

FRACTURED



Melissa Whalen Haertsch

An Essay from the Exhibit FRACTURED

by Michael Poster, Rodrica Tilley & Melissa Whalen Haertsch

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When my son was born, there was a little flurry of discussion about circumcision. I had already decided against it, because I disagree with randomly slicing off pieces of our evolution, but of course in a society where every choice about birthing, feeding and child-rearing is scrutinized, some conversation was inevitable. To my surprise, my Pennsylvania-born father unexpectedly piped up. “My brothers were all circumcised, and I wasn’t, and I don’t think it made any difference,” he said. I asked him why when they reached 1942 and their fifth boy his parents would change tacks. “Things weren’t going so well for circumcised babies at that time,” he said. “And nobody knew how far it would get.”

According to *The Jewish Encyclopedia*, Poland had 1,333,000 Jewish residents in 1897. The population now is around 26,000. In Lithuania before the war, there were 160,000 Jews; the 2005 census counted 4,000. The question is this: is my Roman Catholic family descended from some of those million and a half people?

1: Fragments Of A Broken Mirror

A few years ago my children and I started celebrating Hanukkah. We don't know the prayers, but I cook a nice Jewish meal (the vegetarian dance mix version), light the menorah, give the kids some little gift, and at some point we review the story of the miraculous lamp that burned for eight days on one day's worth of oil. That's what the holiday really is for me—another celebration of the miracle of light, return thereof to us every year. In the mountains of Northeast Pennsylvania, second cloudiest place in the country after Seattle, this matters. A lot. I celebrate Christmas too, but the winter solstice is where the real action is, spiritually speaking. Christmas and Hanukkah I just like for the decorations and gifts and food and parties.

This year for our Hybrid Hanukkah, we lit the menorah and cooked latkes and Chick-Free Soup with Not-Zo Balls. Next year I'll try to plan ahead a little better and get some actual matzo meal for the dumplings, but we did our best to turn a disorganized Friday into a sacred celebration. We listened to some cool jazz riffs on traditional Jewish tunes, courtesy of Steven Bernstein. Next year I might add the Louisiana Klezmer All-Stars, but I think L.L. Cool Jew and the Heb-Bro's is too much for me. My son's visiting friend got some chocolate gelt for his gift; my daughter got a pair of striped red and white Santa knee socks with a faux fur cuff, and my son got black socks with skulls and crossbones, only the crossbones were candy canes. These were not, I'm thinking, the most traditional gifts for this holiday. But we called a couple of Jewish friends to say hello, and one actually walked us through the prayer you say when you light the menorah. I think the call did him a lot of good, based on how hard he was laughing as he

corrected our pronunciation of these sound memes we had never heard before. I'm not sure what blessings we were asking for, but I hope Yahweh will throw in some forgiveness for sonic irregularities.

For many years I have had a strong attraction to Jewish culture and have wondered if we had some lost Jewish ancestor in our extensive family of Roman Catholics. Every time I go to New York and walk down the street, I see girls who look just like me wearing Star of David necklaces. Ashkenazi food and music moves me deeply. With alarming (and increasing) frequency, when someone speaks to me, my Jewish Grandma voice will answer before I get a chance. I even had a date once with...wait for it...a nice Jewish boy who was a little offputting because he smelled exactly like my father. Research has shown that women prefer the smell of men whose major histocompatibility complex (a part of the genome important to immune strength) is as different as possible from their own, presumably so that any children that result from liking someone's smell will have an immune profile that is as diverse as possible, and therefore as robust as possible. So what is this Jewish boy from New York doing smelling like my Swiss Catholic dad? I queried my mom once or twice about whether we had a Jew in the woodpile, but she hadn't heard of any on either side.

