Aviya Kushner

GIVE ME SHELTER

The Fascinating, Quirky, and Deeply American Effort To Help International Refugee Writers Make New Writing Lives in the United States

ONE afternoon, the doorman to my building in Chicago stopped me with visible insistence and handed me a note from a Bosnian woman who lives on the fourteenth floor. She had heard that I was a professor of creative writing and wondered if I would be willing to read a novel that was very important in Bosnia and then introduce it at a book celebration. The wind howled; gusts of sleet blew against the building's windows. I took off my gloves and looked away from the doorman and down at my tired, frostbitten hands: I was carrying several dozen student essays, I had a book review due within hours, and then there were the fifty-something graduate school applications I was supposed to be reading. Everyone, it seemed, wanted me to read something for them. But I was intrigued by the whole idea of a book celebration, and by the doorman's stiff determination, so I said yes. The next day, a novel, *Black Soul*, was waiting for me at the doorman's desk.

The novel was a best seller in Europe, but I had never heard of it. The doorman—Bosnian as well—assured me it was important. The author himself had translated it into English, and the cover, with red letters on a black background, looked self-published. The dedication was a diatribe against former President Bill Clinton and the United Nations.

The story was a gripping, though uneven, account of a young man whose wife and child are murdered as he watches from just outside his home. War begins without warning, and the young man becomes a soldier. Slowly, his war experience teaches him not only what his country is, was, and might become, but also who his father and mother are. We learn that his father was a soldier too; he spent years fleeing and fighting the Nazis and met his mother—an American nurse—in the dark moments of those years. The elderly father teaches his son how to survive, how to carry knives, how to kill. The book had a mixture of wartime fact—the sieges, the hand-to-hand murder, the maiming—and the soft, mournful, inexplicable tones of elegy and eternal, reverberating trauma.

"But the force fighting the threats against writers is harder to measure: neighborliness. That ancient, amorphous quality—the one evidenced by Abraham in the Bible—is exactly what is making it possible for a new generation of refugee writers to make it in the United States."

The novel, like the author, moves to Chicago and offers a glimpse of the refugee experience in America: the poverty, the struggling, the anonymity, and the recurring flashbacks. Walking down Michigan Avenue, he sees a Serb commander in a high-class café. I read it, wondering if it was real or an illusion, and instantly flashed back to I.B. Singer's masterful short story "The Cafeteria" in which a young woman who had barely escaped Europe's fires alive imagines that she sees Adolf Hitler in a cafeteria, right next to the other refugees sipping tea and eating mandelbrodt in Manhattan's Upper West Side.

And so I found myself traveling across the city to a branch of the Chicago Public Library, which serves as the headquarters for the Bosnian-American Library (I had no idea it was there). Inside the library lay a spread—meat, cheese, fruit, and Starbucks coffee. There were several extremely straight-backed men in the room who reminded me of the army officers I had encountered as a reporter in Jerusalem. *Military*, I thought. *All the way*. They were generals, colonels, fighters, and they were coming out to hear a novel about being a soldier.

I turned my head and saw a television camera: Bosnian TV was there.

At times the event was called a "book promotion," and at other times, a "book celebration." I had never seen anything like it. Various dignitaries—military, jour-

nalistic, literary—got up to the microphone and praised the book. I was asked to comment on it as literature, so I said something about *The Things They Carried*, which drew blank stares, and then about the Holocaust, which got a warm reception. The head of the new Illinois Holocaust Museum was there; he soon made a short speech that moved and haunted me.

He had been a child survivor and never spoke of his experiences. But the rise of Holocaust denial pushed him to speak to children, and so he had encountered Dano, a fourteen-year-old boy born in Bosnia, when the boy was researching a school project. The two hit it off, and the older Jewish man promised to help educate American audiences about what happened in what was once Yugoslavia.

The book "celebration" included a discussion of what the Bosnian community could learn from the Jewish community's response to the Holocaust. It then moved into ever-stranger territory for someone used to American literary culture, or someone like me who has friends and colleagues who discuss craft, style, and the beauty of a sentence. The spotlight fell on a woman whose child had been murdered nearly twenty years ago. She stood, someone said something in Bosnian, the audience clapped, and she cried.

