

FROM RIGA TO PHELPS HALL

Victor Bers

When I was asked to consider doing a talk for the Trajectories series on December 7, the date alone would have impelled me to say yes. At the end of my presentation I will explain why.

My trajectory starts in the nineteenth century, since I need to begin with my paternal grandmother, daughter of a rabbi in Riga, capital of Latvia, then a part of the Russian empire. He was known as the “poor rabbi” to distinguish him from the city’s two “rich rabbis.” All three were *misnagdim*, that is, traditional orthodox to distinguish them from *khasidim*, like the Lubavitch or Bobover. In certain respects my great-grandfather was very different from most, perhaps *all* other contemporary rabbis in that he was curious enough to buy and read the New Testament – not that he found it an incitement to convert to Christianity. He allowed my grandmother to hang a print of a Holbein Madonna (probably the “Darmstadt Madonna”) on her bedroom wall, explaining to his perturbed, perhaps even scandalized wife that he had heard that Holbein was a great painter; and he also permitted my grandmother to bring home small bombs meant to be thrown at the czarist police. Perhaps most surprising, only one of his many children remained observant, but he never expressed anger at the others for their atheism. He attributed their apostasy to his own failings.

My grandmother was a pupil in a Gymnasium that admitted both Jewish and gentile girls. Immediately after graduation at age seventeen, she went to a women’s university in Kharkiv (then “Kharkov”) in Ukraine (then “the Ukraine”) where she enrolled in the Department of History and Philology. Favorite among her courses was one in ancient history. Some years later, she married my paternal grandfather. Their one child, my father, was born in 1914. The couple continued their studies in Petrograd, as St. Petersburg was then called.

My grandfather trained as an engineer at Peter the Great St. Petersburg Polytechnic University. As women were not admitted to St. Petersburg University until after the Bolshevik Revolution, my grandmother entered a women’s college, the Bestuzhevski Kursi. Its most famous alumna is Nadezhda Konstantinovna Krupskaya, Lenin’s wife. St. Petersburg University professors could supplement their income by teaching at the Kursi. Among those moonlighters, her favorite was the historian of ancient Greece

Having barely escaped the advancing German army, **Victor Bers’s** parents and his infant sister arrived in America in 1940. Bers was born four years later. In his teens he was for a while drawn to physics and biology, but four years of school Latin and some intriguing reading drew him to classical antiquity, in particular Greek history and literature. He holds an AB degree from the University of Chicago, a BA from Oxford, and a PhD from Harvard. Professor Bers taught at Yale from 1972 to 2018.

and Rome, Mikhail Ivanovitch Rostovtzeff, who will make a cameo appearance near the end of this talk.

In 1917 the fast-moving events in Petrograd forced my grandparents to return to Riga and change their professional ambitions. My grandfather became principal of the secular, Yiddish-speaking Gymnasium, my grandmother, principal of the corresponding elementary school. These were, in a sense, parochial schools, but financed by the state. Dealing with children's problems, my grandmother became interested in psychoanalysis and by the 1920s took a leave to study the discipline in the Berlin Psychoanalytic Institute.

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For their entire lives, my paternal grandparents remained united in their political beliefs: both remained Social Democrats – *very* roughly Bernie Sanders “democratic socialists,” but their personal relationship soured in ways that would be barely credible for a soap opera plot – and entirely irrelevant to this talk. At some point, my grandmother married an actor and director twenty years younger than herself. Yes, Macron is twenty-three years younger than his wife. But back to the narrative track. The couple emigrated to the US, arriving shortly before September 1, 1939, the start of World War II.

Back to Europe. My paternal grandfather, still in Latvia, was appointed a deputy minister of transport in the so-called “Solidarity Government” with the Russians, who were of course firmly in charge. Considering the advance of the German army into the Baltic states, this employment might look like good luck, but he was soon sent to Russia together with his second wife, and not long after, since he was a confirmed Menshevik, he was sentenced to eight years in a Siberian labor camp, to be followed by another eight years of internal exile. On the surface, bad luck, but in fact *excellent* luck since he was far from Riga in the fall of 1941. More about that in my concluding paragraph. Moreover, my grandfather was released from exile soon after Khrushchev's momentous speech in 1956 at the twentieth party conference of the Communist Party and allowed to return to Riga. I will add that both my paternal grandparents lived into their eighties.

