If I Were a Cloud

Mascha Kaléko and the Journey of her Life

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A distant land

The ship weighs anchor. There is no going back now. People are waving down on the jetty. Are Chemjo and Steven among them? She waves at the slowly vanishing throng. By now both of them, father and son, are probably on their way back to their little apartment on Minetta Street, in Greenwich Village. The family has lived there since 1942. Mascha found the apartment, Mascha furnished it, Mascha organised their life there. Just as she has organised everything in exile, in their new homeland, for her husband, the composer, choirmaster and music collector Chemjo Vinaver, and their son Steven, who wasn't quite two years old when they left Europe in October 1938. His name was still Evjatar then. His parents exchanged it for a new one in America, to make things easier for him. Life had been hard enough for him already – for them all. But they were together; they'd survived. They had been lucky.

It's the last day of 1955, and Mascha Kaléko is on a journey into the past. She has been resisting it. For a long time, she didn't want to go back to Germany, although she'd loved her life there in the twenties, and even into the thirties. 'Those few luminous years' is how she will always refer to that period, the years when she finally settled after many years of travelling, years of uncertainty and constant house moves.

Born in 1907 to a Russian father and an Austrian mother in the Galician town of Chrzanów, she was a child when her family fled to Germany shortly before the First World War. They feared the antisemitic pogroms, feared that Mascha's father might be conscripted by the Russian army and forced to fight his Austrian relatives. They

came to Frankfurt and stayed for two years, while Mascha's father was interned as an enemy alien. After his release, they spent another two years in Marburg and finally, at the end of the war, moved to the capital. Mascha was eleven years old, and Berlin became her home.

This is where she became a poet, writing poems in secret under her school desk. She wasn't allowed to progress to university; her father said girls had no need of that. 'They told us we should enter life. / But all I entered was the office,' she wrote later. She trained as an administrator – 'In the first letter, a yawn follows every comma' – but still managed to chat her way doggedly into Berlin's literary scene. After work, she would go to the Romanisches Café, where the writers met: Erich Kästner, Else Lasker-Schüler, Gottfried Benn, Gabriele Tergit, Hermann Kesten, Alfred Polgar, and all the others. Mascha contributed to their discussions in her strong Berlin dialect – there are stories of the weak-chested poet Klabund raising his hands, cautiously, trying to pacify her, to stem her flow. Kurt Tucholsky reassured him: let her talk.

Mascha Kaléko was desperate to belong there, and summoned all her courage to make it happen. 'God knows, it would have taken no more than a little shove to knock me off the timid Pegasus onto which I'd swung myself while no one was looking, and which made such defiant noises. I was meek as an early snowdrop and shy, as befits a raw beginner. But my ambition was considerable.'

The best newspapers began to print her poems; readers and editors couldn't get enough of these everyday verses with their melancholy wisdom, childlike cleverness and emotional immediacy, in which she described her life, her times and her city in beautiful but sober words.

Mascha was overjoyed. Photos from these years show a beautiful young woman with wild, dark hair, bursting with confidence, wearing dungarees, or furs, or a wide-collared shirt, often at the seaside, on the island of Hiddensee. In one, she is sitting on rocks in front of a wicker beach chair, face resting on one hand. The back of the photo reads: 'Now where do I get a return ticket?' She looks as if she would like to stay forever on that beach. In another photo she is standing, legs apart and hands combatively on hips, in wide-legged, white linen trousers (the image on the cover of this book). On the back, she has written: 'The clothing is "free and easy", apparently – because every fashionable girl copies the sea air.' She travels a lot in these years, to Copenhagen, Granada, Morocco; on a postcard from Paris, she writes: 'Paris is beautiful… very beautiful. But life, life is in Berlin.'

And then one day, a man came into the Romanisches Café. He introduced himself to the young poet as a friend of Franz Hessel's. At the time, Hessel was something of a celebrity. He wrote essays about the things he'd seen while strolling the streets of Berlin and Paris, loved France and French literature, translated Balzac and Proust – but first and foremost, he was an editor at Rowohlt. His heart belonged entirely to the famous publishing house and its publisher, Ernst Rowohlt. 'I would work for Rowohlt even if they didn't pay me,' he once said. And now Hessel had sent his friend to the café to tell Mascha that he wanted to publish a book by her. This was some time in 1932. What he really wanted was previously unseen work, but Mascha Kaléko had always published everything immediately, writing 'from hand to mouth,' so to speak. All the same, Hessel wouldn't be put off this idea, and worked with the young poet to compile her first book, *The Lyrical Shorthand Notebook*. She never forgot his love for

her poems, or the feeling he gave her that they were truly important, and must become a book. His faith in her, and her art. ‘My first meeting with Franz Hessel was unforgettable,’ she wrote many years later. ‘For me, it was the start of a great friendship with a wonderful man and a wonderful writer, who on top of that was a saint – and I don’t use that word lightly.’ Everyone who knew the quiet, reserved, refined Franz Hessel shared Mascha’s view: ‘We all loved this strange Saint Francis, who walked through our noisy century like an enlightened sage from the far east.’ Her work was in good hands with him, and with the loud, cheerful, impulsive publisher Ernst Rowohlt, who in 1912 published Franz Kafka’s first slim book, *Contemplation.* It was said of Rowohlt that he didn’t need to read a book, just to tap it against the back of his head to know if it was one for his press.

