

SHEMS FRIEDLANDER

# WINTER HARVEST

*Bob Dylan to Jalaluddin Rumi*

*Memories and Illuminations*

HBJ

You must leave now,  
take what you need, you think will last...

*Bob Dylan*

I've noted down the day of my birth  
And some events known only to me  
Which occurred between that day and another  
Which I will not remember or note down  
But leave to others.

*Jorge Luis Borges*

Blessed are you that are so wise!  
Blessed am I that I have fallen into your company.

*Tripura Rahaysa*

## **PREFACE**

Few are left who knew me when I was young or who now walk the streets and were on the planet when I was born. I realize that as the experience of my life increased, its length diminished. Every breath taken did not increase my life but lessened it by one breath.

When Emine Eroglu, the director of Sufi Kitab Publishing in Istanbul asked me to write a memoir I was hesitant. Although each life is unique, it is not necessarily interesting to others. When I glanced back I saw that I had met many spiritual teachers from diverse beliefs, men and women filled with lights, energy, and love who willingly transferred these qualities to others, and their stories would be interesting to others. I agreed to the task and went fishing for memories in the ocean of my past.

I remembered my boyhood in Boston, Massachusetts. I remembered my years in art school. I remembered being a reporter for the Boston Record-American. I remembered the Gurdjieff Work, Swami Muktananda's flying lessons, and Lama Chimi's folded paper. I remembered Sheikh Muzaffer, Safer Baba and The Whirling Dervishes. I remember music and scents. I remembered Istanbul nights, Cairo days and much more that I have scribbled onto these pages.

None of these memories appeared in the order of their happening. They jumped to the foreground as if I were in a game of hopscotch.

Although linked by the invisible skein of my life, each event was unique and pregnant with a possibility of a future, unlike a frozen photograph that expresses a moment but has no future.

This book like its many remembrances is not written sequentially, although the events are tied by the continuity of my time. Much like my thoughts of the past, these memories jump from the timeline of my life like pieces of a puzzle that belongs to one man. Like a mirror in many shards lying on the floor with the reflection of a part of the whole in each section.

## 645 Million Breaths

These are unconnected impressions of the theatre of my life, with players who drift in and out of light and dark, clear and sullied moments, faded and acute images, that emerge in the present as muffled prayers, or jumbled visions, during a winter harvest of memories.

Like a dedicated farmer pruning trees so they may grow healthy, I have searched for the places in my life where seeds were buried, and sought the fruit that may have been born. It's an early age I became aware of the vacuity, but with little life experience, filled it with the toys of the world, rather than the Name of God.

In my daydreams I visited invisible cities, and used poetry and art as weapons to defray the enemies of mankind. In the nearly 645 million breaths I have taken, how many have been conscious, how many contain the Name of Allah? Far too few I am sure.

The Sufi sheikhs say that a breath taken in which the Name of Allah is missing, is a waste of breath. How much of this precious life have I wasted, dreamed away, clouded with confusion, crowded with meaningless or poisoned thoughts? Will I be written down as a man broken by the world, a life devoid of meaning, unfulfilled, or is there yet a glimmer of hope, the afterglow of a firefly's light?

The Sufi sheikhs tell us to say once in one's life, *la illaha illa Allah*, is enough to enter Paradise. This can be said in one breath. Not just repeated, but said from the deepest part of one's heart, with every fiber of one's being, with every cell of one's body alight, like the firefly.

Perhaps we are given 600 million breaths in order to locate the one where the Name of Allah is hidden

## The Wedding Night

Anatolia is like embracing ice in the winter of 1972. Konya it's cold. Nevertheless thousands of lovers of Mevlana Jalaluddin Rumi converge from various parts of the world, to honor "His wedding night" in December. The Whirling Dervishes turn each night leading up to the 17th of December; the day Mevlana met his Beloved, some 700 years before.

I arrive from New York, the city of a hundred thousand traffic lights, to Konya, a small city in the heart of Central Turkey, that has one traffic light. I didn't know it but this particular journey would change my life.

Sadik, a friend from New York is my traveling companion. We struggle with our bags at the old, dingy, Yesilkoy airport in Istanbul, then find our way to Uskudar, to the house of Mevlevi musician Nezhir Uzel whom I had recently met when the Whirling Dervishes were in New York.

Houses in Istanbul are heated by wood or coal stoves and carry a night chill. Nezhir is to play the *bendir* in the Mevlevi dervish ceremony in Konya. Sadettin Heper is the *kudunzenbashi*, Kami Karaca, the blind *hafiz*, will chant the *Naati-Sherif*, Kudsi Erguner and Aka Gunduz will play the *ney* and it is master *ney* player Ulve Erguner's last *sema*, as his face is swathed in bandages, the result of the cancer that is eating him.

We board the night train to Konya at Haydarpasha Station. The "iron horse," clatters, clacks and chugs its way through a dimly lit Asian landscape, occasionally covered by patches of snow.

Arriving in the chilled early morning, we take rooms in the Shaheen Hotel on Mevlana Caddesi, just down the street from Mevlana's tomb.

The following day, a burly figure accompanied by four men wearing the overcoats and round white hats, enters the Hotel Shaheen's lobby. Everyone who is a dervish runs to kiss his hand. I

am among them. This is Sheikh Muzaffer al-Halveti al-Jerrahi and his dervishes from Istanbul.

I greet him, he greets me, and this is where it ends...for the moment. That night after the *sema* there is a private *zikr* in a Konya apartment. Seventy or so people are packed into a tiny, hot, room. I am pasted against one of the oven walls. The sheikh and several of his dervishes are seated on their knees in a circle on the floor, surrounded by several standing Mevlevi musicians.

