

Roman

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In 1946 Roman the painter married Riva. His nights were not filled with the joy of the coming Jewish State and his days were whipped into a thick mixture by his wife and his soft character. Roman the teacher, who approves of every piece of work done by a child, does watercolors on paper that soaks up all his excitement. Back at the academy of art in Leipzig, Roman used the watercolor technique. He gathered his subjects into a daily report: landscapes he had seen in his childhood, landscapes he had seen yesterday, landscapes that recurred but were different, landscapes that had been changed by the light of the day and season, gloomy northern light, searing winter light lacking dullness, weightiness, clouds, a dense and damp light.

There was a time when he allowed himself a conceptual expansion. He raised the curtain that concealed the way he worked and only left the words defining colors and brief character descriptions. Beforehand he had always erased the descriptions inscribed with a soft pencil after using this verbal impression and translating it into visual language. The sky: yellow faded with use: above it sky: yellow rusted by dank air. Between them he used wall yellow - like at home. He painted the whole sky twice, once in lemon yellow and then yellow with veins of red. With brushstrokes he lifted the mess of earth color below. The rust of the air he brought down from above when he dipped the edges of the absorbent paper in clean water. In the middle, wall yellow like at home, four short incautious strokes: lemon yellow, yellow with red veins, transparent red, and white. He imagined two poles of his conceptual instrument, one revealing the creative work and the other he understood as a blessed poetic incursion from another world. He then stopped immediately when his father told him that his secret is not revealed and his poetics are not uniform in their success, and in general, "How can I put it, it's shallow, and above all it pulls away the rug of quality, which still exists: your daily report with personal lessons learned, not grafted like an orange."

Snow did not dampen the sheets he painted since he did not paint snowy landscapes. He painted neither moonlit landscapes nor a lone tree standing there – an eye into a dark forest – or landscapes with menacing clouds hanging above. He called himself a

naturalistic artist with the right of choice since his choices lacked any scientific discipline. He was therefore surprised at how he began depicting the roots of the new Jewish farmer, up to his neck in almond blossom.

His colleagues, who admired the scent of his famous father, the magic of Roman's fluency in French and his prolonged stay in Europe, said No, it's impossible, the farmer looks like an Arab, the houses like a pigsty, and the tang, the delicate tang of charcoal smoldering in the ground, is missing. Each in his turn posed the question of how he, Roman, had mastered Hebrew without an aftertaste. How his palate had mastered the gutturals and his hand gestures matched the vocalized accents. He replied patiently, laying his open hand on his chest, covering his heart in proof of his candor and to ensure that the pulsing muscle would not burst: I possess a visual memory. In a flash I permanently recall the movements of the throat, the esophagus, the jaws, the nasal hum, the sealing of the air inside the spaces of the ears, the effort of the eyes as the tongue is rolled and its root stiffens the pharynx. I remember a great deal from which I chose the dialect of the Jerusalem Sephardi.

Three members of the Leipzig academy's artistic community convened to deal with the future of the esteemed professor. They did not submit their conclusions in writing but invited the dignitary to a study evening on the inferences arising from man-machine relations. On the evening the three converged on Mr. Cohen, Roman's father and told him in alarm: Quickly, time is of the essence, it is already late, we have prepared papers and a hiding place, you must leave and return later, but now you cannot refuse. Elazar Cohen was unsurprised and the four seemed calm. "And my son?" he asked. "He is young and he'll manage," said the representative attentive to detail.

"My wife is dead, and my son, what will become of him?" he repeated. "He's young," replied Dieter, Elazar's close friend, "and if needs be he'll get over it," he said, laying his hand on Elazar's shoulder and forcing him to sit down. "You can't refuse," he told him.

Elazar glanced at his watch, a memento of behavior towards the importuning of indelicate women, and said, "And my son? What will become of him?" The three changed places. Dieter shook his hand and said slowly and angrily: "He will perhaps

survive, you definitely will not.” The next day the representative’s son came with a roll of papers and a letter:

“Cohen, my friend, I am sending you a first swallow heralding the work awaiting the summer.” Among the flimsy plans were an American consular passport, first-class train tickets, and a berth aboard a ship sailing from Lisbon two weeks today. The documents were in an envelope on which Dieter had written: “Respect my safety – leave immediately”. Roman’s father intended to leave, waited, and was too late. He was arrested and placed in custody in a headquarters cell. Dieter Machteffer interceded on his behalf and managed to dull the severity of the detention. Four weeks later the professor was unexpectedly attached to a group of political detainees sentenced to forced labor, and he died.

I wasn’t in the city when my father was arrested. I came back on Sunday. From a distance I saw two people on the doorstep talking earnestly with Mr. Landlord. He saw me immediately and averted his face. I hid in the town center, and with the money I’d hidden a month earlier in the lining of my coat, purchased my future.