The Lyrical Shorthand Notebook passed the tap test and came out in January 1933. And although that date could not have been less auspicious for a debut by a Jewish poet, the collection was a success. If only it had been published two or three years earlier – what a triumph it would have been! The final poem in the book ends with the lines: ‘…Once one had a manicure / And a reputation. – long ago. / Since spring the porter will not say hello. / – Not any more…’

There was even a second book, published the very next year, in December 1934. Time was of the essence. Its modest title was *A Little Reading Book for Big People*. It contains so much longing. So much love and beauty. ‘I call upon the sun, the sea, the breeze / To give you their brightest, clearest sunny skies, / To scatter good dreams over your closing eyes, / And bring your clouded nights a little ease,’ she writes in ‘Little love song’. And in another poem: ‘Some nights I look

up at the million stars; / Does happiness hide behind the clouds of day? / Oh, to live in nights that are not marred / By thoughts of the "tomorrow" on its way.' The book also contains one of her most beautiful love poems, called 'For One':

The others are the open sea;
The harbour, only you.
Have faith and sleep the whole night through:
I'll sail back to your quay.

All the storms that raged and blew
Have passed and let me be.
The others are the sparkling sea;
The harbour, only you.

You are the lighthouse. Where I'll stay.
My dearest, sleep the whole night through.
The others… ripples, billows, spray;
The harbour, only you.'

Except – we don't know exactly who this harbour is. In the summer of 1928, Mascha had married the philologist Saul Kaléko, who was almost ten years her senior, and taken his name. She had already changed hers once by then. At the time of her birth, her parents had been married only by the rabbi, and so were still single in the eyes of the law. At first, Mascha had her mother's name, and only after 1922, when her parents married legally in a Berlin register office, was she given her father's name: Engel. Mascha Engel. And then, from 1928, Kaléko. Her husband taught Hebrew, and managed to place a textbook called *Hebrew for Everyone* with a German publisher as late as 1935.

For everyone who had emigrated to Palestine, and everyone who intended to.

But at some point in 1935, Mascha met Chemjo Vinaver. Both felt it was a fateful meeting. They kept their love secret, and wrote letters that were sent poste restante to the Lietzenburger Straße post office. All the same, in 1936 Mascha and her husband moved into a new flat on Bleibtreustraße, in the Charlottenburg district of Berlin. She began to make half-hearted plans with Saul Kaléko to emigrate to Palestine, where her parents and younger siblings Haim and Rachel were already living. But in her heart, she already knew she wasn't going with him. Her husband had long suspected she was being unfaithful. But he was prepared to forgive everything if only she would stay with him. 'I don't care if you are true / I care only if you leave / So be untrue, it's up to you – / Just never let me see,' he had written to her at the start of the thirties. He just wanted the two of them to survive together, and to flee.

Three Jews in Berlin in the mid-thirties, threatened, humiliated, excluded from everyday life, fearing what the future held, inwardly already on the run. And now this secret life as well. One day, probably in early 1936, Chemjo and Mascha were sitting in the Romanisches Café – yes, the café was still there, though the Jews, the literature, had largely vanished from it – when he slipped her a note: 'Mascha, I must have a child with you.' And on 28 December 1936, that child was born: Evjatar Alexander Kaléko.

The birth certificate said Mother: Mascha, father: Saul Kaléko. That was wrong. But she simply couldn't tell her husband. Later, looking back, she wrote in her diary that she had suffered more 'under this

huge lie […] than humanly possible.' But eventually, the secret had to come out. They would have to get divorced, the boy would have to know who his father was, and, in the end, Saul would have to know too. It was finally time to leave their life in Berlin and prepare to flee; even the most naïve of people could see that. And fleeing with a baby seemed an almost impossible task. But then it must all have happened very quickly. Incredibly quickly, if you choose to believe the version she wrote as a poem. Probably the shortest story of separation in world literature. The poem remained unpublished in Mascha's lifetime:

When we three
Crossed the street
Even
The traffic light turned
Red.
Surrounded by packs
Of exhaust-snorting cars,
I gripped the arm of the one
Who walked to my right.
Not the other
Whose ring I wore.
When we four
Met
On the other side,
Everyone knew.
The one. The other.
The silence.
And I.