I was surrounded by people who had lived harrowing stories. They read for different reasons than why I was reading. They were reading for comfort, community, for a soothing of wounds.

"A lot of books got war wrong," one of the straight-backed men said. "This one is right."

At last, my neighbor sat me down with the novelist. He was a tanned man of medium height with thick hair and intense blue eyes, who was extremely proud of two things which he quickly mentioned in accented English: his successful business as a self-employed electrician, and his children, who spoke fluent English. I got a sense of deep kindness from his eyes and the creases around them, and the way his wife looked at him with quiet, gentle admiration; later, Bosnian after Bosnian mentioned the author's decency, his unwavering personal sense of what was moral and what was not, and his conviction that this novel had to be written. He was shorter than the generals and seemed a little more everyday, a little more normal: an accidental soldier, if anything, a young Dad who got caught in some genocide going on in the backyard.

PEN American Center's Freedom to Write program keeps a watch list of journalists, novelists, poets—even historians—who are being threatened in their homeland. To snag a spot on the watch list, a writer has to be in jail or under death threat. Generally, there are seven hundred to one thousand people on that list annually, according to the committee's chairman.

But the force fighting the threats against writers is harder to measure: neighborliness. That ancient, amorphous quality—the one evidenced by Abraham in the Bible—is exactly what is making it possible for a new generation of refugee writers to make it in the United States. While Europe has government-funded efforts to help writers at risk and a neat organization that is thirty-something cities strong and growing, in America writers are often welcomed by ordinary citizens, not government functionaries. Each American city of refuge and each effort to help refugee writers who make it here is, therefore, also the story of a raging, still-burning American individualism come to life.

It turns out that my story of getting involved in the world of refugee writers by chance, by fortuitous accident, is common. Americans involved in helping literary writers at risk nearly always mention neighborliness or connectedness: a sense that a writer from a far-off land is truly as close as the person living next door. For American writers who have devoted thousands of hours to helping international writers facing death threats, jail time, or other hounding persecution, it's a story of understanding what community means. Sometimes, it's about redefining community: insisting that the community is the world itself.

"I can trace it to a period maybe twenty years ago," the novelist Russell Banks told me in a phone interview from his home in upstate New York, "when I began to realize that I really belonged to an international tribe that transcended language, as a writer. Malaparte, the Italian writer, says I wear no flag but my skin. I had as much in common with a Chinese poet as with John Updike," Banks explained. "My brothers and sisters are engaged in the same enterprise I am. Some are imprisoned, put in exile, beaten and sometimes killed because they are writers, and for no other reason. It was a no-brainer to say: what can I do?"

Banks started by signing petitions, and eventually became president of an organization helping writers. "I had been a yearly signatory for the International Parliament of Writers, along with Toni Morrison, Susan Sontag, and Kurt Vonnegut." In 1999, Banks was approached to become president of Cities of Refuge North America. "They wanted an American," he said. "We have a strong history of providing sanctuary to artists and people in flight."

Banks took over with "the ambition of generating some cities in the United States." It wasn't easy; Europe had a system of government support, and America had virtually none. The writers had to make connections, one by one.

"You have to raise the money privately—it's hard work," says Banks. "It's much harder to do in the United States. You're putting together a fragile structure of individuals, sometimes corporations, and educational institutions. In Ithaca, they were having a bake sale. You can't imagine having a bake sale in Paris."

"It was binge work," he says. "You work really intensely for two weeks, and then you don't think about it for three weeks."

And that's how Russell Banks ended up flying to Pittsburgh to meet Henry Reese.

REESE is a Pittsburgh businessman who spent decades running a successful telemarketing firm and helped make Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD) a viable organization, one phone call at a time. I wondered how he got involved in helping writers in danger, eventually founding a City of Refuge in Pittsburgh.