In 1946 Roman the painter married Riva, the daughter of a Jerusalem family that had moved to Tel Aviv. Her father refused to consent to the marriage; “Over my dead body,” he said, fully aware of the effect of his last weapon. He later relented and consented not to refuse. In the bosom of the family during the years of his courtship, Roman learned the haughty tone of the Sephardi and did not abandon it. He loved her as he understood, and two years after their marriage their son Rimon was born. Her father chose the name and with great satisfaction rolled the appellation, Rimon Cohen, from the base of his throat until the tongue touched the palate. Riva said, “Let him enjoy it,” and Roman didn’t care. “Well, may the name Rimon be a blessing,” he told the father and shook his hand.

Roman and Riva sought an easy life and with the redness of his skin and his two teeth, Rimon was assured of good health. Roman’s wife whipped his days into a thick mixture that after ten years became fluffy whipped cream. His character was easygoing and any troubles were covered by the cream of his life. At school he attempted to accord the boys a sense of the richness of color or at least reading comprehension. “Colors, especially watercolors, are not sovereign in their kingdom. Their validity is dependent on the neighbor’s definition and on negotiating the nature

of the border between them. Watery green that inconsiderately invades sealed purple does not resemble green adorned with layers that respects purple's border. Thus, too, purple that rebels against the yoke of its neighbor does not resemble the one which threatens the border of green".

Four times a week Roman went to the state school. He talked a little with the teachers, his colleagues, and went into the first lesson of fourth-graders, who he perceived as teenagers, for he believed that the body of a young person grew on the spirit and character shaped long before, and he called the ninth graders adults, for consequent to the excitement of sexual experience, the body determines the character, spirit and rules of behavior of a complete adult. In the classes he taught the students loved the teacher, his patience, erudition and willingness to help. Riva loved him because of his soft character.

He had long since stopped depicting the romantic eminence of the new Jew and now and again painted small landscapes that put up barriers in his memories. He painted them as if he wanted to beat them until a great memory fell, which he had apparently forgotten. Again he painted rows of vines meticulously arranged on a slope, wide expanses divided into precise plots, a townlet in the middle of an autumnal plain, an empty barn in winter.

In August 1955 a request from the ministry of education arrived on the principal's desk, which he passed on to the teachers for their perusal. Roman received it too, and it courteously demanded that the staff join forces in a common effort and contribute to the following educational experiment: the ministry has chosen the Zamenhof State School as the flagship of an experiment called "The Modern School". The ministry posed the assumption, which had been formulated by its experts, to the effect that the demands of future modern society would be for active choice, discretionary ability, and decision. Therefore, and not sweepingly, from September 1957 all the authority to determine study tracks, subjects and timetables will be transferred from the ministry of education, i.e., the school, to the student. The ministry had worked to bring out a booklet that would encompass the details of the experiment in explanations. From September 1955 small working groups would meet once weekly with the ministry's experts to discuss the experiment and its implications. "You, Dear Teacher, should know this: you can contribute to the success of the next generation of adults." Roman

filed the letter away and for the first time checked who the man was after whom the state school was named, and what he did. .

Riva asked him what he thought. He answered that he would be grateful to anyone who could see how the new road deviated from the old one. He could not see the light of change emanating from head office. Riva said, "Yes, we really must wait and see," and added that Rimon would be deep inside the program of change. Roman replied, "Apparently not." Riva asked, "How's that?" and Roman explained that trying out the new system would only be held in our school, and after five years conclusions would be drawn, and by then Rimon would be planning the end of his school studies and going into the army.

A week after the copies of the letter were placed in the files of the teaching staff, uproar broke out and fear of change shattered rocks and uprooted trees. Despite the fact that they had been chosen as guides for the perplexed, they were in no hurry to change the mode of teaching they knew and had buffed like diamonds of certain wealth.

The excitement and anxiety engendered a tumult that after two weeks grew into strife between the yeas and nays, and outright revolt against the authority that left the teaching staff facing a fait accompli with no possibility of appeal. They tried to undermine the authority's stability by threatening to resign. "The authority stands fast following the initial decision and would prepare a suitable venue at which the union representatives would be able to air the views of their electorate. Regarding postponement of the date, which the authority viewed as a celebration, it was inconceivable that the authority would change it, just as no one could imagine sending the Passover festival sailing down the river of time. The authority remembered the teacher Roman Cohen and his tolerance and paintings depicting the thinking of the New Jew, and it sought to put forward his qualities for election as the abovementioned representative, and this would not be considered as the authority's intervention in freedom of choice, but as a mark of goodwill. With regard to wage claims that deviate from the collective agreement, the authority would open negotiations and requests that an elected representative of the central union, or another to be elected, be its negotiating partner". Roman trembled as the edges of his foliage were pulled by the flow. He agreed and submitted his candidacy. The teaching staff closed ranks around him for he was a good candidate, and duly elected him. A