Then one of my cousins from my dad's side of the family stopped in for a visit. We were sitting in my dining room, which is decorated with Roman Catholic religious relics: an old sick call box, a bizarre shadow-box crucifix with strange symbols stuck all over it, and two molded plaster Stations of the Cross that came from our paternal grandmother's childhood parish church, which—stay with me here—was demolished

along with the rest of Centralia when the creeping mine fire that has been burning nearby for 60 years or so crept under the town, causing the government to buy everyone out and demolish the entire burg. So sitting there facing this Wall-o-Catholicism, which I am at liberty to consider decorative because I don't spend any time in Catholic churches, my cousin suddenly said, "So, are we Jewish or what?"

As I sort through my father's antecedents, looking for likely candidates for the position of Jewish Forebears, we have to immediately strike the Haertsch side of the clan, because one of the founding monks of the Benedictine monastery at St. Gallen, Switzerland, which is a UNESCO World Heritage site and holds the largest Medieval library in all Europe, was a Haertsch. If we were already Christian in 719 A.D., I think that line has to be ruled out. This leaves the more promising option of my paternal grandmother's kin. They were called Rumin and Lutcavich; some of them came from Lithuania, and some were Polish, though the borders of these places were inclined to move around. There is a town in Poland named Rumin, which coincidentally sits a stone's throw from the Nazis' Chelmno extermination camp, where something in excess of 153,000 Jews and other victims were collected and murdered by being loaded into vans whose exhaust was piped into the cargo area, killing those within by carbon monoxide poisoning. Unlike the work camps in the Nazi system, Chelmno was entirely for the purpose of killing the greatest number of civilians with the utmost expediency. It was the first such camp established in occupied Poland. After exterminating the entire Jewish population of the surrounding area, the camp systematically liquidated the Jews of Lodz, and numerous Roma; the victims included people who had been transported to the

Lodz ghetto from their original towns, no doubt with Chelmno as their intended final destination. So if my ancestors came from Rumin, and if they had been Jews and had not converted or emigrated, they would have been among the first truckloads gassed in December of 1941. The Rumins had come to America a few decades before the war, but there is no doubt that the neighbors they left behind included people whose descendants did not survive the Holocaust. Things in Lithuania were just as bad.

The natural question, then, if one did have Jewish ancestors in Europe some time prior to the twentieth century, is why one is no longer a Jew. Certainly, in addition to actual religious conversions, conversions of convenience were not unheard of, since anti-Semitism has been around as long as Semites. Felix Mendelssohn's paternal grandfather was a well-known Jewish philosopher, Moses Mendelssohn, but this prominence did not stop Felix's father from becoming a Lutheran and having all his children thus baptized. Still, Abraham Mendelssohn knew that the act of eschewing the Jewish faith did not remove all Jewish identity; he wrote to Felix many years after the fact, "There can no more be a Christian Mendelssohn than there can be a Jewish Confucius." His conversion was apparently the most dramatic possible route to defining himself away from his father and family heritage, and becoming his own man, but it did not change the fact that the Mendelssohns had been Jews time immemorial.

My father's family is great for not talking about things considered painful, shameful or otherwise unflattering to the clan. Partly this was generational: even though German was my Swiss-born great grandfather's native language (which he must have used now and again, because my father developed a sentimental attachment to the

handful of vocabulary words he picked up), German was actively forbidden in my grandfather's house. This was not just an effort to play down any possible connection with Germany during the Second War; the family, like many immigrants of that era, was simply uninterested in anyone thinking they were anything besides Pennsylvanians. The other languages their recent forebears had spoken—among them Polish and Lithuanian—were similarly dispatched. In addition to this cultural effacement, we also found out not too long ago via my parents' genealogical work that this same linguistic menace of a great grandfather had been divorced back in Switzerland. Divorced! A divorced German-speaker in a family of good American Catholics! Oi!