Even now, Saul Kaléko was prepared to compromise. Even in these times, under these circumstances, he would raise the child with her, no matter whose it was. He didn't want to see the truth. But eventually he left their apartment on Bleibtreustraße, and Chemjo moved in. In autumn 1937, Saul Kaléko agreed to a divorce, and also gave his written consent to Mascha taking the boy with her if she emigrated. In January, Chemjo and Mascha married, and life accelerated dramatically: how would they go on, the three of them? Each day brought a fresh humiliation, placed a fresh obstacle in the path of Berlin's Jews. The situation was putting pressure on their love, too. Chemjo tended towards choleric outbursts, fits of rage – and woe betide anyone who got in his way when it was 'his time of the month', as Mascha complained; he cared about nothing but his music, his choir, could not be spoken to about everyday concerns. But lately, dealing with the everyday had become a monstrous task. Could she rise to the coming challenge of fleeing the country with this man, whose head was filled with nothing but musical notes? It was hard to imagine. 'I am slowly but surely perishing,' she wrote in her diary in early February. And 'at his side I die a new death every day. Without him, I would die only once. But it would be a thorough death, from which there is no return. I would like to fall asleep and never wake up.'

How would they manage? Two children and a poet, who loved to look at the world through a child's eyes herself, as if it were new-made each day? It was too much for her. 'I would like to go to Palestine with the baby,' she wrote on 1 February 1938. And in March, Mascha did in fact travel to Palestine, alone, to see her parents and younger siblings. And to see if a life there would be possible for her and her

little family. She had reconciled with Chemjo. ‘Chemjo is very precious, meshugge, but the dearest man alive. He and the child are the best thing in this world.’ Should she stay, and bring the two of them out there? But the country, the language, everything was so foreign to her. She wrote: ‘And then more desert, sand and rocky ruins, / A woven tent, a haggard Bedouin, / And thin goats chewing thinner grasses. / Then a sombre, swaying, yellow camel, / And on high the fellah vase appears; / Its red clay glows. And there is the oasis – / Oh thy tabernacles, Israel…’

No, she couldn’t imagine living there. Relations with her family weren’t easy, either. Her two siblings were so much younger, strangers to her, and she’d always had a difficult, distant relationship with her mother. In the first poem of her first book, an ‘Interview with myself’, she described that relationship: ‘As a child, my favourite word was “no”. / I was no perfect blessing, meek and mild. / And thinking of that time, so long ago - / I never would have liked to be my child.’ These lines become truer when you read them from the other side. From the child’s perspective. She simply wasn’t loved; her mother thought her ‘difficult’ – but what child thinks of themselves as difficult? The world is difficult; you yourself are only difficult if you can’t get along with your environment and those closest to you. Every child wants to be a perfect blessing to their mother. But Mascha was always too wild, too wilful for that.

And then came Lea, the second of what would eventually be four siblings. She was different. Lea was what people called ‘easy’ and ‘quiet’ and ‘a dear little thing’, a blessing from the start. That just made life more difficult for the first-born child. Her sister was their

mother's favourite. But Lea vanished without trace, somewhere in the maelstrom of time. The last the family heard was in 1933, when she followed her partner, a doctor and communist named Herbert Pelz, to settle in the Soviet Union. Not a word from her since. No clue. Their mother became depressed – largely out of worry for her favourite daughter, so it was said. Mascha had always loved their father very much. But he was so often away, doing a huge variety of jobs, frequently working as a salesman, and for a while as a 'religious supervisor' in Berlin, ensuring that the dietary laws were upheld.

In April 1938, Masha returned to Berlin; by then Chemjo had found a new flat for the family in the Steglitz district, organised the move and unpacked everything at the other end. Masha couldn't believe it. Her husband, a man made of music – orchestrating an entire house move? Maybe they *could* all survive together, and Masha wouldn't have to bear the whole burden alone? '…[H]e is overjoyed that I'm back,' she wrote in her diary after her return, 'and the three of us are probably the happiest people on earth. It's spring, the lilacs are blooming right into our window, and in the evenings we stand at the window with Avitale and he "blows out the moon".'

A Jewish family idyll in Berlin, in 1938. Happiness measured in seconds. The Steglitz flat was a shelter, a spaceship, a world in itself. But of course, things couldn't stay that way. By now, Mascha Kaléko had been barred from publishing her poems for quite some time. It was surprising her work had been spared for so long. On 10 May 1933, when the books that would henceforth be banned were burned outside the Opera House, hers weren't included. Too harmless, maybe, or too new; in those first months and years of the regime, salvation or

damnation were so often a matter of chance. Mascha Kaléko stayed lucky for a while. But in 1935 she was barred from the Reich Chamber of Literature, and in 1936 an attack on her appeared in the *Schwarze Corps* magazine: 'The entire scrupulousness of an intellectual life' was reflected in her poems, it said, and even 'after four [sic] years' she still had not managed to 'connect with the new age.' The new editions of her two books were seized before they left the printer. Hanns Johst, the chair of the Reich Chamber of Literature, wrote to Ernst Rowohlt personally in early 1937 to inform him that Kaléko's books were on 'the list of harmful and undesirable writings.' Rowohlt was entirely unwilling to let the new regime dictate what he published. But his own press could no longer print her books. He wrote to his colleague Gottfried Bermann Fischer (the son-in-law of the famous Jewish publisher Samuel Fischer), who had started the Bermann-Fischer publishing house in Vienna, to ask if he would print Kaléko's books. But Bermann Fischer turned him down. The 'main success' of the old books was in the past, he said, though she was welcome to send a new manuscript. When Ernst Rowohlt celebrated his fiftieth birthday in the summer of 1937, he gave a little speech to the press's authors and employees, during which he expressed heartfelt thanks to 'my dear Jews,' for 'your loyal help and friendship since my press first came into being'. Mascha gave her publisher a blue shirt for his birthday. One day, he would take it halfway round the world. And back. They would see each other again. They didn't know that yet. They didn't know anything.