Now to the next generation, that is, my parents. My father was attracted to the study of classical antiquity, but could get very little on that subject in his pre-university schooling and wound up in mathematics. When Karl Ulmanis, an agrarian reactionary, not, as it happens a fascist, staged a coup d'état in May of 1934, my father and mother, both twenty years old, were active in underground activities against Ulmanis's regime. My father just barely escaped the dictator's remarkably inept political police when they came to arrest him. He escaped to Prague and got his PhD in the German division of Charles University, just soon enough for him and my mother to make a quick exit from Czechoslovakia and get to Paris two months before the start of the war.

My sister was born there in the spring of 1940. Very soon after, German planes began flying sorties over the city. Together with many other – but still too few – Jews and political refugees, they made their way south. They presented themselves at the

American consulate in Marseille and asked for visas to enter the US. They were told that at the very earliest, Latvian citizens *might* be admitted to America in 1951. Stymied by that prediction they went to live in Bagnères-de-Bigorre, a small village near Lourdes. Being Jewish atheists, they didn't expect to find a cure there for their specific malady. But sometime that summer a functionally equivalent substitute arrived, a telegram instructing them to return to the consulate, where they would be given visas admitting them to the US, *not* qua Jews escaping the German army but as political refugees and *not* for ultimate nationalization, just a temporary stay, in compliance with the Johnson-Reed Act of 1924, which set in place formidable obstacles to refugees from eastern Europe. As I expect many of you know, FDR had *no* inclination whatever to save many Jewish lives.

On this point, a short digression: Henry Wallace wrote as follows in his diary: "Roosevelt spoke approvingly of a plan, recommended to him by the president of Johns Hopkins, 'to spread the Jews thin all over the world.' The president said he had tried this out in [Meriwether] County, Georgia, where Roosevelt lived in the 1920s, and at Hyde Park—just four or five Jewish families at each place. He claimed that the local population would have no objection if there were *no more than that*."

Fortunately, Eleanor Roosevelt saw things differently. Working with Varian Fry—as it happens, Fry was a classics major at Harvard—she played a crucial role in promoting a special visa program, with 10,000 places for people endangered for their political stance. Jews were nowhere designated as appropriate beneficiaries. A local—I mean New Haven—aside: my parents' visas were signed by the American consul, Hiram Bingham IV, son of Hiram Bingham III, renowned for discovering Machu Picchu in 1911—and then shipping a good part of what he found to the Peabody Museum. Harry, as he was called, "prepared"—is that term still in use?—at Groton, and then entered Yale College. The Bingham family were, and perhaps still are, a New Haven family. I take pleasure in adding that Varian Fry went on to teach Greek, Latin, and French in Connecticut high schools.

With the visa in their hands, my parents and sister then made it across the Pyrenees, evidently on foot, and thence by train to Lisbon. In Lisbon they embarked on a Greek ship, the *Nea Hellas*, that is, New Greece, and arrived in Hoboken on October 13. From the *Times* archive I found that there were many persons rather more prominent than the Bers family in the trek across the mountains who then boarded the *Nea Hellas*, including Heinrich Mann, brother of Thomas, and his wife, Maria Kanova.

The visa, welcome as it was, stipulated that they were not admitted to the United States with a view towards permanent residence, and that my parents could not even accept paid employment. Luckily, my grandmother's psychoanalytic practice—at first conducted in German, Yiddish and Russian, since her English was not yet ready—brought in some money, and my step-grandfather had occasional paying work in the theater. My parents and sister moved into my grandparents' small apartment on West 79th Street.

Now back to my trajectory per se.