When I mentioned this habit of omission to my mother recently, she rejoined with an anecdote about my paternal grandmother's brother, who had, in his early twenties, developed a mental illness that resulted in his institutionalization at a regional hospital. My father and all his siblings grew up with no knowledge of this uncle's existence, even though he lived within 100 miles of them. When my father was in his early twenties, and his mother was suffering her last illness, she unburdened her conscience regarding this brother. My father was aghast that the family had abandoned him, but he kept her secret, even from his wife. When this poor old uncle died some years later, my mother's sister, still living back where they all grew up, called to tell my mom that someone called Rumin had died at Danville Hospital. With such an uncommon surname, surely this was a relative? My mother asked my father, who poured forth the story. My dad got on the phone then and started calling his siblings to tell them that the uncle they didn't know existed had died—but he didn't call his sister or the brother next oldest to him, because they were both going through divorces and he didn't want to add to their burdens. So the

knowledge gaps go on. I asked my mother what was wrong with this uncle, because mental illness of various kinds and severities runs rampant among my dad's kin, and I've always wondered what the genetic vector was. "Nobody knows," she said. "But at the funeral, we met a lady who had been their neighbor and knew him as a young man. She was sad. 'I think he was harmless,' she told us. 'He just wanted to sit in church all day.'" My mother added reflectively, "It takes some of them that way. The world is too much for them."

Given this inclination to omit facts we would rather were not known, to gloss over things whose existence makes us as a clan uncomfortable with who we are and what other people might think of us, it's hard to imagine a juicier secret than having Jewish ancestors. With any luck they were divorced, gay, hard-drinking, professional musician Jews with an antipathy to firearms and a staunch belief in women's rights. That would really give us something to suppress.

2: The Land of Milk & Honey

I had wanted to live in the Endless Mountains for many years before I actually got here. In my early twenties, the mountains started beckoning to me. After a while I began to look at houses in the region, but my then-husband could not be persuaded to move. Later on, after I had been divorced for some time, I chanced to phone a friend who had been an enthusiastic accomplice in the "moving out" plot, just to say hello. She said, "Do you still want to live here?" A day or two later I was driving out to see an apartment for

rent in an old mansion so beautiful that when my convertible climbed the hill and came round the curve of the driveway between the stone walls, I gasped and nearly grabbed the leg of my passenger, the old gentleman who managed the place. Within a few weeks myself and the children were living there.

In those days, Susquehanna County was one of the poorest areas in the commonwealth. Local industry consisted of dairy farms, timber and wooden pallet companies, stone quarries and the Proctor and Gamble plant some miles away on the Susquehanna River. Milk prices are notoriously unreliable, and only families that had gotten dairying right a few generations ago and then hung on with a clamped jaw were still farming in any kind of livable way. Getting a job at P&G, teaching school or finding bluestone on your land were the only known ways to have the kind of comfort that much of suburban America took for granted prior to the recent monumental recession. The tepid local economy, however, made the cost of living here very low, and along with the hard-core right wingers, the county also had a substantial community of artists, musicians, progressive newcomers to farming and liberal, music-loving hippies. We had a nice Open Studio Tour every fall, and everybody had sizeable kitchen gardens. Anyone who had a piece of a mountain had a small maple syrup boiling shed up on it. The elderly property manager turned out to be a Master Beekeeper who loved to teach newcomers how to tend bees and extract honey. One family even had a cider press, and they had a party every fall to which people brought their apples for squeezing. Everyone had cell phones and the Internet, and you had plenty of chances to be killed on a gravel road by a milk tanker or a flatbed laden with stone, but in other ways the place was a lot like it had been since the dawn of electricity and mechanized travel. And right across the road from

the old estate we'd moved to was a six hundred acre nature preserve that had been given to The Nature Conservancy back in the early 1960s by the same family that still owned our new place. The preserve was quiet and remote and heavily populated with animals, plants and old growth trees. I went there often.

When I had been in the country a little more than a year, I decided to go looking for more people to love. The Open Studio Tour was an obvious place to start. I looked at the map and chose a few studios to visit, including a potter whose luminous Quaker wife I had worked with at a catered wedding a few years earlier and for whom I had been looking ever since because she seemed a good candidate for friendship; a wood carver and collage maker couple whose work in the Open Studio brochure looked oddly familiar; and the closest studio to my house, another potter, because if they turned out to be friends, they would only be a few miles away.