"It's one of those things where you know exactly where and how it happened," says Reese. "It was in 1997, and Salman Rushdie gave a talk in Pittsburgh. He was just coming out of a *fatwa*, being in hiding, and in the middle of the talk he mentioned a group called Cities of Refuge."

That was the first Reese had heard of the European network of cities that help persecuted writers.

"My wife and I, we kicked each other. Our legs touched. We had a house that had once been a crack house. We were renting it at the time, and we both thought it would make a great house for a writer." That house was on a troubled block

in Pittsburgh, an unusual block that is more of an alley, before they bought and renovated it.

I wondered if Reese himself was a writer, and it turns out he is that rarer breed: a reader. "I'd always been a reader, had been a lit major. My wife is an artist, and we both understood the difficulties of creative people—even those who are not persecuted. It's doubly or triply so for those who are persecuted."

So he wrote the Cities of Refuge folks.

"I would write them every three to six months," Reese recalled, as I listened in fascination. "Finally, in 2003, I got an e-mail back, saying that Russell Banks, the novelist, was president, and the idea was to move the program here."

Reese met with Banks and Richard Wylie, a novelist who teaches at the University of Nevada at Las Vegas. He realized his proposal was radically different from the European model: he wanted to pull off a private, totally American, individual effort. "The cities in Europe were essentially government funded—the cities sometimes owned property, from after the war and reconstruction. The bulk of their funding, if not all, was coming that way, and it persists that way."

Today, the government of Norway handles the administrative matters, not the European Union, but it's still primarily government-funded. In the United States, several programs are university-funded. Reese was proposing something else: individually-funded, and he also wanted to rethink the traditional structure of most writers' refuge programs. A university might host a writer for a few months, or a year at most. Europe's programs offered two years. Reese thought the ultimate, long-term problem wasn't being addressed.

Banks expressed the same worry.

"After the two years are up, what's the writer to do?" Banks said. "Most of the time there is some kind of transition that's possible—the writer finds a publisher, a translator, or a job. For many, that's not as easy as it sounds."

These writers are often in their forties, and they may not speak English.

"They rely on the kindness of strangers, so to speak," Banks said. "There is a built-in limitation and it's hard." When a refugee writer finally goes home, Banks explained, his house is often not there: it's been burned, or bombed. The dictator might be dead, but the writer's friends might be long gone too. "I don't think we

Americans can fully appreciate what happens when a whirlwind enters your life," Banks says.

Reese thought the way to go was to have the writer contribute to the community outside of the university and outside of the government. He sees hazards to university sponsorship. "When your primary relationship is [the university] from the get-go, you are a little islanded from the complexity of life."

The Pittsburgh model brings the writer into the city's life, and the city into the lives of writers. The program has hosted community readings in the streets and established the Jazz Poetry Concert series, which pairs poets from all over the world with avant-garde jazz musicians. Reese is also sensitive to the long-term issue of finding publication opportunities: the Pittsburgh effort now includes a magazine, *Sampsonia Way*, named for the street on which the writers live. The magazine provides, it says, shelter to the words of writers just as the street provides shelter to their physical bodies.

I wanted to see what the Europeans are doing, what the competition is. The organization that intrigued Reese has been renamed. Now called The International Cities of Refuge Network, or ICORN, its website lists 33 European cities and one American city: Miami. The 34 cities are all either hosting a writer now or have committed to do so within the next year. They work closely with International PEN's Writers-in-Prison Committee, the Norwegian government, and a British foundation; the city list varies from Paris and Amsterdam to smaller places like Trondheim, Norway. ICORN makes it clear that it is not a refugee organization: it cannot remove a writer from danger; all it can do is provide housing and funding for two years.

America's list is far shorter. Besides Miami, American programs of varying length exist only in five places: Ithaca, Las Vegas, Iowa City, Providence, and Pittsburgh. The programs in Ithaca, Las Vegas, Iowa City, and Providence are run by universities: Cornell, UNLV, The University of Iowa, and Brown. I wondered why there were so many more European cities, and called a longtime friend of international literature for answers.