My sister learned to speak at the usual age, quickly added English, has retained our parents' Yiddish, and much of their Russian. I did not speak *at all* until I was three, and then only Yiddish. Worse, I suffered from severe separation anxiety, and was quickly dismissed from a series of nursery schools intolerant of my incessant crying. Perhaps to compensate, I was ahead of normal in learning to read and soon started to notice some pleasing—maybe I should say “comforting”—connections between English *as spelled* and Yiddish, for instance English *knee* and Yiddish *kni*. (It was many years before I added ancient Greek *gonu*.) I entered kindergarten—now that was another word composed of familiar ingredients—but was nevertheless *very* apprehensive. Then I saw that the classroom had the complete set of the one-volume books for children published by the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, each centered on a child living in a different country. For instance, the volume for England showed a child who lived on a canal boat. That calmed me down just enough to get through the first week, and I endured kindergarten and first grade with only occasional episodes of weeping.

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At the prior talk in this series, Peter Brooks spoke of reading books he found in the family library. I am sure most of us remember doing the same. But my parents knew nothing of children's literature written or translated into English. The one exception was Erich Kaestner's *Emil and the Detectives*, which I recently learned has been translated into sixty languages. My elementary school library had Alcott's *Little Women*, a book I must have heard praised, but the librarian refused to check it out to me: “No, *this* is a book for *girls*.” I slinked back to the shelf where I had found it and saw that there was also *Little Men*. That book I was allowed to take home but did not much like it. Strangely the same librarian who denied me *Little Women* did allow me to check out a book on child development, full of interesting physiological descriptions by a once well-known New Haven figure, Arnold Gesell.

Books in my parents' bookshelves that I read with great enjoyment, but limited understanding: *Don Quixote*, some Mark Twain, and Boswell's *Life of Johnson*. Also, Sinclair Lewis. When I was reading *Main Street* my father told me something that to this day puzzles me: that before he immigrated, reading that particular book made him fall in love with America.

One of the pleasures of retirement is going back to these books first read long ago. There is enjoyment, as before, and vastly more comprehension, but also some unpleasant discoveries. I cite two books that attracted me to the study of antiquity: C. W. Ceram, the pseudonymous author of *Gods, Graves, and Scholars*, also wrote propaganda for the Third Reich. Sir Leonard Woolley, author of *Digging up the Past*, has been charged with serious misrepresentation of his discoveries.

In junior high school I had a very witty and pedagogically gifted teacher for elementary Latin, and I liked the language enough to want to continue in high school through a fourth year, where the main text would be the *Aeneid*. Now, these were public schools in New Rochelle, New York, and getting that fourth year, which had not been offered

for decades, required petitioning the Board of Education, which we potential students did via a telegram – in Latin. Competing with Classics for my attention were interests in physics and biology. I made a cloud chamber out of a big tin of Belgian cookies and plate glass, and was given, and still have, a good microscope. I especially liked watching amoebae, perhaps because they moved very slowly compared to, say, paramecia. And I dimly remember being very impressed by Pauli's argument for the existence of neutrinos. But in my last year of high school a teacher's fumble made all the difference. He assigned several books we were to read over the summer before classes resumed. Among them was a book nearly 400 pages long, W.K.C. Guthrie's *The Greeks and their Gods*. All the other students, as well as my father, realized at once that the teacher had wrongly assumed that this was a short, simple book of classical mythology. I stubbornly persisted in ignoring their opinion, even when I noticed that the teacher never once mentioned the book. Guthrie's book grabbed and held my interest, but I was frustrated at not being able to read the untranslated Greek, and resolved to learn the language in college. Another book that gave me a push: Edith Hamilton's cleaned-up translation of Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*. Only later did I learn that Hamilton had made many factual mistakes and, worse, presented the fifth-century B.C. Athenians as very nearly Protestants. Similarly, unaware that Greek sculpture was routinely painted and had eyes composed of jewels, I admired the statues as monuments of abstraction.

With these misapprehensions in my head, I entered the University of Chicago with two directions in mind, archaeology and literature of the ancient near east, or classics. From an introductory course taught by Hans Güterbock, the great Hittologist, I learned that Sumerian and Acadian were not nearly as securely known as Greek and Latin; and as for fieldwork – well, when I confronted the reality of how poorly I would do under the hot sun of summer expeditions, and how clumsy I could – and still can – be, and consequently prone to disrupt the precision crucial to dating, I felt certain that I would be sent home before I did more damage.