“I can’t stay like this for hours.” I don’t know what encourages me to do it, but I move to the circle and sit on my knees between Sheikh Muzaffer and his *khalifa*, Safer Baba. Not invited, I nevertheless nudge them aside and sit down. The *zikr* begins and I repeat the Names of Allah and do the swaying movements, which is natural for me. It becomes a part of me. I feel as though my soul has returned home.

The circle of men performs various movements in this long *zikr* that continues for several hours. My heart is bathed in light. At the conclusion, in this space of sacred air, the sheikh looks at me and says, “You make *zikr* like us,” and he kisses my eyes.

“I want you to come and see me in Istanbul”

“I’ll be in Konya another week.”

He meticulously writes down exactly where to go and when to come and see him. “*Insha’Allah*, I’ll be there.”

Whose dream could have unfolded these images of an American educated, son of Russian immigrant parents, sitting before a dervish sheikh, in a *zikr* circle in the ancient city of Kony, the laboratory of Mevlana Jalaluddin Rumi, in 1972?

## **Some World Conditions**

In 1940 a new car cost \$890 and a gallon bottle of mild could be purchased for ten cents. American President Franklin Delano Roosevelt requested wartime powers, and urged higher taxes for defense. Britain began rationing bacon, butter and sugar. Saudi Arabia had been a country for only eight years. Israel did not exist. Saddam Hussein was three years old, and Muammar Gaddafi had not yet been born. Kemal Ataturk had recently died. Kings governed Iraq, Egypt, Iran, Libya and Saudi Arabia. There was no television. Pablo Picasso had painted *Guernica*. The Cincinnati Reds won the World Series and Joe Louis was the heavyweight-boxing champion. These were some of the conditions of the world when I entered.

## **Born In The Sky**

Sophie lay on the clean sheets of the Medical Art Center Hospital on Eight Avenue and 59th Street in New York City. She was in an upper floor room of a high-storied redbrick building that could have easily been mistaken for an office or apartment building. I was born in the sky. I passed through the birth canal of awareness, into the ocean of consciousness to an unknown world, and Sophie saw to it that I knew no hunger. They named me Ira, and I was called by that name for the first twenty-five years of my life, and long after by some friends and family. My father Sam was a member of the electrical union and therefore was assured a good income. After living in Brooklyn, New York for two years my parents moved to Boston, to an area called Roxbury.

My mother looked like a Russian ballerina, but had a modern dancers' walk. Her raven hair was parted in the middle and pulled back tight into a bun that rested on the back of her head. She wore it that way every day of her life, along with the gold gypsy hoops about

the size of a quarter that hung from her ears. She had a birthmark in the center of her forehead in the place the Indian woman position a small circle of red powder called *kumkum*, to indicate marriage. Her name was Sophie, but everyone called her Sonya. Some two decades before, my mother was living in Montreal with her mother and sisters. Her father had died in Russia many years before. He sold meat to the military, and when the czar was overthrown he was arrested.

"They arrested him. When the communists arrested someone, you would never see them again, they would kill them... you understand. Papa would never come home, he'll be dead. But then somehow... He just delivered them merchandise so they let him go. He was in prison. When he came out his skin was grey, he was a good man, his hair was all white and he became sick. Papa died and they assembled our papers. So we came here without him. They saw that papa wasn't a general, he wasn't one of them. One friend had a house in back of the Jail where we used to go. We would see how they let out the prisoners in the yard. We used to see papa but we kept quiet so they would not discover us. When the Cossacks went to the streets every week to dance and play music we ran to look for papa. There was a special place on the main street where the Black Shirts met. I remember. I do. I don't know why."

The clattering of horses' hooves on the cobblestoned streets sent Sophie and her siblings scurrying beneath their beds. The family hid from the Cossacks, until they could gain passage on a boat for Halifax, and then on to settle in Montreal.

My mother's father was married to a woman in Russia who birthed six children. Somewhere in the batch were twin brothers. One drowned as an infant, in the mild of the woman breast-feeding him, who had fallen asleep and unconsciously pressed her peasant arms so hard against his back, that he couldn't release himself from the massive breast. His brother, at the age of eighteen, was swallowed by the Black Sea while swimming, his intestines scrambled by the sea, and soon there was no breath left in him. Neither got to comb grey hair.

My grandfather's wife witnessed five of her children pass through her birth canal into the world. When her sixth child made the



journey to the ocean of consciousness she died. As was the custom of the time, her husband married Ethel, his wife's younger sister, who also gave birth to six children. One of them was my mother. This all happened more than a hundred years ago.

At fourteen, my father was a volunteer fireman in Moscow. A photograph of him with a helmet and uniform, printed on a metal surface, was displayed in my parents' home. He was handsome and feisty. In his twenties he jumped ship to the west and followed an older sister, Annie, who had settled in Canada. When Sam arrived he spoke no English, but he got a job selling sandwiches on a train that went back-and-forth between Montreal in New York. He memorized the names of the sandwiches and could make change, so he got along with his customers. He worked long hours, save money, and sent for the remainder of the family who were still back in the U.S.S.R. It appeared that destiny offered him more. One day he disembarked the train in New York and never looked back. He found a cousin in Brooklyn who took him in, taught him the electrician trade, and eventually got him a union card. He became flush with money, had a car and lots of women. He visited Montreal periodically to spend time with his family.

One day, during one of these visits, he was walking with a friend on Esplanade Street in Montreal at the foot of Mount Royal. In a window of one of the wooden houses with a thousand steps, was a beautiful woman. My father, of course he wasn't my father then, was smitten. His friend asked if he was interested in the woman. He answered that he was, and the friend coyly said that he knew her. She was the sister of one of his friends. They courted, married in Montreal, moved to New York and then Boston, and I lived with Sam and Sony until I left for the army in 1962, and then on to New York to follow a career in the arts.