"They get a lot of European Union money to make this happen," explains Christopher Merrill, director of the International Writing Program at Iowa. Merrill was preparing to leave the very next day for the Middle East; the situation of writers in a rapidly changing Arab world was grabbing his attention. "The American version doesn't have government money. So each city has to figure out how to scrape together money."

Even Iowa City, a mecca for American writers, took some convincing. It recently became the only UNESCO City of Literature in the United States, as well as a City of Asylum.

"Sometimes the solutions are small, like that bake sale in Ithaca; sometimes they are magnificently large, dreamy, and entrepreneurial, like Reese's vision of an entire street: a district of literature, art, and freedom."

"We worked very hard to get Iowa City to turn into a City of Asylum. The city agreed to it only on the condition that they would not be responsible for any funding. We managed to get this through at a moment when budgets were getting slashed dramatically." American cities and towns are generally strapped, due to the twin devils of high unemployment and a housing crash. It would have been "politically untenable," Merrill said, to put up a writer at risk from abroad at a time when so many Iowans and Americans were experiencing deep, cutting economic pain.

The International Writing Program juggles a variety of funding sources, including State Department grants, corporate funding, university assistance, and private support. The 2010 Annual Report lists supporters including U.S. Bank, and a junior-high school teacher from neighboring Coralville, IA. "Generally speaking, the State Department funds between a third and a half of our writers, and then we manage up to fourteen grants, from several countries, foundations, and individuals, to bring other writers to the program," says Merrill.

BESIDES money, ideology comes into play, too. Americans have a different sense of how government and art should interact. It's not that Americans aren't keen on literary philanthropy, but more that they want to do it themselves, on their

own, without a Senate committee making judgments. "As a people, we are leery of federal support of the arts in any shape or form," explains Merrill. "But as a people, we also do more volunteering than any people on earth. Writers who come to the IWP are always taken by the sheer volunteerism in America."

So while the long list of cities of asylum in Europe may look impressive, it might not indicate a level of commitment on the part of the average European reader-citizen.

"That money is being divvied up in Brussels, and the average French farmer is doing nothing for it," says Merrill. In the United States, there is little government support, he explains, but there are small, individual efforts like the Bosnians in Chicago and the Hmong in Minneapolis, keeping refugee writers going. "It's a different way of operating."

Banks also points to the entire nature of America as a reason for the disparity.

"It's easy to criticize Americans for not stepping forward as aggressively or as readily as they have in Europe," Banks says. "In a way, there are reasons for that. It's not that Americans are selfish or parochial. It's just that historically we live in a society which believes itself to be open and welcoming. But we are also very individualistic and pragmatic."

Those qualities directly affect how Americans view writers, and so, how the situation of international writers is viewed in the United States. "As a pragmatic thing, we don't value literature and artistic work," Banks says. "We aren't likely to think that that's as valuable to the community as a doctor or a scientist who is on the run. In Europe, they tend to value the intellectual's role in the larger community more than we do. They are willing to put it as a line item in the budget."

That leaves Americans coming up with different solutions, with new lines of thought. Sometimes the solutions are small, like that bake sale in Ithaca; sometimes they are magnificently large, dreamy, and entrepreneurial, like Reese's vision of an entire street: a district of literature, art, and freedom. There are clear advantages to a successful entrepreneur heading a literary refuge, I thought, while listening to Reese describe his efforts to expand. He mentioned an effort to purchase a building that used to be a notorious bar, and make it into a literary center. He envisions the entire alley-like street on which he lives as a sort of Literary Row. It was

thrilling to listen to: a wide-span plan, a vision for a holistic, long-range solution for the problem of writers who are driven from their home country. Reese wasn't throwing away money, he was imagining a world, and a future.

BANKS described the position of writers, over many decades with a novelist's sense of span, of long-range plot. "Over time, writers flee different forms of persecution. In the Cold War, they were fleeing the state apparatus. And since the end of the cold war, writers have started to offend and often flee religious and ethnic fundamentalists, in places like Algeria, and then civil war in places like Liberia and the Congo."