The first potter's studio was all the way on the eastern side of the county, so it took forty-five minutes to get there, because we have no east-west roads to speak of. Jordan was very nice, but his wife was in graduate school in Maryland. The wood carver and collage maker, Tom and Betty, turned out to be people who used to sell their wares at an annual show near my old house, and whose work I had bought for family and friends as Christmas gifts. They remembered me too, as the only woman at the suburban hall who was not wearing a red Christmas sweater. As I was waiting to say hi to the potter nearest my house, listening to him explain something about Japanese glazes and wood ash to a small group of onlookers, his wife, Marilyn, came up from the cabin to the pottery and struck up a conversation with me that quickly turned to hiking. She was delighted to hear about the preserve across from us, and we agreed that we must hike

together there. I went home feeling that the tour had been a great success in friend-finding. In fact, I had no idea how important it would turn out to be.

The following spring, Jordan the far-off potter was having an open house, and I made a point of going over in case his wife was there. She was not, but his apprentice was. Jordan was explaining something about glazes and wood ash to a small group of customers, and Zoe came to ask if I had any questions. I knew and liked her mother, who was a painter in town, and we had a pleasant chat. The next day Marilyn called to say I'd made a big impression on Zoe, and that we all had to go for a hike together. We did, and friendship ensued.

As the next Open Studio Tour drew near, Marilyn decided she would open a café for the weekend, with all proceeds to benefit the local library. It was a test run to see if people were interested in local food, and since I am an old hand at food service and also devoted to Marilyn, I signed right up. It turned out to coincide with my 20th high school reunion, and I had a moment of surreal clarity in which I knew that I had to choose between the past and the future. I can't stop writing about the past, but I have no illusions about wanting to live there. So the weekend kicked off with Zoe's end-of-apprenticeship party over at Jordan's pottery, and even though I was just getting back from Scranton late that afternoon, and had to be on site for the Art Café very early the next morning, I made the drive because I wanted to honor Zoe, who was so dear and so talented. While I was congratulating her and asking about what came next, her mother came over and introduced me to their friend John, a building designer. We fell to talking about our childhood trainyards, and the ceramic chickens that were a story and a half tall. I loved them; John found them disturbing because they were not to scale. With that memorable

neurosis in mind, I went on to talk to Zoe's mother. While we were ranting together about the importance of birth control and not leaving dogs chained outside all day, a man with a camera around his neck came over and fed her a bite from a chocolate covered strawberry. I narrowed my eyes at this devious fellow, because I knew Roddy was married, and I felt very protective. Roddy was married, it turned out, to him.

The following day, Zoe's partner Matt, also staffing the Art Café, told me that I had an admirer. After cussing volubly, I asked who it was: John the to-scale building designer. I grumped my way through an entire tray of roasted baby beets that had to be peeled for the Local Harvest Salad, but that did not sway Fate one iota. John was at the Art Café before the doors opened, and he stayed all weekend. He never talked to me but when he left at the end of the second afternoon, he passed me a note with his phone number on it. On the phone, he fed me more memorable neuroses, one at a time, tantalizingly. We started hanging out.

Meanwhile, I was also hanging around Betty and Tom's gallery and used book store, and, as often as not, talking to Roddy's husband, Michael, while everyone else was hobnobbing. Pretty soon, Tom and Betty invited me to curate a collaborative show for the gallery, in which I would gather a bunch of visual artists and writers to work together on a common theme. And Michael invited me to contribute some poetry to a pair of books he was making for Roddy and Zoe for Christmas, using old family photos handed down from Roddy's ancestors. We enjoyed the process so much that when the project was done, we did another one, and another and another. Pat, my friend who owned our hill, sold me the house next to her own. Zoe began illustrating some of my mystery stories for children. Kristin, the friend who tipped me off about the mansion apartment, pointed out

to me after my fourth annual ritual break-up with John that he really was a good man, and love in your forties didn't feel like love in your twenties, but it was still love.