Minetta Street

By the summer of 1938, Mascha Kaléko and her husband were determined to flee to the USA. They had been given an affidavit of support, crucial for their survival, by the musician Gerald F. Warburg, but time was short. No one knew just how short. Mascha hurried from one government office to another, and sold, donated or packed all the family's belongings. Some things were put away in a storeroom at the Jewish community's building on Fasanenstraße, and she got their valuables ready to ship to America. The valuables would never arrive.

In September, the three of them embarked on their journey. 'But life, life is in Berlin.' Love had kept her there for so long. But now, it was high time. On 4 September 1938, Chemjo Vinaver conducted the German premiere of the opera *Chalutzim* by Jacob Weinberg at the Prinzregentenstraße synagogue. A final simulation of normality. A final performance of Jewish life and Jewish culture in Germany. In October, the passports of all Berlin's Jewish inhabitants were seized, and the Polish Jews, like eighteen-year-old Marceli Reich – who in later life, as a literary critic, would love and celebrate the work of Mascha Kaléko like few others – were arrested and interned in prisons and camps. When the Gestapo knocked on Reich's door and took him away in October, he, like so many others, had no idea what lay in store. He took with him a handkerchief, five marks and a Balzac novel.

Mascha Kaléko managed to get herself and her family to safety. They caught the train to Hamburg, and at each station Evjatar cried 'Amegica!' as if they were already there, on the continent that would save them. But that would take time. They had to calm the boy down.

In Hamburg they spent a night in a sinister hotel, ‘the Nazi hotel’ as Mascha called it in her diary. ‘An angry neighbour’ in the next room frightened Chemjo most of all. But in the end, it was fine. They even managed to withdraw their money from the bank, which was anything but a given. ‘It’s like a fairy tale,’ Mascha wrote in her diary. Then a train across the border, through the last narrow crack in the door before it closed forever. And finally: Paris! ‘This is what we had dreamed of: knowing the boy was fast asleep, while the two of us marvelled at the lights on the Place de l’Opéra. Crispy pommes frites in a good Parisian restaurant, the juiciest meat, the reddest wine, then a little walk and upstairs to the little monkey.’ They spent two weeks in Paris, and on 14 October set sail from Le Havre, finally crossing the Atlantic on the *Britannic*. All three were horribly seasick, even Evjatar, though small children weren’t supposed to get seasick. Chemjo suffered the most. Mascha noted sarcastically: ‘remarkable behaviour from heroic Papi, who declared he couldn’t bear it any longer. It’s true he was feeling miserable as sin, and snuck away in secret. But what he really wanted to declare was: I’m getting off.’

Then, at last, the Statue of Liberty emerged from the mist, the skyscrapers, the new world. Mascha was 31, Chemjo 42, and Evjatar nearly two. They would begin a new life in New York, and they felt positive. A lovely photo shows the couple shortly after their arrival, Mascha leaning her back against Chemjo, both looking at us, their dark eyes calm and confident. They have each other. Mascha anticipated the great crossing in a poem written the year before:

No one is left whom we could call a friend.
Just God. He has been exiled, too.

So many turned away, but he stayed true.
The only one on whom we could depend.

No heart to weep for us upon the shore;
That soft lament is just the wind and sea.
We two, stoic, silent, must agree:
Our enemy shall drink our tears no more.

In the dark, stay close. I'm so afraid.
I bade farewell to home and fatherland.
And so much woe awaits on foreign strands.
Give me your hand. We mustn't stray.

And if the ship should founder in the swell,
Our blood-pledge will abide until the end.
No one is left whom we could call a friend.
All that remains: to love each other well.

They relied on Chemjo and the international language of music. He started a choir, the Vinaver Choir, whose repertoire included synagogue music and Yiddish and Palestinian folk songs. He also wrote music for Stefan Zweig's anti-war play *Jeremiah*, which opened on Broadway. Leonard Bernstein and Marc Chagall supported the choir, and Chemjo appeared at Carnegie Hall and on other great stages, to critical acclaim. Mascha took care of daily life and the business side of Chemjo's career. In September 1939, she wrote: 'My world has "narrowed" to two people: Chemjo and Evjatar. And yet it has expanded. I do no work for myself, am completely dedicated to

Chemjo's work and Evjatar's little happiness. And it feels good. This period, albeit "unproductive" for me, is deep and very full.'

