where were the walls of gold and the gates of glass? Where was the city of glory and splendor? Could Via Dolorosa be a stinking alley? Could the Gate of Zion be lined by rubbish-heaps? Could the City of God be inhabited by beggars and lepers?

Birger Larsson beckoned Halvor over to him and took him solemnly by the hand.

"Now you must tell me something, since you are related to me," he said. "Do you really believe that this is the real Jerusalem?"

"Oh yes, this is certainly the real Jerusalem", said Halvor.

"I am sick and by tomorrow morning I may be dead", said Birger. "You do understand that you may not lie to me."

"Nobody is going to lie to you", said Halvor.

In our *aliya* nobody had to be suspected of lying, other than we ourselves. Both the journey and the arrival eventually fulfilled even our most unrealistic expectations. Since then I have made several trips to Israel, also some by train and boat, but none of them can compare with our trip in the Spring of 1962 aboard the beautiful, white, "Enotria" out of Venice; its gentle flight across the Adriatic Sea, its magical millimeter-exact passage through the vertically-hewn walls of the Corinthian Canal, its inexhaustible supply of spaghetti and grated cheese, its entrance into glittering Dubrovnik, palm-lined Brindisi, noisy Piraeus and slumbering Limassol, It was a journey of perfect pace and good comfort that rocked us through time and place, away from something that increasingly felt like a cold dead-end and towards something which in our dreams took the shape of an ever warmer and ever more open embrace. There was something

definite and irrevocable about that journey, a satiated sense of fate, which no later journey in my life could ever recreate.

As mentioned, the first view of the goal can destroy it all. If there isn't the slightest confirmation of the myth, the myth dies out. Those travelers to another paradise, America, eventually had a Statue of Liberty on which they could pin their hopes that kept many of those hopes afloat for a long time. In our case, the arrival gate to Israel was Haifa, which seen from the sea on a clear day offered a much more inspiring vision than Jaffa ever could. And this very morning not even Jerusalem could have competed. Against the still verdant slopes of Mount Carmel, the city glimmered chaste, white and clean. Elegant villas and exclusive neighborhoods hovered weightlessly under the still sparsely-populated summit. In the midst of the city, slightly above the most cluttered quarters and bordered by cypress trees, the marble-white Bahai temple with its golden copula, shimmered in the low morning sun. At the entrance to the port a swarm of prosperity-promising passenger and freight ships lay at anchor, while at the docks, energetic Israeli police and customs boats with the Star of David proudly flapping from the sterns, kicked up white wakes every which way in the clear blue water. Along the low coastline to the north rose the smoking refineries and brimming cisterns of progress, gradually giving way to the sun-drenched walls of Akkos, the green beaches of Nahariya and the white cliffs of Rosh Hanikra. Wherever I looked I saw what I wanted to see: vitality, challenge, purpose. The air was filled with it, the clamor in the harbor signaled it, the uniformed policeman and customs officers who clambered on board and made us wait patiently for several hours, commanded it with their assured gestures, buttoned-down khaki shirts and nonchalantly confident behavior.

Even after having gone ashore, after the houses had taken on a more normal ash-gray shade behind the now noticeable, somewhat irritating pulse of traffic, and the people proved to be of all kinds, and the sandy dust whirled in through the open windows of our small Volkswagen as we headed south towards Tel Aviv, even then our arrival did not lose any of its original magic. There was absolutely nothing that did not seem to confirm my view of how everything should be.

For a long time I was thus convinced that the reason Israelis drove like maniacs, as they already did back then, was because they had Divine protection. In Israel there could simply be no traffic accidents. Whatever other miraculous occurrences there were, I would find out soon enough, but the dogma of accident-free traffic was kept alive for a long time by circumstances. It was partly

because I never saw a traffic accident occur, despite all the ones I saw that should have occurred, and partly because I could neither read nor hear about the many that in fact did occur. Maybe I also didn't want to. Another, more short-lived, misconception of mine was that there were no criminals in Israel. There was simply no cheating, no stealing and no murder. Consequently there were of course no prisons. I still remember my shamefacedly repressed amazement, when I first noticed the huge rolls of barbed wire surrounding the prison of Atlit, along the road to Haifa. Such big prisons in such a small country?

In retrospect I cannot reconstruct how these childish idealizations came about, except that they must have been the fruit of long-nourished child fantasies. And perhaps of a child's need to rationalize a life transformation, which could not easily be rationalized. During the months leading up to our departure I swallowed uncritically every argument in favor of breaking up, especially the romantic ones, and cautiously pushed away any which would hold me back – comrades, emotions, memories. With a pounding heart I read Leon Uris' newly published blockbuster Exodus not as a work of fiction, but as a real and ongoing drama. Israel was a live heroic epic waiting for my appearance, and I certainly did not intend to wander in on stage with my hands in my pockets. Here hard work and camaraderie were being offered, courage and sacrifice. And girls of course, but of a completely different type than those at home, tough, boyish and modest, serious and dedicated, which of course, as in every heroic epic, made them harder to conquer in the short run, but the way I looked at it, that was a temporary sacrifice, which would be followed by an even greater reward. My first Israel was a boyhood fantasy, a scout dream, an endless summer camp.

My first self-directed studies in Hebrew were conducted with the help of a bilingual Bible. That sounds more eccentric than it really was. The Bible as we all know, is organized in a such way that each and every line in it can be located according to book, chapter and verse. Each verse in the Swedish version of the Old Testament, which I had received for my *bar mitzvah*, thus exactly matched a corresponding verse in the beautiful Hebrew *tanach* with a metal relief cover, which I found in the bookcase at home. In this way I could for instance easily make out the meaning of the Hebrew word *bereshit* since it stood in exactly the same place as *in the beginning* in the Swedish Bible. Even if the phrases and the vocabulary often seemed archaic and had no exact corollary in modern Hebrew, the step was much shorter than one would expect. The rough-hewn archaic

phrases from the bible desk at home were quickly polished into modern shape in the streets and schoolyards of Israel. It was no coincidence that I excelled in the mandatory Bible classes in the Hebrew school, more than in anything else. Although my Bible reading obviously had utterly prosaic motives, I would be very reluctant to discount the possibility that this early drilling of archaic phrases and myths further reinforced my romantic view of Israel. The country's still governing patriarch, David Ben-Gurion, regularly quoted from the Bible as if it were a contemporary historic and geographic document that had relevance to the events of the day.

Departure and arrival, ascent and initiation, absence and longing, promise and fulfillment, were the heavy building blocks of a new Israeli identity, which rapidly replaced whatever identity had been there before. After only a year, Sweden had become a foreign country, I spoke broken Swedish, and Hebrew had become my everyday language. An identity swap of such radical nature can probably only occur under very special circumstances and at a very particular age. I wanted to become someone else, breaking with a past that seemed to have lost its meaning, and I was still malleable enough, at least on the surface, to be able to do it. It certainly was an identity with coarse contours and large voids, because I knew little of course about the real Israel. And for a long time I really did not know anything.

Translation: Peter Stenberg and Lena Karlström in collaboration with the author.