Exactly five years after the Open Studio Tour I had embarked upon to find some new friends, Kristin arranged dozens of vases and bouquets and boutonnieres of blazing fall wild flowers and foliage for my wedding to John the to-scale building designer. Marilyn and John-the-potter drove up from Philadelphia for the 10-minute ceremony, with Marilyn lending me her own wedding dress and her mother's fur stole, then drove three hours straight back home because she had to work that night. Michael buzzed around me making pictures. Zoe brought the bread Matt had baked for us and the beautiful dahlias she had chosen to add to the bouquets. Tom and Betty got someone to watch the gallery for an hour on the busiest day of the year so they could come to the ceremony. It was a party so magnificent that complete strangers in neighboring townships had heard about it by the following day.

3: Di-Gas-Pora

Meanwhile, America's endless need for petroleum-related products converged with the latest technologies in natural gas extraction to make it profitable for gas companies to drill in rock structures that previously defied economic exploitation. One of these structures, the Marcellus Shale, extends under a lot of Pennsylvania, as well as New York above us and Maryland and Virginia below. It is everywhere under Susquehanna County. And in a place where money is scarce, the promise of gas royalties swept almost

everyone up in a dream of prosperity. As a church bulletin board said in the equally poor county west of here, “Thank God for Natural Gas.”

Gas companies have been sniffing around our area since the 1930s; the paterfamilias who gave the preserve to The Nature Conservancy all those years ago had been worried about gas drilling here more than fifty years ago. Local families with significant land holdings were offered leases every few years by various oil and gas concerns. Lots of people signed them for \$25 or \$50 an acre. Nothing ever came of it. Then, a few years ago, more and more companies began contacting more and more landholders with smaller and smaller parcels of land, offering more and more money per acre. At the time of this writing, there are rumors of leases at \$8,000 an acre.

This sudden rush of opportunity produced some strange effects among the populace. People who had signed for not much resented those who had signed for a lot. People whose farms were beautiful and prosperous tore them up with so many wells that the farmers became millionaires overnight. The first thing long-time dairy families did after receiving their first royalty check was sell all their cows except a few show pets to take to the fair in the summertime. Archconservationists signed so-called subterranean leases in which no wells are drilled on your land, but you get paid royalties for the gas that is extracted from under your feet. This is surprising primarily because gas drilling involves injecting a variety of industrial solvents into the earth, which is of questionable value to Mother Nature and might therefore raise some red flags for the preservationist crowd. But even these people went for the bait.

According to the gas companies, this type of drilling is perfectly safe for the environment because the wells go straight down to far below the water table before they

reach out sideways to fracture the shale layers in which the gas particles are trapped, a smashing process accomplished by forcing the aforementioned variety of industrial solvents into the rocks at high pressure. The process is known as fracking, a pet name derived from the word fracturing. Needless to say, fracking activity and the presence of industrial solvents has led to spills and stream poisonings and even a spectacular exploding water well where methane had built up to intolerable levels in a well shaft near a drill site. Although old timers who had gone to the one room schoolhouse on that road claim to have spent their formative years blowing up toilets down there using only the methane in the well water and a common stove match, the state DEP ruled that the gas company was responsible for the exploded well. And since the DEP seems to be giving the gas drillers the benefit of the doubt at every turn, we were inclined to believe them.

A few of us decided not to sign leases, primarily because we didn't want to do business with the oil and gas companies. Anyone who was sentient at the time of the Exxon Valdez accident knows how far the industry can be trusted to work clean, and to have a care for the environment first and profits second. Some people think it's insane to walk away from royalty money when the gas is going to be sucked out from under our land just like everyone else's, but we holdouts feel like some money is not worth having. Still, we all have friends who signed, and the whole situation has told us more about our neighbors than we ever wanted to know. Things reached such a fever pitch that more than one heated conversation has begun with someone bursting into a room and gasping out, "So-and-so signed!"