Her strength was great, her talent for organising life in this huge, foreign city greater still, and her selflessness greatest of all. She had given everything to be a German poet, but in America, she stopped writing; she simply didn't have the time. There was no Franz Hessel here, adamant that he wanted a book from her, no Ernst Rowohlt, not even a Monty Jacobs, the legendary head of the *Vossische Zeitung*'s feuilleton section, who had practically forced a weekly poem out of her for his paper, as if his life depended on it. True, in 1940 she gave a reading to a few emigrants at the German Club – and true, she managed to place poems in *Aufbau*, Manfred George's émigré paper. But as editor-in-chief, George recoiled from texts tinged with melancholy or despondency. The name of his paper meant 'building up' and reflected its philosophy: they were building a new world here. The old one was self-destructing on the other side of the ocean. We emigrants were not saved just to mourn. But Mascha's poetry was melancholic and mournful by nature; she saw the world as it was, not as it could be bent to fit dreams and stubbornly optimistic propaganda. Her nature couldn't be papered over. *Aufbau* was only able to pay very low fees for poems. But the money was now all that mattered.

That, and the news from Europe. They'd heard about the transport of Polish Jews from Berlin as soon as they arrived in New York, of course. And every day brought fresh horrors from the war and Hitler's triumphs. For a long time, she heard nothing from her family in Tel Aviv, and worst of all, her sister had disappeared without trace: 'And if I think of Lea, I am dead.' In the summer of 1940, they decided to

move to Hollywood. That's where the money was: the film industry needed musicians, composers, songs! What on earth were they thinking? Chemjo was a choirmaster, conductor, composer of synagogue music, collector of Hassidic, Yiddish folksongs, and already overwhelmed by day-to-day business matters in New York. How was he supposed to thrive in fiercely competitive Hollywood? But he believed in himself and thought he stood a chance. And Mascha was only too willing to share that belief. Unfortunately, she was also a realist and knew the state of their bank account. She confided her despair to her diary: 'Chemjo is such a fool. Hard to rob him of so many illusions. But should one hide from a child the fact that wolves bite?' After a few months, they abandoned the experiment and returned to New York, more downhearted than ever. 'We have no money. No friends. No connections. No hope. We have no money for transport. Or shoes. Or medicine for Steven. The school won't keep him if we can't pay. Damned money. It's humiliating.'

All the same, a few months after their return from Hollywood, they found an apartment which they hoped to make into a real home. 1 Minetta Street in Greenwich Village was a handsome, red brick building with black fire escapes, on a large intersection. Mascha would later write a beautiful little paean to this apartment block. But not yet. For now, she was just too worried, especially about shy little Steven. Even as he got older, he retained an innocence that, though adorable, was unhelpful to him in his childhood. He had no defence against any kind of meanness, which made things difficult for both him and his parents. Especially his mother, since Mascha was in charge of his care and upbringing. His father lived in his own world and paid attention to the little boy only when it suited him. And with

all the stress and worry in their lives, it didn't suit him very often. Amid her many concerns – money, her son, her husband, the rent, school, food, shoes – Mascha Kaléko lost something fundamental: her hope that after the war they might return and reconnect with life in their embattled, beloved German homeland, and Berlin in particular. There was no basis for that longing now. Even if the war ended with Hitler's defeat, her world would have been annihilated forever. Slowly, Mascha found her way back to poetry. But she had become a different person. Her poems were different. They were no longer rooted in longing and human kindness and humour and melancholy, but in despair, sadness, and even hatred: 'The past will never come again, / Though things may change with time. / Though the swords may cease to clash / And the little bell may chime. / Sometimes now I feel as though / All this has crushed my heart. / And I feel homesick now, sometimes. / I just don't know for what…'

All her life, Mascha had been carried by a real faith in God, a self-made religion consisting of her parents' Jewish beliefs combined with a very earthly Zen Buddhism and a very private belief in miracles – but now she had a score to settle with this God. She titled her curse, 'Verses for small psalters': 'In such dark days, I'd hate to be Our Lord, / And mount my sheltered throne behind the clouds, / And there, all-knowing, watch the bombs and guns / Spit red death at my beloved sons. / […] Praise God, who does not speak! But in these times – / Forgive us, Lord – such silence is a crime. / Yet God won't lend, for all his holiness / An ear to the most pious lamb of us. / The Lord of Hosts strolls in his cloudy grove / And casts no lightning bolts; he seems unmoved. / In such dark days, I'd hate to be Our Lord. / But how to tell my boy what this is for?"

But the greatest curse that Mascha Kaléko wrote in poem form during these years – and which found the widest readership because it was printed in English in the *New York Times Magazine* – was aimed at her former homeland. Its title is 'Hear, Germany!', referencing the Jewish prayer 'Hear, O Israel'. This prayer, with words that begin the fifth Book of Moses, is read at morning and evening services and spoken at the hour of death, and invokes the unity and singularity of God. The poem was published on 14 March 1943. Beneath the title of the English version, in brackets, are the words 'On reading the pogrom documents'. The German is more specific: 'In memoriam Maidanek und Buchenwald', the sites of German concentration camps.

