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FROM THE OLD MARKETPLACE By Joseph Buloff. Translated by Joseph Singer. 335 pp. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press. \$19.95.

An old Chinese proverb about immortality says a man should have a child, plant a tree and write a book. Joseph Buloff, who died in 1985, achieved his real immortality on the stage, but his one and only book should live a good long time as well. Buloff was not a writer but an actor who played in such venues as Warsaw, Bucharest and Broadway. Principally a man of the Yiddish theater, he did, however, win renown as the peddler Ali Hakim in "Oklahoma!" and as the Greek landlord in "My Sister Eileen" and the appraiser Gregory Solomon in "The Price" by Arthur Miller.

"From the Old Marketplace," now ably translated by Joseph Singer, is cast as fiction -- both the story of a boyhood and of a city, Vilnius, in the 12 years between the Russo-Japanese War of 1905 and the Russian Revolution. Called Wilno by the Poles, Vilna by the Russians and Vilnius by the Lithuanians, it was always many cities in one. For the Jews it was the Jerusalem of the North, famed for its learning. For the Poles it was the place where the true spirit of their nation remained pristine. For the Russians it was, and still is, an important outpost on the western flank of the empire, in an area that gave them access to the Baltic Sea. For the Lithuanians, who were the last pagans in Europe and who speak an ancient Indo-European language, it would truly be their city, their capital, only a year ago, when Lithuania became the first of the forcibly incorporated Soviet "republics" to declare its independence from the Soviet Union.

The city lends itself to mythology, perhaps because its best writers tend to view it through the prism of exile, which magnifies nostalgia. Buloff is in that tradition, though his exaggerations are also an attempt to recapture the psychology of boyhood. Buloff creates a Chagallesque vision of Vilnius by blending hyperbole, sarcasm and sweetness. The sound of a violin does not merely afford pleasure:

"Flocks of pigeons took wing.

"Trees swayed.

"Lions roared."

The hero's reluctance to enter Hebrew school is summed up with a scamp's wisecracking: "Moses and Elijah the Prophet may have been great men once, but what were they to me? After all, had I known them personally? Could I be partners with them in a bakery?" And, veering close to the schmaltzy and thus being true to the actual sensibility of that time and place, Buloff describes first love: "A strange, sweet ache, one I had never known before, coursed through my body as if someone had stabbed me with a blade made of sugar."

What is most charming about this tale is the way it blends the coming of age and the coming of history. When the narrator is still a little boy, history is part of his phantasmagoric world of Cossacks, golems and pogroms, all centered around his beloved marketplace, which was both his playground and his school: "stores and stands -- gentile-owned to the one side, Jewish to the other -- and scattered among them, as if gone astray, were several Tatars, a few Greeks with great turned-up mustaches, a Turk or

two in red fezzes, a ruddy-complexioned Georgian, and a Chinese with a queue -- all carrying their businesses in their hands or on their backs." When the Russians are defeated by the Japanese in 1905, he worries, with the a child's lack of geography and a Jew's feel for history, that the Japanese might "invade the country and possibly even come to this very marketplace and make the Jews liable for the whole goddam mess as was usually the case."

In the marketplace he is initiated into the art of swearing by a good-natured Cossack and, more important, he learns the quick reflexes of survival, an essential skill in that part of the world, where armies were always on the move. But he is also tremendously gifted at fantasizing and lying, abilities that destine him for the stage. He makes his show business debut pretending to be a midget. Soon he becomes aware of the "longings toward which I later directed my entire existence -- the longing to perform, the lust to hold an audience in the palm of my hand."

The story is populated with fantastic characters who flash for a vivid moment against mud and poverty. A tipling grandfather "had his own version of paradise and believed that when the Messiah came the water in the river would turn into vodka and his goblet would be the great bell from the church." A deaf mute tries desperately to explain something with her "shouting fingers." A tailor is also a scholar of the Torah; near-sighted, he "would tuck his long beard to one side, which would allow him to put his whole face close to the book and run his thin nose across the page as if anxious to sniff the holy words."

The boy discovers people, girls, the world, death, his vocation all in the nine crowded years between the Russo-Japanese war and the beginning of World War I. And that war does indeed come to the marketplace and put an end to his childhood. After the boy is interned by the Germans, his grimly picaresque adventures never lack humor. In that he is like the other Jews in the town. They "left all the whys and wherefores of their hard lives and the puzzling contradictions and inexplicable lunacies of the world to God, and for themselves they reserved laughter. With laughter they erased their humiliations and revenged themselves against their enemies. With laughter they transformed the tragic into the comical and the comical into the ludicrous and thus pulled themselves out of miserable reality."

But then one event puts an end to the laughter, the Russian Revolution. It too has its comical aspects -- Mensheviks are referred to as "Mensche-vicks." But soon enough the new order proves an all-too-serious business. People were to be "mixed, shuffled, and dealt like cards into new categories: poor, poorer, and poorest; into workers and peasants; into enemies, greater enemies, and greatest enemies; and the fourth and last category -- the unnecessary, the useless, and the dangerous." Finding himself, because of various mix-ups, in the wrong category, Buloff's hero is forced to leave his hometown forever. The last chapter, reminiscent of an Isaac Bashevis Singer story, is a bittersweet coda that takes place in Brazil, where a chance meeting with an old friend from the marketplace gives rise to the book.

Buloff summons a vanished epoch, a city that still exists, yet is no more -- for it was the capital of the true lost kingdom, childhood.

THE TURK, THE PEA AND THE RUBLE

Neither did I neglect the Cossacks. For them, I had a special weakness. . . . One of them, Arkashka, became a close friend.

One morning Arkashka was standing in a crowd of other sports watching as the Turk with the red fez placed a pea beneath one of three thimbles. Anyone who was willing to risk ten kopeks could try to guess under which thimble the pea lay and win a whole ruble the Turk was betting. . . . I was no less

familiar with the Turk's tricks than he himself, and . . . I pointed to his right hand where the pea usually lay between his fingers. The Turk leaped at me with his iron cane, but Arkashka wrenched it from his hands and, with a long, drawn-out curse that began with the Turk's father's father and ended with his mother's blood, demanded the silver ruble. . . . Following this incident, whenever I met Arkashka in the marketplace he would offer me a handful of sunflower seeds. . . . I would then take hold of his sword and thus, cracking sunflower seeds, we would stroll through the marketplace. -- From "From the Old Marketplace."