Because we are surrounded by preserve, our land and our water well are more protected than most. But still, the neighbor on the back side of the hill is planning to drill,

which may endanger our water. And the preserve itself has become a flashpoint in the debate, because The Nature Conservancy does not have a policy yet about subterranean drilling, and with the economy like it is, they have not categorically ruled out the preserve as a potential cash cow. Before the last quarterly meeting of the preserve's stewardship committee—an institution that has promoted, maintained and watched over the preserve since the land was donated to TNC—a member who has a subterranean lease on his own land proposed signing up the preserve too, and using the money for forestry and educational efforts there. In the ensuing flurry of emails between committee members and TNC staff responsible for the preserve, it became clear that the committee actually has no legal power whatsoever, and that regardless of what decision they come to (about gas drilling or anything else), TNC is in no way obligated to honor it in the final decision on drilling. Furthermore, it became obvious that whatever monies were earned by a subterranean lease at the preserve would not necessarily flow back to that land, but would be used as TNC saw fit, in all likelihood to support other, more prominent properties elsewhere. When I saw this, I resigned.

The quarterly meeting, however, was so spectacular that I almost wish I had been there. The most dramatic moment came when my friend Bill, Kristin's husband, asked the committee member who had proposed the idea of the gas lease whether he was, in fact, working for the gas company. It was the question on the mind of all us skeptics, not least of all because the gas company seemed to know more about the upcoming meeting than anyone else outside the committee. The affronted committee member jumped up and stomped out, leaving several of the other members to flutter on about civility and the

ongoing need for the committee to take its balanced, informed and completely moot stand.

The little minority population that has held out on signing leases is peopled in part by my closest friends, including Kristin and Bill, and Roddy and Michael. Unfortunately, a number of them are planning to avoid the anticipated wave of pollution, population and baneful development by moving away. The households in question are using their vacation time now to scout possible locations for their next life, places where the ground beneath them contains nothing of interest to capitalists. Since they are not all headed in the same direction, and I am not in a position to follow even one group of them, let alone all, this is not the happiest news for me.

Will things really get so bad as to justify flight? Although I do not believe the predictions of the fire-and-brimstone “acres of poisoned water and dead trees” crowd, I do see a county—at least while the boom lasts—where local people can’t afford to live because everyone with rental properties wants to rent to gas people for three times what they used to be able to charge. I see a county where the roads are even worse than they used to be, because they weren’t designed for the constant parade of exotic wheeled machinery they now support. I like heavy equipment, so I take some pleasure in the bizarre mechanical chimeras going past, but there is no question they wreak more havoc than the semi-weekly milk tanker. I see a county where property values have skyrocketed, but where the jobs that would allow local people to earn enough to buy land do not exist. And I see a county where the first flush of gas money will fuel a wave of development that cannot later be supported, so thirty years from now our main roads will be lined with the empty hulls of box stores. The natural gas boom will drag Susquehanna

County into the late 20th century while the rest of the U.S. is in the mid-21st, having learned the lessons of and repented that ill-conceived exurban sprawl to which my neighborhood is rushing headlong.

For some reason, nobody around here seems to connect natural gas (thank God for it) with our previous local brown site, where the Bendix Corporation used to manufacture television tubes, and which now molders poisonously on land that will never be useable again. A few decades from now when the local populace is shocked, shocked to discover that there is a rash of bizarre post-industrial cancers going on in this café, it will be very difficult not to turn my face resolutely away and go stumping off into the deepest wilderness I can find.

