

On the Landing

A short story by Yenta Mash, translated by Ellen Cassedy

http://www.yiddishbookcenter.org/yenta_mash_on_the_landing

Yenta Mash was born in 1922 and grew up in Zgurutse, a small town in the region once known as Bessarabia. In 1941, she and her parents were exiled to a Siberian labor camp, from which she escaped in 1948. She then spent a number of years working as a bookkeeper in Kishinev. In 1977, Mash immigrated to Israel and settled in Haifa, where she finally gained the courage to begin writing and publishing her work. Her last book was published in 2007; she died in 2013.

In many of her stories, Mash buries difficult material in the narrative, approaching it only indirectly. “On the Landing,” published as “Afn pristan” in her 1990 collection *Tif in der tayge* (Deep in the Taiga), uses a delicately understated narrative strategy to recount a daring escape from the Gulag and commonplace elements to convey the enormity of hunger and terror.

Krivosheino, the regional center, sat on the Ob River, on the other shore, far to the north. The river was frozen for more than half the year, so you traveled there by sleigh—if you had the means—but most people went on foot, pulling little sleds behind them. For two months of the year—October, when the ice was beginning to form, and May, when it was breaking up—you could neither ride nor walk; then you stayed home. In the summer you could take the steamer that connected the river towns of the Narym region: Krasnoye, Kipriushka, Nikolskoye, Krivosheino, Moltshanova, and so on, all the way to Kolpashevo and beyond. The boat crept along like a tortoise and had no established schedule—it came when it came. Depending on your luck, you could wait for twenty-four hours, for two days, or for three or more. And where did you spend those three days? On the landing, of course: a trampled patch of earth with a sign, a flag mounted on a pole, and a massive piling where the boat would tie up. There you could sit down or even stretch out on the ground, if you weren’t afraid of mosquitoes, ticks, or assorted other biting and crawling insects. If you wanted something to eat, you could help yourself to whatever you’d brought with you. Otherwise, you’d starve to death on the landing, and no one would bat an eye.

Esther had brought food. Besides having to wait for the boat, she knew that no one would be waiting for her in Krivosheino with a good meal; she’d be hungry by the time she got where she was going. Nothing would hold her back, though. This time she’d decided, once and for all, to escape from the forest. She wasn’t going to think about what would happen at the other end. In her sack she had some boiled potatoes, two turnips, and three days’ worth of bread rations, divided into slices to help keep her hands off the share for the next meal. She had some salt, too, tied up in a scrap of white cloth. She had to stick with the plan to the end, she kept telling herself, or else she was

in for untold suffering. It was hard to say how she'd come up with the plan. It had occurred to her out of the blue, really. Back at the base, she'd happened to hear that the region's annual teacher conference was coming up in Krivosheino. A longing had come upon her, a gnawing nostalgia. She yearned to spend even a day among those lucky teachers, to sit in the hall listening to presentations, no matter what they were about. How long had it been since she was seated proudly onstage, a member of the board, the envy of everyone in the room? God, what has become of me, she asked herself. A lump formed in her throat, and suddenly the idea came that she must seize this opportunity no matter the cost. Nothing ventured, nothing gained. Maybe the plan wouldn't succeed, but as the official slogan had it, "Red or dead!" She had to try. Among the papers she'd hastily packed and brought with her to Siberia was a certificate stating that she was in her last year as a village teacher. With luck, maybe they wouldn't look too closely, wouldn't notice the certificate was from Moldavia, and would let her onto the boat. And what do you know? That's exactly what happened. Holding the paper stamped by the ministry of education, she was taken for a peasant girl, a teacher from one of the local farming communities, and was waved onto the boat without ado—davoy, davoy, hurry up, get on, we're late.

And that would have been the end of the tale, if not for the most important part of the story, which happened earlier, on the landing. So we need to back up.

Tired from her long walk, Esther had sat down on the riverbank, taken off her heavy sandals, and put her feet in the river. Bliss! The water cooled her burning feet and drained the weariness from her limbs. She sat for a while; she couldn't get enough. Then she furtively wrapped up the sandals, put them back in her sack, and pulled out her shoes. Now that she was among people, she needed to look like a person. She was in no hurry to eat. That morning she'd had a double portion of soup. In return for a pink hair ribbon, the cook had scooped up two whole ladles from the bottom of the pot, the thick part. She'd filled herself up. But since then a whole day had passed, and quite a day at that. She'd walked as fast as she could—it would be just her luck if the boat came today and she arrived too late, in time to see it recede into the distance, wagging its stern as it disappeared out of sight. She'd pushed herself to the limit, not permitting herself a moment's rest. So it wasn't that she wasn't hungry—she was always hungry—but she knew there would be no food tomorrow. Best to make do now with a slice of bread and a little water from the river, and save the potatoes for later.