The day will come, it is not far ahead,
When you will hang upon your crooked cross,
And not a living soul will mourn your loss,
And not a dog will howl his master, dead.

Fenced with barbed wire, hemmed by prison walls,
Now your fresh graves lie ready at your feet,
Full of fat worms that hunger for their meat,
Who fed so long on steady funerals.

The good earth that you fouled remembers well
How you came down like wolves upon the herd,
The ravens saw, each death-devoted bird,
That savage drive from hell to blacker hell.

Out of the east those ravens yet will fly,
Where motionless your rusted panzers lie.
And the mute victims of your lust for blood
Will swarm about you in a ghostly flood.

From their mass graves united they will rise
And fill your ears with their undying moans,
The wind that heard, night after night, those groans,
Accuses you with its repeated cries.

Upon your brow the angry mark screams red.
Oh, be the sword of Germany accursed
Forever! How I hate your oaks, that fed
On corpses, hate your earth, that quenched its thirst
And bloomed upon the drops my brothers bled.

But you, who taught me hate, I hate the worst…

Alongside hatred, her base emotion in these years was gratitude. She was grateful that she and Chemjo and Steven had been spared, grateful that New York was slowly starting to feel like home, and for having found acceptance and salvation. 'Really it was only angels that snatched us away from death in the camps,' she wrote later. Their part of town was liveable and pleasant; a lot of émigrés had taken refuge there, and on the streets you would hear all the world's languages. The author Hermann Kesten, whom she knew from the Romanisches Café and who was friends with so many German Jewish writers, was here too. They met often. The Bavarian anarchist and folk writer Oskar Maria Graf had gathered a Bavarian café group around him just down

the street, at the Rienzi. Mascha wrote of him and his group: ‘The San Remo bar is full to bursting at the weekend, and Café Rienzi is full every night, where the gramophone plays constant music, from Gregorian chant to the latest Khachaturian. And where on Wednesdays a famous Bavarian prose poet gathers his admirers and literati around him: “Grüß di Gott” and “How are you” – Oskar Maria Graf.’ Not far from there, Valeska Gert, the modern dancer and cabaret artist famous in the Weimar Republic, had opened her cabaret club Beggar Bar, where émigré and American artists performed and the young Tennessee Williams worked as a waiter.

In November 1944, Chemjo, Steven and Mascha became American citizens; in May 1945, the war ended, and a new poetry collection by Mascha Kaléko was published, eleven years after the last. Forty-five German-language poems, with a modest number of copies printed by Schoenhof Verlag in Cambridge, Massachusetts. It was called *Verse für Zeitgenossen* – ‘verses for contemporaries’ – and was one of the very few German-language poetry publications in the USA at that time, if not the only one. Mascha prefaced the book with a dedicatory poem for her son – ‘To a little emigrant,’ which ends with the lines: ‘You, whom I loved long before you came, / You, nothing but distant eyes aflame, / I place this book into your little hand, / You, emigrant.’ The collection contains all her bitter, accusatory, deeply depressed poems, and love poems, too – to Chemjo, who else? ‘In my silent hours I sit and muse, / What was life, beloved, in the time before / You lifted up the shadow my soul wore? / What was I seeking, love, when I found you?’

The book caused barely a ripple. Few sales, hardly any discussion, though in *Aufbau* – where her own work was published – her friend Hermann Kesten wrote a kind review. And reviews from friends didn't quite count, although it was comforting and his words brought hope: 'It won't be long before you will be reading some of this collection's loveliest poems in future anthologies of the best living German poets. And I can even imagine that a few of these verses will please people other than our "contemporaries", namely their sons and daughters.'

She also sent a copy of the book over to the East Coast, to the white house beneath the palm trees where the German Nobel laureate Thomas Mann had set up a kind of headquarters for an alternative, better Germany in the war years, and from where he had broadcast his addresses to German listeners. Would he be receptive to these poems, which were light-years away from his own writing? He was working on the German tragedy *Doctor Faustus*, and eyeing developments in Germany with the greatest scepticism. Thomas Mann sent a kind reply, saying that 'a certain light-hearted melancholy' was what appealed to him most in her poems, as he put it, in rather stiff and formal terms. The book clearly didn't speak to his heart – but he could appreciate the artistry of these poems, and the effect they might have: 'Certainly, you have expressed what many thousands out here are feeling; but I do wish that your melodious, sardonic voice could be heard once more in Germany, where it would certainly be more likely than ever to strike a chord. I have the feeling that poems are still the best way to reach the souls of these unhappy folk, who most likely no longer believe in any spoken word.'

A very different German Nobel laureate and émigré contacted Mascha Kaléko to express his gratitude and happiness after reading her book. The physicist Albert Einstein wrote: ‘I have read your poems with genuine admiration. They have made an impression on me as few things of our present age have.’