"We are equal-opportunity offenders," he said. "We manage to be offenders in any conflict. Who knows what will happen in the pro-democracy movement in the Middle East?" Banks wonders. "Writers get involved in these things."

Time has taught him that the state is not the only problem, and that the toppling of a dictator may not spell the end of a literary writer's travails. Banks adds, "The enemies of humanism aren't just dictatorships—they can be found everywhere."

Perhaps the friends of humanism can be found everywhere, as well, though they are harder to locate. "The first writer, Huang Xiang, came from China," says Reese. "I tell this story a lot—it's another one of those moments. He had political asylum in the United States, and we asked him to visit with his wife before they decided [on Pittsburgh]. He had been imprisoned off and on for twelve years, seven times, and we didn't want him to feel like he was entering another prison."

"We went out to dinner and we were passing one of the cliffs overlooking the city, and he said, 'I'd like to carve my poetry into the cliff to thank the city of Pittsburgh.' We said, 'That's highly unlikely, but why don't you carve your poetry on the outside of the house?'"

Well, the writer went ahead and wrote his poems in tall, wide Chinese characters, on the exterior of his new house on Sampsonia Way.

(Opposite page) Photograph of Huang Xiang's *House Poem (An Anthology of Poetry and Calligraphy)*, near the Mattress Factory Art Museum in Pittsburgh. Huang and his wife, also a writer, were forced to flee China and are now legal refugees in the United States.


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"When we did the house, we had no idea the kind of reaction we'd provoke in the community," Reese recalls. But the day he began writing on his house, it was clear that the house itself would help publicize the writing refuge in Pittsburgh. "Because he couldn't speak English, he would read his house. He would act it out. I can't tell you how good he was—the best. And it was a way for him to meet people, and people would start slipping notes under his door."

The poet's work continues to affect the neighborhood. "I recently got a typed anonymous poem about Huang Xiang as an inspiration mailed to us," Reese said. "And once—I am sorry we didn't photograph, we meant to—after the poet moved, someone wrote in pebbles on the steps: 'I want to write poetry.'"

OF the larger foundations working to help persecuted writers around the world, the big kahuna is PEN, especially its Freedom-to-Write Committee. I was told by several people to contact Larry Siems, who heads that committee. One person told me he knows "everybody in trouble," which seemed as good a recommendation as any.

Siems has an MFA in poetry from Columbia, and has been a fellow at the Fine Arts Workcenter in Provincetown. Eventually, while teaching in Los Angeles, he became interested in the lives of immigrants there. He wrote a book, composed of letters from these immigrants and their families and friends back home, which led to a job at Human Rights Watch, which then brought him to PEN. Working on the book made him realize he was interested in "the intersection of human rights and literature."

"I was a little impatient," Siems says, reminding me of the doorman to my building, who stopped me in my tracks and forced me to read. "Even Auden concluded that poetry makes nothing happen." Advocacy, he says, is different. "You can really make something happen. And

"The key, Siems explains, is the speed with which a writer can share information. That's why one blogger matters, and that's part of the blurring of the lines between 'poet' and 'journalist' that makes it hard to get a solid, complete accounting of writers at risk."

you're in contact, all the time, with smart, creative people around the world who are also incredibly brave."

PEN was founded in 1921, by a group of French and British writers. "The idea was that if you get writers talking across boundaries, you can mitigate some of the nationalism that causes wars," Siems says. "PEN really began to define itself as an internationalist organization and as a free-expression organization in the 1930s, first as a response to Nazi book-burning and the purge of Jewish writers from Germany."

But the world of writers at risk has changed, fundamentally, since then. Thirty or forty years ago, there were many Eastern European writers jailed because of their literary work. PEN's watch list was full of literary writers. "The battle was really for ideas," he says. "In the information age, the battle is really for information and not ideas."

