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A TABLE FOR ONE

Under the Light of Jerusalem

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Chapter one

I have lived in Jerusalem since the age of fourteen, for almost sixty years. When I ask myself where I've spent the most time and the happiest hours throughout these years, I have to admit that it's in cafés. A café is my lookout, my place of observation; on certain days my refuge. In periods when I'm inspired, it's the place where I'm best able to concentrate. My room at home is quiet and secluded, but sometimes it's hard to concentrate there, or I get lazy, distracted, my mind wanders and I end up sitting on the sofa and leafing through a book.

My attraction to cafés probably goes back to the beautiful cafés of Czernowitz, in Bukovina, where I was born. The cafés there were full but not crowded. Those who frequented the Czernowitz cafés had their regular places, zealously kept for them by the waiters. Naturally, the tables by the windows were the most sought after. Every regular had his own spot. In contrast to the pubs, the cafés were quiet, circumspect, more like public libraries—everyone immersed in his own newspaper or book. The conversations, even the arguments,

were not loud. These cafés of my childhood were distinguished by their secluded niches for chess. People sat for hours poring over the chessboards, as if the entire world hung in the balance. My father was an excellent chess player. When he would play, people would gather around our table, intently following the moves.

When I grew up and needed time to myself, I went to cafés. During the 1950s and 1960s, Jerusalem cafés were still quiet, there was no music, and they retained something of the aromas and manners of European cafés. They were all like this: Café Rehavia in Jerusalem's garden suburb in the center of the city, Café Atara on Ben-Yehuda Street, Café Vienna on Jaffa Street, or Café Hermon on Keren Kayemet. Not one of them is there any more.

What is it about a café that makes it such a wonderful place to concentrate? Perhaps here it should be said—most cafés nowadays are not so much cafés but more like large, crowded spaces invaded with violent music. Don't try to find any quiet there, or something mysterious, or that furtive connection with those surrounding you. It's only a nexus, a point of transition, a place where you wait impatiently. Cafés of this sort are not inviting, nor are they intended for sitting or lingering. You'd like to get out of them as quickly as possible. Real cafés are inviting, they tempt you with fresh coffee and a cake straight out of the oven, and offer the chance to spend a precious hour or two alone with yourself.

A café is not a sentimental place. Those who sit in cafés are generally people who find their own homes cramped, or for whom loneliness is a frequent companion, people from foreign parts who have gathered so they can speak their native tongue and share memories. In cafés you can sometimes hear words cold as ice, or words full of longing and a fierce loyalty. Usually there's silence in a café, but sometimes a wave of speech will surge up, flooding the listener with painful things that have been mostly kept down, things buried deep in the soul for many years that have at last found an opening and emerged in words.

There are times I feel that a café is a port to which all gates of the imagination are open. You sail toward distant lands, you are again

with people you loved. Toward evening, a café can resemble a secular prayer house in which people are immersed in observation.

I like being in a café in the winter. Winter imparts a lot of flavor to a cup of hot coffee. In winter, the people whom I wait for emerge from their hiding places. Sometimes it might be a man who resembles my uncle, and sometimes it's the splitting image of a beloved woman who has passed away. Once a woman who looked like my mother came into the café. In winter, the imagination has more strength: the heart is open and receptive, the words you need are ready and you can recall things that had been hidden from you as well. It's assumed that cafés are better for writing poetry than writing prose. I find that the groundswell of noise in a café stimulates me to grasp what is most important. Often the quiet at home can lead me astray and into inessential details. Because of their rhythm, cafés push me to choose the essential.

I have written all my novels in Jerusalem cafés. When I'm abroad, I may jot things down, edit a page or even a chapter, but I've never completed a short story or a novel abroad. Only in a Jerusalem café do I feel the freedom of imagination. That's my starting point. That's where I depart from and it is to there that I return. There were many houses and fields and streams in the region of my childhood, but to reach them I need a home port.

Chapter two

Café Peter in the German Colony was my first regular café. I used to go there for more than ten years, from 1953 till the mid-1960s. It was in its garden that I began my university studies and there that I completed them. The dark, narrow little room that I rented in Rehavia was just a place to sleep; I ate my meals at Café Peter, read, prepared for the examinations—but mostly I wrote there. To be more accurate, it was where I struggled to find my voice.

The dream of becoming a writer had stayed with me since my discharge from the army. I said “dream,” but it would be better to say “delusion” and even self-deception. In my parents’ home in Czernowitz, I had finished first grade, but the war broke out at the end of that school year. In Israel, I studied for about two and a half years in the Youth Aliyah, and after that I did my army service. I completed my matriculation exams without any assistance: I bought used and stained textbooks for next to nothing, and got hold of a few notes from high school students. Algebra and trigonometry presented the

biggest obstacles: I took the exam three times, and only passed on the third try.