4: The Pillars of Smoke & Fire Move On

What happens when a local culture is destroyed? Times change, as they say, slowly or suddenly, through malice aforethought or thoughtless plunder or simply the dying off of the old folks and their old ways. What has been for some time simply is no longer. In the case of sudden change, catastrophic change, the survivors are left to start again on the original site or go somewhere different and start there, try to re-build what can be saved of the old ways. What they manage to complete is perforce a fragment of what was, no more the old world than the tiger is still the tiger when it is no longer living in the forests of the night. But sometimes, instead of remaining a kind of cultural set piece, a curio in a glass case along the hallway of the real world, the fragment can root into its new surroundings and grow into a new, and whole, entity. If the Jews who

survived the Holocaust, burdened by the pain and loss so evilly inflicted on them, could go forth and start new communities, a new Jewish world elsewhere, and succeed so well at it, why should those of us who have been booted so much less violently from our paradise not also go forth and thrive? Why should we think so aching of the lost world? Why seems it so particular with us?

I can't seem to answer that. I knew when I moved here to Susquehanna County that this would not be my last life. I seem to run in eighteen-year cycles—first the Pocono Mountains where I grew up, then Scranton, then here. As I write this I have been here six years already, which doesn't put me anywhere near the eighteen-year mark, but it's a third of the way. I hope this place stays in my life, even if I live somewhere else for a while, or if I live somewhere else part-time. Who knows?

Meanwhile, when I mentioned to Kristin that I was writing an essay on the fact that I thought part of my father's family used to be Jewish—like it's possible that someone 'used to be Jewish,' I can hear Mendelsohn's father vamping—she replied that she had always thought some of her father's German ancestors were secretly Jews. What is this about? Are we all actually Jews? Or is there something about Jewish culture that speaks to us, some deep genetic memory of having lived near a Medieval ghetto somewhere? Smelling the food on the air and hearing the music from someone's open window? What?

Maybe we *are* Jews. As Poland's chief rabbi Michael Schudrich (in the *New York Times**, that organ of the Northern capital of Jewish America) told the young Polish skinhead who had discovered his own hidden Jewish ancestors and decided to become an Orthodox Jew himself, "The sleeping souls of your ancestors are calling out to you."

Or maybe we are drawn to the demonstrated ability of the Jewish people to overcome disaster. In another *Times* piece, this one David Brooks's column "The Tel Aviv Cluster,"** Brooks says, "American Jews used to keep a foothold in Israel in case things got bad here. Now Israelis keep a foothold in the U.S." Being something particular and yet flexible, something with a long, rich heritage and the ability to pack it all up and take it on the road, always having a foothold somewhere else, or at least the willingness to go get one if you have to—maybe this is what we are all seeking: the ability to face down the most hideous reality and go on. The Holocaust was preceded, of course, by plenty of other massive injustices perpetrated upon the Jews solely for who they were; the Chosen People have a long history of surviving. And since normal life is not without its setbacks, anyone would covet that history and that ability.

Still, it's hard to turn away from this idea that all these Polish Catholics are actually Jews, that people are arising to fill the void left in that country by the Holocaust, the void Rabbi Schudrich called Poland's "missing limb." Maybe it was no coincidence that my cousin and I were standing in the dining room, looking at two Stations of the Cross donated to the parish by people called Jan and Stanislaw and Maryanna, at the moment when he posed the question of our identity. Are these uber-Christian names the names of the donors? Or are the Stations donated in memory of Jan and Maryanna and Stanislaw? Either way, maybe we should just overlook the Jesus-oriented generations in between and ask to speak directly to Mary, Jesus's Jewish mother, or Ann, his Jewish grandma. The Catholic "cult of the Virgin" that sets the Church apart from Protestant denominations is, after all, the adoration of a Jewish girl. Such a nice Jewish girl, in fact, that when God sent His angel to announce the coming of the new order, she didn't say,

“What, are you kidding me?” She adapted to this sudden change of plans, this bend in the road that she had not foreseen. It seems to be what we’re best at.

**New York Times*, Feb. 24, 2010

** *New York Times*, January 11, 2010