Siems says that's why bloggers who quickly disseminate information about atrocities are at high risk; as we spoke, he was dealing with a case of an Egyptian blogger who was arrested for criticizing the military. Fortunately, he exhaled with a sigh, that blogger was released, but it created a moment of fear in the human-rights community, which is so hopeful about events in the Arab world.

The key, Siems explains, is the speed with which a writer can share information. That's why one blogger matters, and that's part of the blurring of the lines between "poet" and "journalist" that makes it hard to get a solid, complete accounting of writers at risk. One blog post—or comment to the international news media—can catapult a poet into the at-risk category. It happens that fast.

In the rapidly transforming Middle East, spreading information can mean jail or death. According to PEN's Action Alert, on May 12, 2011, the sixty-six-year-old Syrian writer and activist Najati Tayara was arrested "after he gave a telephone interview to Al Jazeera TV on the crackdown by Syrian forces on peaceful protesters in Homs." But idea-sharing can still be risky in that part of the world. Generally, the exception to the information-not-ideas rule remains in the Islamic world, where a writer can still be condemned for "blasphemy," which Siems says is a variation on the old story of being jailed for an idea, as opposed to information.

Recently in Bahrain, a twenty-year-old poet and student, Ayat Al-Gormezi, was thrown into jail for a year for reciting poems that criticized the Bahraini king.

"Ayat's case illustrates that in the Islamic world in particular right now literary writers are often targeted as well," explains Siems, "and for one of the reasons they have traditionally been targeted—that is, for violating official taboos." Saying the king has flaws is a classic case, an old story. "Blasphemy and criticizing the monarchy are both examples of 'insult laws'—laws that are put in place to suppress speech that really is protected under the universal right to freedom of expression," Siems says.

THE mention of a variation on an old story made me think of my grandfather, who escaped Nazi Germany on the last legal boat in 1936, and made his way to what was then British Mandate of Palestine. He was not a writer, but he was certainly a refugee. He was removed, entirely, from the continent of his youth, never to return. When Banks said that he didn't think Americans could understand what it was like to have "a whirlwind enter your life," I thought, well, I listened to that as a child. I was raised on those stories; they were my food, my skin.

It so happens that my grandfather also encountered, by chance, by neighborly accident, the world of refugee writers of his era; perhaps, then, I am the one exploring a variation on an old story. My grandfather was twenty-two when he quickly waved goodbye to his mother, father, and four brothers, who had risked a certain, vicious beating to accompany him to the train station in Bremen, Germany; the train took him to the boat. "I was sure I would see them again," he told me. "I was just a boy."

When he got to what was then Palestine, he got a job working construction, laying concrete. On the way to the construction site each morning, a blue-eyed man with a bushy head of gray hair would tail along with the workers, reciting something. The other workers said, "That man's insane," but my grandfather said, "He's a poet." The man was Shaul Tchernichovsky, one of the two founding fathers of modern Hebrew verse. A good sixty-two years after my grandfather passed him just before dawn, I started translating Tchernichovsky's poems into English. My favorite poem, titled "Man Is Nothing But," posits that man is nothing but the image of the land he was born in. Sometimes, I imagine my grandfather listening to that, as he walked with his tools in a new, unfamiliar land, a city boy

in a country of deserts and swamps and sweat, completely unaware that his childhood land would be gone to him, forever. Perhaps Tchernichovsky understood the gravity of the situation far more than my grandfather did. He could feel the whirlwind entering into all their lives.

By the late-1940s, my grandfather knew he had no family. A man had climbed out of a mass grave, past sighing corpses and blood, and seen my great-grandparents and my four teenage great-uncles fall into the pit; suddenly there was nothing where there had once been a family, a sense of home. By then, my grandfather also had nothing to eat; he subsisted on grapes stolen from his security-guard-at-a-vineyard job. And at about that time, he started reading contemporary Hebrew literature with great seriousness, and he bought a novel, *T'mol Shilshom*—the English title is *Only Yesterday*—which he considered "first-class." The book was food money, and my grandfather kept it in a place of honor, on a high shelf in his one-room apartment. That was all I knew.