That was my education—or rather my lack of education. It was with this meager equipment that I sought to become a writer. Though six years of war taught me many important life-lessons, you can't get far without any linguistic or cultural tools. My mother tongue was German. My grandparents spoke Yiddish. We lived among Ruthenian peasants and so we spoke Ruthenian. The government was Romanian, so we spoke Romanian. The intelligentsia often spoke French, so we spoke French. After the war I was with the Russians and I learned to speak Russian. Those languages that were not too deeply rooted in me rapidly faded in Israel; however, Hebrew had not yet taken root in my soul. To try to link my experience to the few Hebrew words at my disposal was too much of a stretch. But I'm rushing ahead.

Before I dreamed of being a writer, I had a different vision: being an Israeli, looking like an Israeli and behaving like one. All through the years in the Youth Aliyah and in the army I nurtured this illusion. It found expression, among other things, in jogging at night, working out, lifting weights, and various kinds of unpleasant physical exertions. But all this seemed to have no effect on my height, the way I walked, or the way I spoke. My shyness never disappeared, and I still spoke haltingly. Several of my friends in the Youth Aliyah did change—they did assimilate and when they were called up to the army, they were accepted into elite units. But it was as if my body refused to change, and even my interior, apparently, insisted on remaining what it had been. Our desires, even the strongest ones, seldom dictate what we actually do.

What I couldn't bring about in life, I tried to do in writing. After failed attempts at poetry, I tried to write about my life in Israel. It was no less awful than the sentimental poems that I had been writing. Strange how what we want befuddles us; to what extent we are in fact hostage to our desires. It is only the fortunate few who, from the outset, recognize the path that fate has marked out for them.

As I said, Café Peter was a home to me; if truth be told, it was more than a home. All that I hazily remembered was revealed to me

in the shape of living people, who spoke in tones that reminded me of home and who, between one conversation and another, might let drop a word about the ghetto or the camp.

The people who frequented Café Peter in those years had come from Transylvania, Hungary, Bukovina, and Bulgaria; they spoke the languages of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, particularly German. Everything there—the taste of food, the manners, the tone of speech, the silence between the sentences—was just as it had been at home. The garden too—the huge atrium, the sideboards, and the chairs—all these were as if they had been reincarnated from “there” and had come here.

I don't remember who first brought me to Café Peter, but I do recall that no sooner was I through the doorway, ~~then~~^{and} I knew that these people were my lost uncles and cousins, they had brought their language here with them—their attire, their little shops in the pastoral villages, and their splendid department stores from the towns from which they had been uprooted.

I had already been in Israel for some seven years, yet only now had I returned home. I was so enchanted by the place that whenever I had a spare hour I would rush over, and sit there spellbound. I understood everything that was said around the little tables, not only the words, but also what was implied, the hints and the silences. I immediately felt that these people, whose names I didn't know, were my real relatives. It was as if everything that had surrounded me up to now didn't touch my real essence. That essence was embodied by these émigrés, who spoke Hapsburg German, who had been uprooted from the land of their birth and now found themselves lost in their homeland. To assuage that loss, they would gather together, evoking and reminiscing about their homes and their fields.

One autumn night, I heard one of them confess that the years in the labor camp were a time when all reserves, body and soul, had been drawn upon, yet they were years of hope and immense belief. Since the Liberation, it was as if everything had been overturned: now it was hard to sleep at night, and torturous thoughts returned

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with piercing intensity—the body’s betrayal. The restraint in his voice shocked me. Yet strange as it was, no one contradicted him.

Chapter three

Café Peter was my great discovery. It was at Café Peter that, once and for all, I gave up on the dream of becoming what I could never become; it was there that I stopped trying to belong to something I simply didn't belong to. After all, my homeland was not the land of the Hebrew revolution, but the land of émigrés. This discovery did not come to me overnight—time, humility, and the renunciation of great ambitions, were all required.

The émigré is not a loveable personality. Usually, he's a man who has left half of his life behind him, everything that was built up so carefully is gone, and his loved ones have been brutally murdered. You look at him and you can read his entire life in his body. At Café Peter, I learned to look carefully at the human body, its positions, its movements; a body tells you far more than words like "loneliness" and "sorrow."

I have to confess today: there were years in Israel that I distanced myself from survivors, I avoided them, I did everything in order not to be near them. They were called "the Desert Generation,"