Meanwhile, night fell, and those who were waiting on the landing, ten or twelve of them, built a fire to protect against the swarms of mosquitoes eager to take up a collection from the assembly. She couldn't figure out anything to do but move closer to the fire herself. That was when she saw him. He was standing on the other side of the fire, directly across from her, in the jodhpurs they all wore, the big belt buckle, and the familiar N.K.V.D. cap. Esther froze and thought she might pass out. Well, well—you escape from hell and here's the devil in your face. It was none other than Shapovalov, the camp commandant. What could be worse? Shapovalov was about thirty years old and lived in Krasnoye. He supervised the deportees who worked in the forest chemical works from there and was rarely on site. Instead he had his minions, who served as his

guard dogs, keeping an eye on every move. Every so often he paid a short visit to see and be seen. It was said that he wasn't a bad guy, but to the prisoners he was not a guy at all, good or bad, but always the commandant. Even if you weren't afraid of the man himself, the blue cap with the red stripe and the star in front still made you tremble. The cap and the trousers alone were enough to strike terror in the hearts of everyone in the forest.

To this day, Esther doesn't know whether he didn't see her or whether he just pretended not to see. It wasn't a question of recognizing her personally. To him, she was just one of the masses. But all the deportees were easy to identify because of their tattered clothes and how intent they were on hiding themselves. Their scarves were always pulled down low on their foreheads, their eyes full of fear. The deportees had good reason to be afraid. Their fates were in his hands. In this instance, he would decide whether Esther got on the boat to Krivosheino or went back to the forest.

He didn't even glance in her direction, but the exaggerated way he seemed to be avoiding her made Esther suspect that he'd seen her. What to do? She lowered her eyes. It's in God's hands, she told herself. Every minute felt like an eternity. She turned her head away, then worried that she would attract his attention by trying to hide, so she turned back to the fire, looking straight ahead and pinching herself with her hands in her pockets. Lord, how much longer? A minute passed, then another, ten more. He seemed to be playing a game of cat and mouse, certain that his victim wouldn't escape. It was not easy being a mouse, even in an imaginary game. She broke into a cold sweat.

The game lasted so long that she found herself beginning to relax. If he were planning to punish her, she reflected, he wouldn't have let things go on so long. He would have thrown her out right away. Letting it go was a sign . . . a sign of something, even if she couldn't figure out what. A flicker of hope began to glow. Maybe he wasn't going to turn her in after all. The boat was coming—please, God!

The commandant was not alone. With him was someone else, also from the N.K.V.D. but obviously of lower rank; the commandant called him Sashka, and he never opened his mouth, only listened and smiled while his superior never stopped talking. No doubt Shapovalov felt it was beneath his dignity to have to wait on this muddy landing with ordinary people. He was laughing and talking loudly, probably hoping people would notice that he was no regular fellow but a bigshot official. When his initial supply of stories had run out, he told Sasha, who was standing by the fire not far from Esther, that he had never eaten a carrot in his life and never would, not for all the money in the world. He loathed carrots and wouldn't let them pass his lips, not raw, not boiled, not even baked the way everyone loved them. He couldn't stand to look at them. It drove his mother crazy. If this wasn't the good life, what was?

Meanwhile he was tearing open a bag of cookies, round, plump ones like the spice cookies from back home. He ate one and playfully tossed a second to Sasha over the

fire, then another. Whenever Sasha made a catch, the two of them laughed uproariously. Then one fell and rolled close to Esther. Sasha shrugged. He wouldn't bother bending down. There lay the cookie, suddenly the center of the universe. Esther forgot about the commandant. All she could think was that someone else would see the cookie and pick it up. Lifting her eyes as if to study the stars, she edged over and gently covered the cookie with her foot, not crushing it but nudging it deeper into the grass. A little later, when she thought no one was looking, she picked it up, brushed it off, and gobbled it down, her heart weeping with every bite.

Did he witness her in her moment of degradation? Did he drop the cookie at her feet on purpose to humiliate her? To this day, Esther does not know.

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