But not very long ago, I learned that there was a lone businessman behind the scenes who kept the man who wrote that novel from starvation. The novelist was Shmuel Yosef Agnon, the towering, inimitable figure of Hebrew fiction, a man who is known for the layers and layers of his prose; one sentence might be packed with two thousand years of references. Agnon later won a Nobel Prize, but his patron, Salman Schocken, who became the major publisher of Jewish literature in the twentieth century, is exactly the kind of person who never wins a Nobel Prize. He's the sort of literary philanthropist we should all think about once in a while. He was the kind of man my grandfather never mentioned, besotted as he was with the actual writer, with the Hebrew of his religious childhood transformed into contemporary fiction. But Schocken's small stipend, sent from America to what was then Palestine, is what made that novel and so many others possible. That money, that small-time, individually-funded support, is what freed Agnon to write.

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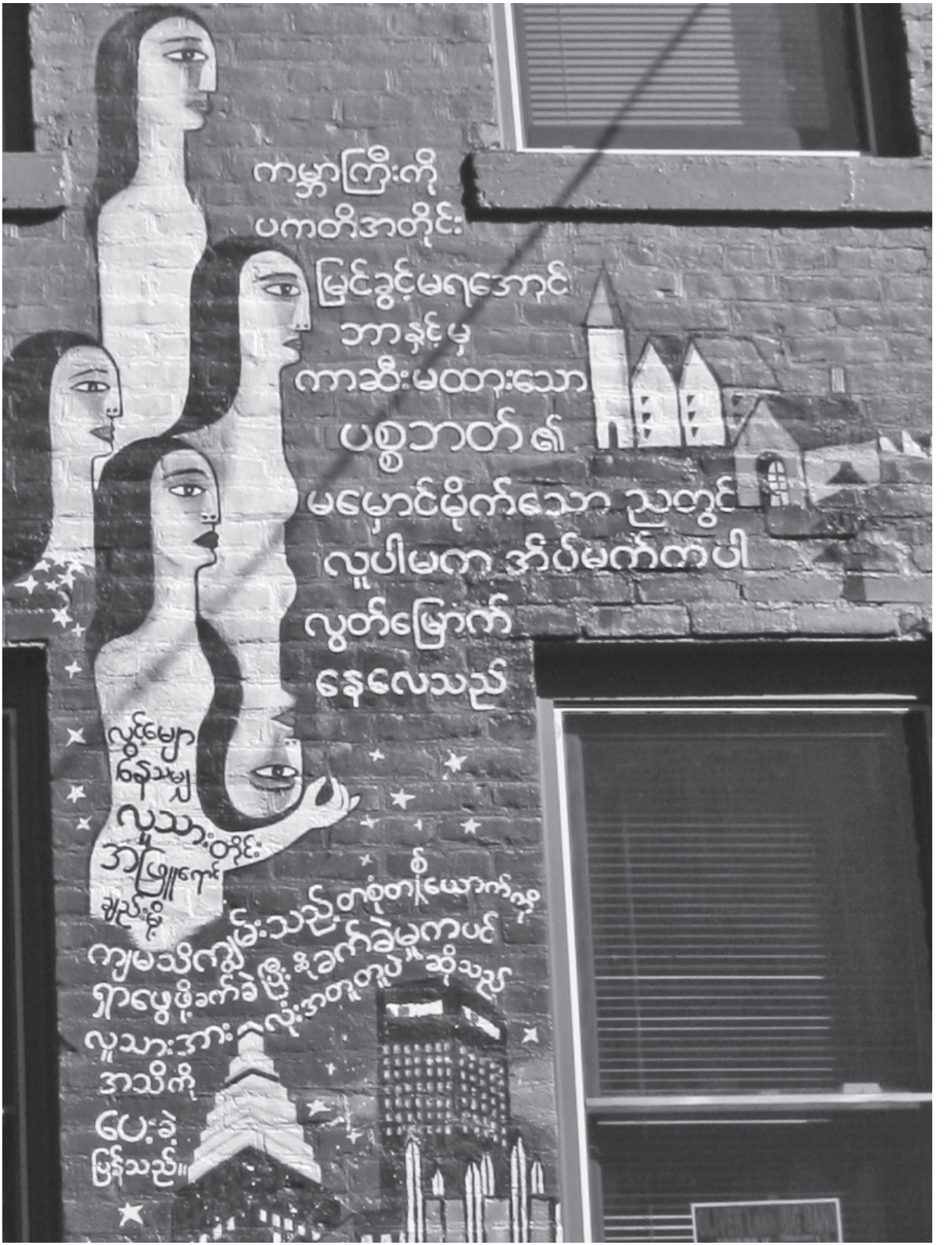
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Schocken, with his vision and business acumen, reminds me of David, the brother of Maimonides. David was a merchant who supported the author of *The Guide to the Perplexed* until he was about thirty; then David perished in a shipwreck, his story of patronage—and family, and community—forever a footnote in history.

