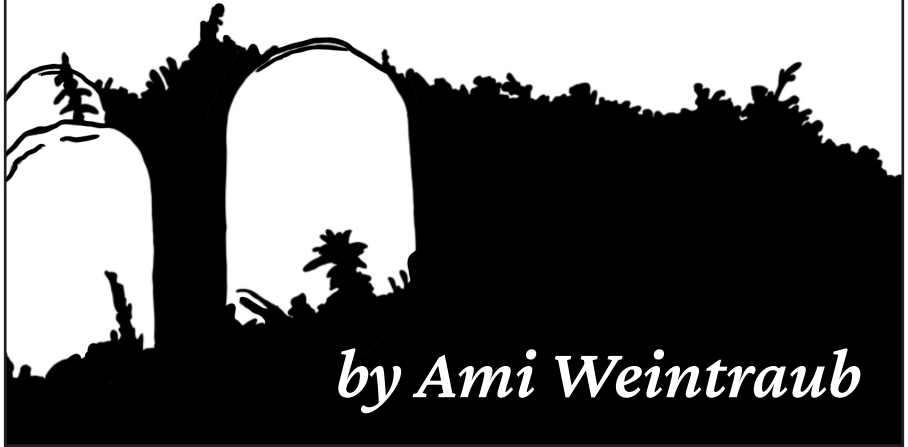


Releasing the Land



by Ami Weintraub

The following is an essay from *To the Ghosts Who Are Still Living* by Ami Weintraub, available for preorder July 1st 2023 at tangledwilderness.org. You can learn more about Ami's work at amiweintraub.com.

“Ami Weintraub’s essays are a brilliant meditation on both the generational trauma and resiliency that underscores our struggle to survive in a world not built for us. Lyrical, insightful, and heartbreaking, Weintraub is a powerful voice for the radical nature of memory and healing.”

—Shane Burley

Releasing the Land

My great-grandmother's cemetery is now a soccer field. My great-grandfather's synagogue is now a Baptist church. My great-uncle's home is now a police station.

And I live in Pittsburgh, far from these lands where my family no longer exists.

Where are you from?

Behind my great-grandmother's synagogue in Klimentov, Poland was a Jewish graveyard. Humble gravestones marked where my ancestors buried the people they loved.

In the 1900s, pogroms and war and poverty pushed my family from their small town in Poland. My great-grandmother, Anna, was three when her family moved to Argentina, and 12 when they later left for New York. Her parents couldn't afford to take all of their children so they left a young son behind in Poland for his grandparents to raise.

In Argentina Anna ran through the hills with a baby sister and a colorful parrot. In New York she wandered barefoot through the bustling streets, laughing in Yiddish with the women who spoke German.

The family lived in the crowded Lower East Side with the many Jews who had left synagogues and graveyards in lands they hoped would remember them. It was there that Anna gave birth to my grandfather, David.

That was the life they lived, but there was also the death. Anna's baby sister died in Argentina. Her pet parrot was struck by lightning. Her older

brother joined them when they moved to New York and screamed like hell for all of the years he had been left behind. While Anna was pregnant with my grandfather, her husband died suddenly. She named my grandfather David after the man he would never meet.

There are so many details I leave behind in this retelling. But I try to remember the joys and the loves she buried in these new lands so far from the small town in southern Poland.

No one told me the name of this place in Poland where my family first lived and died and buried their loved ones. I heard of the town in a letter, written by Anna, tucked into a blue box at the top of my father's closet. It fell off its high shelf one morning when I was rummaging through clothes with my mother.

“Klimentov,” written in Anna's handwriting.

There are no more Jews there. I have no more family there.

But I found a fourth cousin online who went back to Klimentov. He taught himself Polish and wandered through the countryside, sneaking

into archives and taking pictures of records when the librarian's back was turned. People looked at him funny, and sometimes with fear, when he said he was Jewish. But he continued. After years, he pieced together the marriage dates and birth certificates to make a family tree. Its roots stretch back to the 1700s. We were from there.

We talk on Zoom and he tells me the tales of Klimentov. Centuries ago there was a giant castle outside the city. The royalty built the palace as a perfect oval. Above the living room and dining hall they suspended a giant glass ceiling. They filled it with gallons of water and hundreds of flashing, colorful fish. They ruled the land under a sea of their own creation.

“Were we the kings and the queens?” I ask, dreaming of shadows of sharks and stingrays falling over my dinner plate.

“Of course not,” he laughs. But the story lets me imagine a life of fantasy and ease. I remember: I came from a land where beautiful fish swam through the sky.

I am from this place of left-behind boys, man-made oceans, people who fled, cousins who returned.

I am from this place where only a synagogue and a cemetery remember me.

“Home,” this sanctuary and burial ground say. “Meet me in the words of the Torah, in the bones of your ancestors. Return to this place.”