Encouraged by this great authority on physics, a few years later Mascha Kaléko sent him a poem that seems, in a mysterious way, to bring to life the theory of relativity in poetic form: ‘Time stands still. We are what passes. / Yet, as we speed by on the train, / Fields and herds there chewing grass / Flash past like ghosts and fade again. / Someone waving vanishes; / House, lamppost, tree all go […]’. Einstein was delighted: ‘I find your poem very beautiful and rich. It touches, incidentally, on a deep metaphysical problem, which through physics has become particularly relevant to our times.’

He wrote these lines in 1952. The same year, Mascha saw her parents and two younger siblings again for the first time in seventeen years. Lea had not reappeared. Mascha travelled to Israel with Chemjo, and then on to Europe, to Paris and London. She avoided Germany, and Berlin, not yet ready to face a reunion with this country, this city. Even her short visit to two other European capitals left her shaken. ‘When I saw Europe once again / – as I longed to, all these years – / when I saw Europe once again, / then Europe saw my tears.’ What she feared above all were her own love and sentimentality. Berlin, her city, had been the headquarters for planning the genocide against the Jews, the headquarters for subjugating the world, 55 million dead in the world war, six million dead Jews, and a continent destroyed.

Few emigrants had returned; Thomas Mann had come back just that summer, in 1952. But he settled in Switzerland. Carl Zuckmayer did likewise. Alfred Döblin, having returned filled with such hope, soon went back into exile, horrified at the Germans' obstinacy. Anna Seghers, returning from exile in Mexico, was reluctant to choose any of the four sectors of occupied Berlin ('I'll take the Mexican sector'), and when she finally settled on the East, wrote: 'I can feel myself freezing over.' In the GDR, Brecht had at least been given use of a theatre. And in 1949, faced with the depressing political situation, Klaus Mann took his own life.

Many, many others did not survive exile: Joseph Roth, Stefan Zweig, Kurt Tucholsky, Else Lasker-Schüler, Walter Benjamin, and his close friend Franz Hessel. Hessel had been interned in 1940 as an 'enemy alien' in the Les Milles prison camp near Aix-en-Provence, with his son Ulrich and other emigrants, including the painter Max Ernst, Lion Feuchtwanger, and the publisher Kurt Wolff. How twisted the times must have been, for someone like Hessel – who loved France more than Germany, was immersed in French literature, and had translated so many books brilliantly into German – to be classed as an 'enemy alien'. Even in the camp, he remained the silent saint. Alfred Kantorowicz, a fellow prisoner, recalls him as: 'the small, quiet Franz Hessel, whom one noticed and found remarkable because he had no desire to be noticed, never made himself the centre of attention, and preferred to meditate alone – though when someone sought a conversation with him, he wouldn't refuse. Franz Hessel never complained, although with his delicate constitution he suffered more than most under the rigors of incarceration.' Hessel was released on 27 July 1940. But the life had been taken out of him. He rented a modest

room from a baker in Sanary-sur-mer and filled a small notebook with writing in a delicate, scarcely legible hand. It became his final book, published long after his death as *Final Homecoming to Paris*. And then he died, as quietly and inconspicuously as he had lived. His wife Helen, who lived in exile with him and Henri-Pierre Roché in a complicated, romantic love triangle (a love story that would become famous many years later in Truffaut's film *Jules et Jim)*, was taken by surprise: 'No one, not even us, had any idea he was so close to dying. He approached death so quietly that by the time we realised it, he was already beyond our reach.'

What was Mascha Kaléko to do in this country? Why even think of visiting her old homeland? She had a new one, once again. Couldn't this be the final place she called home? She had written a loving poem to Minetta Street in the hope that if, one day in the distant future, a memorial plaque should be erected somewhere after her death, it would be there, in Greenwich Village, on the red brick building at 1 Minetta Street. But even this love poem to her new American home was qualified by a line that came straight from the heart: 'The name of my homesickness was Savignyplatz'.

But could she really not bear to see it all again? Wasn't there a chance that she could be what she had been before? A poet with a readership who loved her and her verses? Heard? Seen? Part of a world that she knew deep in her heart? 'One day I'd like to see again the land / that exiled and dismissed me out of hand, / And walk the streets I used to know once more, / And stand amid the rubble of before - / Secretly, unrecognised, unplanned…' she had written in *Verses for Contemporaries*.

This longing had been heard. Even without her Saint Francis working on her behalf, her old publisher was making a great effort to get her back; Rowohlt senior had written to her as early as July 1946. He'd left Germany shortly after Mascha, heading for Brazil, but had returned in 1940. The publishing house had continued under the leadership of his son, Heinrich Maria Ledig-Rowohlt, until the Nazis closed it down in 1943. Now it was relaunching, with the Allies' blessing. The archive had gone up in flames during an air raid. All the more important, then, to revive the spirit of the old press. First and foremost, the two Rowohlts wanted to reprint Mascha Kaléko's first book, *The Lyrical Shorthand Notebook*. For that, they needed her permission, and appealed to her to make a new start in Germany, or at least allow her old verses to. But she didn't respond. Another letter in December 1946, again with no reply. The third in January 1947. Mascha didn't react. It was like post from enemy territory. Had she not cursed Germany? So much love disappointed and destroyed. So many deaths. In 1949, Ledig-Rowohlt came to New York and visited her at Minetta Street. He beseeched her to give her permission for the new edition. She refused. In 1952 he tried again, in another letter: 'Do you recall my visit to Minetta Street three years ago? Our meeting is still very clear in my mind. But what always made the greatest impression on me was the child we baptised together in Berlin, so to speak. The checked shirt you once gave my father for his birthday survived the war and still occasionally encases his broad chest in its cheerful colours. No, you are certainly not forgotten here.' They really did want her back. Another letter arrived, this time from Peter Zingler, an acquaintance from the Romanisches Café. He was a close colleague and friend of Ernst Rowohlt, and was now helping to