cloud from their affection rose around him and stuck to his clothes like dust on an evening journey. In addition to their general, the teachers elected a canon of deputies, a wordsmith, and squad commanders who gathered in the principal's office to hear Representative Roman Cohen, clear, succinct, allusive and purposeful. They applauded until his eyes overflowed with the torrent of the feeling of power. Riva told him to sit down and rest. A round, taut forehead, a low, indecisive hairline, a long, thin eyebrow line, a sharp nose, strong shoulders, a smooth, broad chest, small breasts, protruding ribs, a taut diaphragm muscle, square hips, black pubic hair, short legs, thin shins, big toes resting on the others, their nails dark, clipped very close to the flesh. "Surprise is the name of the game," he told her, sitting relaxed in his armchair. "And what about the students?" asked Riva. "They will learn a lesson in necessity and resolve," Roman replied. "And you," she asked, "what will become of you?" "I'm a moderate," he replied, listening to the murmuring of his heart that hurt with excitement. Riva laid a friendly hand on him, she perceived him as a bunch of interesting sweet grapes and sat down beside him, massaged his shins and took off his shoes. As always the socks were sweat-soaked and damp. She removed his socks and warmed his feet. "Leave me alone, please", Roman said, shy in the presence of rest.

Long toes, hard nails, their edges ingrown into the surrounding flesh, narrow soles, the balls of the calf muscles split like an apricot, a square kneecap, groin hair as tangled as a bird's nest, bald privates, above them a diadem hanging like a bat, belly taut on the pelvis, a prominent diaphragm muscle, a skinny chest, freckled shoulders and nape, a narrow jaw, big ears, soft eyebrows, sparse, dark hair. A struggle: three layers of white and orange, layer on layer of white only after the paint has dried. Leave the grains of dried paint. And over it all cheap orange inundated with water placed with an old brush whose bristles have difficulty in draining the pools of orange water around the grains. After his election he got used to expressing anger in public. His soft character was sharpened by this new skill and turned into the humility required of a public leader.

Like a bolt of lightning I will separate them to form hostile camps that will choose me to come between them and rule, he said to himself, and made a mistake in his choice of opening speech at the negotiations. Had he imagined that he would be faced by confident people, filled with grace and affection, he would not have opened his remarks with the memory of his father and would not have attempted to make their

hearts flutter with his aspiration to complete his modest mission for the welfare of his followers and the nation.

He would have opened with a candid discussion with himself on why he had been called, and laid the assumption that the desire of all-present was to accomplish the matter in hand as swiftly as possible.

He did not imagine this and so he erred. And he erred again when he tried to divert his opening remarks to a defense when he excitedly told them about the indigence from which he draws his ability to negotiate. He told them about his father who was erudite in the stratagems of debate, who managed to conciliate opposing parties and still remain well liked. He was mistaken and likened the friendly smiles to mocking winks. And he was again mistaken when he was insulted and a flush of embarrassment set off the whites of his eyes and ended his remarks.

The representative of the authority praised his speech and handed out copies of a proposal, which the authority offered for the representatives' perusal. Ronny Sheinfeld stood up and stated that the delegation needed time to study the new material. Roman said, "Absolutely not," and rejected the proposal without studying it. He was later angry with Sheinfeld and explained that they could always study the new material and it would be better to reject it and not leave the initiative to the authority, "since we are making demands and the authority will accede. We shall lead and the authority will follow". And he was right, for after quickly reading it he found a hidden trap in the draft proposal, "A trap which had we fallen into, the toothed jaws would have snapped shut on the leg" he said

At the next meeting Roman submitted a brief proposal for the authority's study. He did not consult his colleagues and team of deputies, while calculatedly doubting the ability of those seated beside him. The proposal comprised two sentences identical in length. The first tended to accept the authority's demand to change the school's world order, and the second conditioned acceptance of the first upon the authority's agreement to table the wage agreements for serious discussion, unrelated to the demanded change. The authority's representative agreed to this demand on condition that the proposed discussion would take place one day after the practical change. Roman refused and laughed as he spread his arms. "Our hands can grasp but not claw," he said, "if you set our teeth on edge but do not eat sour grapes we shall be as a

pilgrim who has missed the boat” he said. All present laughed and goodness descended and covered the table. Roman was struck by a paralysis he did not hide, but it became an open habit. Whenever he felt eyes piercing him attentively, his own eyes turned up in their sockets and returned when he began to speak. He refined this sight once he learned to clasp his hands and rub them endowing him with the appearance of thinking ahead and making an effort. Those around him viewed Roman as a complete man and that is how he saw himself. The ribs of his personal history became rounded and his soft character was tightened over them like a drumhead.

Translated from the Hebrew by Anthony Berris