On September 6, 2018 the Polish government held a ribbon-cutting ceremony atop my family’s cemetery. They had just finished building a sports complex, here, on our graveyard in Klimentov.

On the day of the ribbon-cutting ceremony people busied themselves pinning pale yellow and pink balloons onto bright, white goal posts. A man in his 80s wearing a suit and shiny black shoes cleared his throat. With an outstretched arm, he welcomed in a gaggle of children in white dresses and pressed shirts. They gathered around a microphone to give speeches in a language I do not understand. The town’s people recounted the dirt they tilled, the basketball hoops they built. They cut a ribbon.

They kicked a ball into a goal. They thanked the Polish government who paid \$90,000 to make this project possible.

Today, children dribble and shoot and howl with laughter atop my family's bones. They move in the rhythms of their parents. Their dads teach them to pull their foot back and kick the soccer ball as hard as they can. Their parents cheer as the children sprint past. The kids learn what their parents teach them. Their parents teach what their parents taught them.

The children know this is a cemetery for people who no longer live there. They saw the gravestones peeking out of the ground like broken teeth scattered in a dark mouth. They grew up waving to their daddies who sat atop bulldozers, leveling the tombs. After school, the children would sift through the dirt, finding chunks of rocks etched with letters that looked like the bodies of smashed ants. Their moms invited them to build a small white fence around the three remaining gravestones.

“Who’s buried here?” the children asked.

But the women didn’t hear their question.

On September 6, 2018 the children played on the field they helped their parents build.

These children witnessed the land finally changing hands. With pink balloons and shiny basketball hoops the land that remembers me passed from my ancestors' bodies to the kids wearing white dresses and pressed shirts.

The next generation in Klimentov will only know of my family and this graveyard as a story. They will learn it from the kids who play soccer on a brand new field.

Where am I from?

“Can I even say I am from there?” I ask my fourth cousin. “It’s been so long?”

I hear him slam his hands on the table over the phone.

“Do you feel like you are from there?” he asks me.

“Yes.”

“Then you are. You are from there, you are from there.”

In his words is the hope that our lands won't be lost forever. He still talks about buying the remaining synagogue, turning it into a community center, teaching the kids in Klimentov to be artists and actors. Instead the children learn to play soccer on a brand-new sports field.

Who will tell the story of this small cemetery in southern Poland?

So many have already told me it's been too long, too far. Move on now. Stop remembering, now. Just be like us—they say—the ones who learned how to forget.

I've spent so long teaching myself to remember.

So I write this to the ghosts who are still living with me. You may be the only ones who believe this story. We tell it together.

You: creating my body from all that you lived through.

Me: writing down the memories you share.

I want the land to remember me and tell our story. Until then, I turn these words into a mirror so we can behold ourselves more clearly.

My great-grandmother's synagogue still stands next to the new sports complex. It is a large white building with a triangle roof and steep steps that lead to its front door. My fourth cousin tells me about a man who sneaks into the building to sell my great-grandma's candlesticks to tourists. He stands on the steps of the temple, throws off the broken lock on the front door and wanders into the empty sanctuary. He looks for the menorahs my great-grandmother lit with her mother, the yad her father used to read Torah.

Treasures for me and for him.

I imagine prayer books tucked neatly in the backs of each seat, or maybe they are strewn in a corner under the crumbling ceiling. Their pages are dogeared and words underlined. I'm coming right back, they seem to say. Wait here a while.

The man grabs the siddurim in his thick fingers; dust flies into the air and he coughs as he opens the molded over covers. In one version of this imagining, the prayer books have been sitting in the backs of each seat for

decades, ready for a minyan to pick up where they left off. In another, they have been covered in rubble waiting for someone to find them.

He laughs at the mangled black letters lining the pages. They look like smashed ants, dying over and over in new formations.

Treasures for me and for him.

He arranges the objects he collects in the front room of his house. He calls it a museum. Tourists turn the items over in their hands, running their fingers along the ornate decorations. They smile at the beautiful things and pay him 10 zlote, 20 zlote for the menorahs, the yads, the prayer books.

This is how they remember us.

They pack the remains of my family into their bags.

The children play. The man makes a living.

The destruction is still happening.

In present tense.

I wake up from a dream and hear your wailing.

You remember the people who pried our fingers from the grounds
that know us.

But how do I return?

When I live in Pittsburgh, far from these lands where my family no longer exists.

Where are you from?

About the Author

Ami Weintraub (he/they) is a Jewish anarchist writer and Rabbinic student whose work and community organizing focus on building a world without domination where people can freely connect to their cultures, lands, and bodies. They have contributed to a number of publications including *Tikkun*, *Jewish Currents*, and *New Jewish Voices*, are the founder and former director of Ratzon: Center for Healing and Resistance, and are studying to become a Rabbi in the Aleph Rabbinic Ordination Program.

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