Now back to Greek and Latin. I encountered a number of teachers remarkable both for their knowledge and, more surprisingly, how differently they approached classical texts, for instance, James Redfield and his own teacher David Grene. Vastly different from both was Benedict Einarson, a man declared by the then Regius Professor of Greek at Oxford to know Greek better than any other living Hellenist, himself included. Einarson once mentioned to me a very curious figure of speech found in Pindar and the tragedians, *enallage adjectivi*. Its best known example comes from Sophocles' *Antigone*: "the kindred strife of men," instead of the expected "strife of kindred men," referring to the quarrel between Creon and his son Haemon. I stored this curiosity in a far recess of my mind, and about four years later it emerged to become the topic of my PhD dissertation and first book. However, I have found it entirely impossible to share Einarson's enthusiasm for Theophrastus' treatise *On Plants*, from which Einarson could recite long passages by heart. Now, Theophrastus as a *philosopher* is quite another story, and it happens that a preeminent authority on that subject is a

member of the Koerner Center, Dimitri Gutas. Aside from reading some stretches of Herodotus and Thucydides, I postponed studying Greek and Roman history because the man who taught both in my years at Chicago was, even in the 1960s, identified as an open misogynist.

To make up for the hole in my historical education, I went to Oxford to “read,” as they say, *Literae Humaniores*, the second part of the undergraduate Classics course, then, as now, known by the nickname “Greats.” My Greek history tutor was the eminent Geoffrey De Ste. Croix – despite the name a fierce atheist – and it was he who advised me that there was “much meat,” as he put it, on the Attic orators – Demosthenes et al. Regrettably, few of the orators are pertinent to the first period of Greek history, which I chose, mostly because I wanted to concentrate on the time of the three great tragedians. But the fourth-century orators were patient, and I eventually studied and taught them too.

Now I will make good on the title of my talk, which promised something about Riga and Phelps Hall, home of the classics department at Yale. The year I was acting chairman I occupied the office once used by the aforementioned classical historian, M.I. Rostovtzeff, my grandmother’s teacher, who left Russia after the revolution. His portrait hangs on the wall of what is now the seminar room, and I like to imagine him saying, “*Ahah!* Bertha Lipmanovna Bers has, at least, arranged for a descendant to get on with our business.” My work on enallage pulled me into a wider study of syntax found in Greek poetry, especially lyric poetry and Attic tragedy. Details would put nearly all to sleep, so I will move on to something less dry, the Athenian Courts, where the role of judge and jury was played by men with no legal education – other than experience in a city known for litigiousness. My current project, which might be seen as a sort of oblique *homage* to my father’s career, investigates *number*, which in the tragedy that bears his name Prometheus declares the greatest of his gifts to mankind. I am not speaking of number theory, but on the chance that at least one mathematician will read this, I insert this tangential remark: when I was three years old, my pediatrician suggested that I try to catch chicken pox by jumping up and down on the bed in our house where Paul Erdős was lying, miserably sick with the disease. For those mystified by that report: Erdős was known in the mathematical world principally for his work in number theory. What I am investigating is the aesthetic and practical use of number as both a singularity and a plurality, particularly in Homer, in the choral lyrics of Attic tragedy as a group of twelve or fifteen performers singing and dancing, aesthetically comprehended as a singularity, as a young Nietzsche claimed, and the practical and political mechanism of counting votes in Sparta and Athens in courts and political assemblies attended by hundreds or thousands.

Back to narrative. I have mentioned that my parents’ visa prohibited their taking salaried work, but within a year of their arrival it was becoming clear to the federal government that the country’s armed forces needed scientific manpower. In the fall of 1941 my father’s visa was modified so that he could be considered for paid employment

by the newly created applied mathematics department at Brown. On December 7 he took the train from New York to Providence, was interviewed by the relevant dean, and offered a job.

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My mother's family – a very different fate. Late in the evening of December 7 on the east coast of the United States, the early morning of December 8 in Latvia, the German forces then in Riga, assisted by Latvian confederates, marched thousands of Jews, including my mother's parents and many of her brothers, sisters, aunts, uncles, and cousins, into the woods outside the city, pushed them into ditches, and shot them dead. That was the method of mass killing in use before the Germans developed gas chambers.

Those are the reasons I had to accept the offer to speak on December 7.