relaunch the press; he wrote enthusiastically about Rowohlt's brilliant innovation, the *Rotationsroman* series, which would make world literature available as inexpensive 50-pfennig 'rororo' paperbacks. Her *Lyrical Shorthand Notebook* would fit perfectly into this series. And what a success it would be. Finally the great success she deserved, which in 1933, for obvious reasons, had been relatively minor. Rowohlt was waiting for Kaléko. And not just the publishing house – you could extrapolate from this, if you wanted to – but the readers, the country.

It was just too tempting. Slowly, the chains were loosening. The mistrust lessened, the hatred, the fear. And Steven was growing up and becoming independent; at sixteen he had even won his first literary prize. Chemjo had finally published his major anthology of Jewish music, for which he had fought so long, with Marc Chagall painting the book's cover art. They still had no money, but at least West Germany had awarded Mascha a small amount of compensation and an equally small monthly pension. It was far from being recompense. But it was a financial foundation on which they could build. Should she dare entrust her verses to this country again, and with them – herself? She wouldn't let her poetry be published there unsupervised, that much had always been clear to her. If her career was to be revived, she wanted to be there. She wanted to present her whole self to the public and the journalists, and let her charm, her sparkle, her beauty, her cleverness take effect on them, as they had the first time. She would be there to make her poems shine and bring them back from the dead. And she would talk. About the years that had followed 1933. About the crimes, the suffering, and the German people's

monstrous notion that she and all other Jews should die. Oh yes, she would talk. ‘Hear, Germany!’

Her friend Kesten, who had returned to Europe before her, gave her no illusions when he told her in October 1955 about the situation in Germany and the Germans’ reactions to emigrants: ‘“Returnees” of a literary nature are generally given a warm welcome in Germany, as long as they don’t talk about the burdensome past and agree to “forgive and forget”. I went on the attack and have therefore been attacked in return. I want neither to forgive nor to forget.’

This obviously reinforced her doubts. Would she be strong enough? But she was determined. She just wanted to do everything right. She dedicated the new edition of her book to her patron saint, now deceased. This dedicatory poem stands on the first page like a shield of grateful remembrance at the gateway to the collection.

To ‘Saint Francis’ of Rowohlt Verlag in the year dot

This book, long out of print and outright banned,
Is dedicated: in memoriam
Franz Hessel, poet, saint and editor,
My steadfast guide and lyrical protector,
Who, with mild rebukes and harsher praise,
Was midwife to it once, in bygone days.
He rests in gentleness and melancholy
Beneath the earth of France, near Sanary,
And edits, in the shade of noble palms

For paradise, the very latest psalms.
And when his distant gaze descends to us,
His smile is quiet and mysterious…

Mascha Kaléko plans the trip and the book's publication in minute detail, calling it her 'battle plan' – she wants to whip up a gentle storm and fight for her place again. Is she already feeling overconfident? She requests that the income from her books' subsidiary rights – such as readings broadcast on the radio – go directly to her and not, as is usual, be split with the publisher. And she asks for a publication date of February 1956, though Rowohlt has other plans. She then waits a long time to hear back from the press that had previously written so eagerly. Ledig-Rowohlt finally replies to say that they are 'perplexed' by her demands; they were evidently expecting nothing but gratitude. But alright, the press will accede to her wishes. Then, at the last minute, she wants to change her biography; she has always left her date and place of birth vague whenever possible, though if both were required, she would make herself five years younger, giving 1912 as her birth date and replacing Chrzanów in Galicia with her father's birthplace, Schidlow. Like Joseph Roth, who was thirteen years older than her and had died in exile, she liked to draw a veil over her Galician origins. The cliché of the impoverished, uneducated Eastern Jew was in her mind, too. In December 1955, having once again heard nothing in response to her latest requests, she resolves to cancel her trip at the last minute. Finally, on 16 December, salvation arrives by telegram. Her life, as it appears in the book, will be changed in accordance with her wishes. Relieved, she writes to her friend and

business adviser Felix Guggenheim that she will now ‘un-cancel’ her ‘half-cancelled berth on the *America*’. She is so uncertain, so undecided, when she wants to be so decisive.

Then New Year arrives. Steven and Chemjo go with her to the port, and Mascha boards the ship. She waves. Are they still there? There is no going back now. She is off on her great journey into the past. Could it become a journey into the future, too?

[END OF SAMPLE]