But the story of refugee writers in America is also the story of one man—one reader, and then one businessman-turned-publisher—who kept a man who became a major writer alive. And maybe it shouldn't be a footnote to history, but a respected part of it. Readers should honor that spirit of *I can do this, I can make this work, even if I have to do it alone.* I think that spirit is what moves Reese, and Merrill, and Banks. Maybe it's short-sighted, even wrong, to compare the number of cities and the number of dollars, to compare European Union funding with one man in Pittsburgh offering a house.

"For writers who find that kind of shelter in America, it is perhaps they who are sheltering us from the barriers we have erected to avoid community, to avoid the world."

"Something we've learned," said Reese, "something I've always suspected, is that you tend to underestimate people. When you talk to people about difficult things with a certain amount of joy, when it's done well, no matter how difficult the subject is, the experience is accessible. Making things accessible is not a matter of simplifying them. It's about creating the circumstances where people can experience them without any barriers." Instead of relying on a random, neighborly encounter, Reese creates them. I wonder if my neighbors have done that, on a small scale, in the building we live in.

MY building in Chicago—with its modest costs, water views, easy access to public transportation, and 24-hour security giving the illusion of safety to the once-traumatized—is a quasi-United Nations, and nearly everyone there seems to have narrowly escaped disaster. In the laundry room, I have encountered brightly scarved women who fled from Sudan; several dozen European Jews in their

(Opposite page) Close-up of the Burma-Pittsburgh house, with a text by Khet Mar and a mural by her husband Than Htay. Khet Mar was the third writer in City of Asylum/Pittsburgh's exiled writer residency program.

eighties and nineties, sometimes accompanied by worried daughters, and entire families from the former Soviet Union, watching their laundry with vigilance. Then there are the better-dressed, domestic refugees: a stream of gay men fleeing repressive small towns, and another stream of African-American librarians and teachers, who fled their childhood neighborhoods on the South Side, swaths of the city that are now plagued by violence. There are the large, multi-generational Indian families, and of course, the Bosnians, who have moved in en masse.

The Indians and Bosnians are obsessed with education, and the Bosnians are further obsessed with how to handle memory. But the very structure of my Bosnian neighbors' lives—family and community—is different from the story of the refugee writer, alone with his words. Even if the writer has his family with him, he is still alone in terms of language, which is perhaps a writer's real home, his shelter.

But if a writer can continue writing, he will create a rather wide and unusual shelter—one that goes both ways, one that both preserves history and changes it. That kind of dual shelter saves the writer, while transforming those who encounter his work.

For writers who find that kind of shelter in America, it is perhaps they who are sheltering us from the barriers we have erected to avoid community, to avoid the world. Sometimes it is the good side of American individualism that brought them here; the writers from burning parts of the world, in turn, save us from the devastation of the downside of individualism: that old isolationism, that foolish hiding from the rest of the earth. Writers like the poet who wrote a poem on his house turn us away from isolation to entrepreneurship, neighborliness, the pioneer spirit, and the idea that if we work together, each person can claim the right to freedom and the personal journey to happiness that America's founders envisioned over two hundred years ago—and write about it.