Impressions from the Rescue Ship: Verdina Shlonsky's Journalistic Writing

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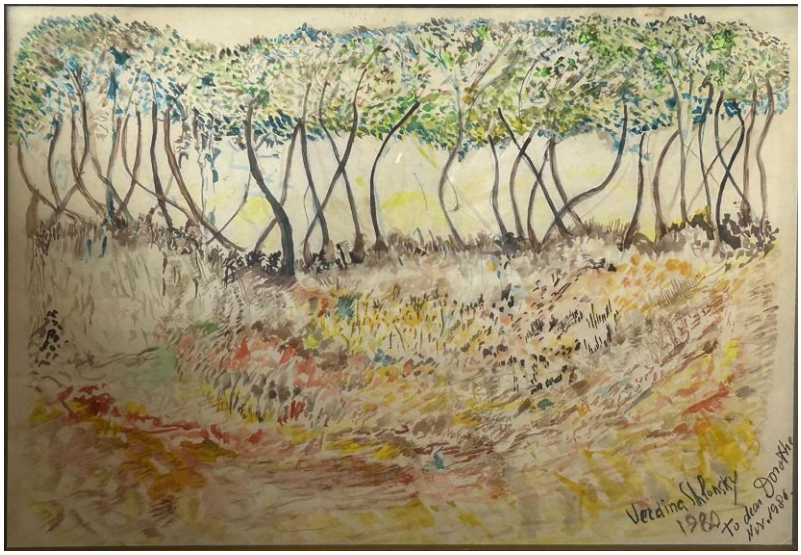


Figure 1. Watercolor by Verdina Shlonsky. By permission of Dorothea Shefer-Vanson.

"Paris in 1933–34 was like a great ship which had come to the rescue, putting down myriad lifeboats to gather up the drowning people from the sea. There were a great many drowning people who were saved," wrote Verdina Shlonsky (1905–90) in her post-World War II memoir.[1] Among the unending stream of "guests," Shlonsky met and befriended Arnold Schoenberg (1874–1951), whose arrival caused a general stir; the famous conductor Oskar Fried (1871–1941), in whose eyes she saw "the fear of homelessness . . . and the terror of poverty"; and the ever-active, goal-directed Hanns Eisler (1898–1962), whom she could not win over to the cause of Zionism. She met them and other refugees from Nazi Germany in hotel rooms that served as temporary homes, in Paris cafés and salons, and at informal gatherings revolving around the dire situation, where conversations shifted between the urgent need for immediate solutions and imaginings of new horizons in British Mandate Palestine.

[1] Verdina Shlonsky, *Silhouettes*, trans. Dorothea Shefer-Vanson (unpublished manuscript, Verdina Shlonsky Collection, Felicja Blumental Music Center), 4. Originally published in three installments under the title "Three Profiles," *Al Ha-mishmar*, December 14 and 21, 1945, and January 4, 1946.

To these displaced musicians, the Ukrainian-born Shlonsky was no less than a representative of the Jewish Yishuv in Palestine. A member of a well-known Third Aliyah family and the sister of Avraham Shlonsky (1900–73), one of the pillars of modern Hebrew poetry, she came to embody in their eyes the new life it offered. In reality, Shlonsky had at that point spent little time in Palestine, having visited only twice, in 1925 and 1931; on both visits, she took an active part in the Yishuv's musical life.[2] In the early 1930s, she was living in Paris after completing her piano studies with Egon Petri (1881–1961) and Artur Schnabel (1882–1951) at the Berlin Hochschule für Musik. Immersing herself in the varied rhythms of Parisian life, she encountered some of the period's most prominent figures in music and the arts—among them Nadia Boulanger, Edgard Varèse, Darius Milhaud, and Marc Chagall—while searching for her own highly unconventional path, which soon found expression in her modernist compositions.

Shlonsky spent the years 1934–37 in Tel Aviv, then returned to Paris and eventually escaped to London, where she became stranded during the war. She managed to return to Palestine in 1944, intending at last to settle there permanently. It was during this period that she began publishing her essays, translated from the Russian into florid Hebrew by Avraham Shlonsky. Most of her articles appeared between 1945 and 1967 in the socialist daily *Al Ha-mishmar*, affiliated with the Hashomer Hatzair movement, although she occasionally published in other periodicals devoted to culture and literature. Her writing assumed a highly individual style, combining impressionistic sketches, cultural commentary, interviews, and memoirs. She vividly depicts her impressions of the streets of Paris or of wartime London, while capturing fragments of conversations and encounters within a broad and varied cultural milieu.

After the establishment of the State of Israel, and particularly during the 1950s and 1960s, Shlonsky resumed her travels and her direct engagement with European musical life. She carried a press card as a reporter for *Al Ha-mishmar*, taking it upon herself to serve as a mediator between contemporary European musical culture and her comparatively conservative Israeli readership. Her articles from this period position her as both an observer and a critic of the postwar European avant-garde. Significantly, she assumed this role while herself experimenting with avant-garde composition and taking an active part in the postwar scene. In 1964 she even became one of the first Israelis to participate in the Darmstadt International Summer Courses for New Music.

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[2] Irit Youngerman, "Between Belonging, Alienation, and Exclusion: Verdina Shlonsky and the Israeli Musical Canon," in *Classical and Popular Music in Israel: Transcultural Dialogues and Contrasts*, ed. Malcolm Miller (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2025), 163–89.

Shlonsky deliberately sought out leading figures and questioned them directly about the issues that preoccupied her. Among them were Otto Klemperer, André Jolivet, Max Deutsch, Daniel Lesur, Louis Saguer, Henri Barraud, Alexander Tansman, Pierre Boulez, Pierre Capdevielle, Georges Auric, Maurice Thiriet, Florent Schmitt, Olivier Messiaen, Pierre Souvtchinsky, André Schaeffner, and Henri Dutilleux. The range of her subjects is striking: serialism and twelve-tone composition, electronic music and *musique concrète*, jazz, folklore, musical traditions, radio, theater and film music, and musical education, as well as broader questions concerning modernism, experimentation and technological innovation, the relationship between technique and expression, intellectualism and emotion, artistic individuality, the composer's relationship with the audience, and the social and human purposes of art. Shlonsky tested their positions against her own aesthetic convictions, repeatedly returning to such tensions as human expression versus technical innovation, hyper-intellectualism versus emotional response, communication with the audience or its absence, and, more broadly, what might be termed the "human purpose of art."

Late in life, she collected and reworked these various writings into a book titled *Silhouettes* (*Tzlaliot*), which has remained unpublished (see Figure 2). She engaged musicologists Herzl Shmueli and Benjamin Perl as editors, with Shmueli, then a professor at the Tel-Aviv Academy of Music, providing an introduction. Shlonsky was probably considering publishing her book abroad and so decided to translate the text into English. Thus, a decade prior to her death she approached translator Dorothea Shefer-Vanson, who soon became wholly engaged in a broad and fascinating project.

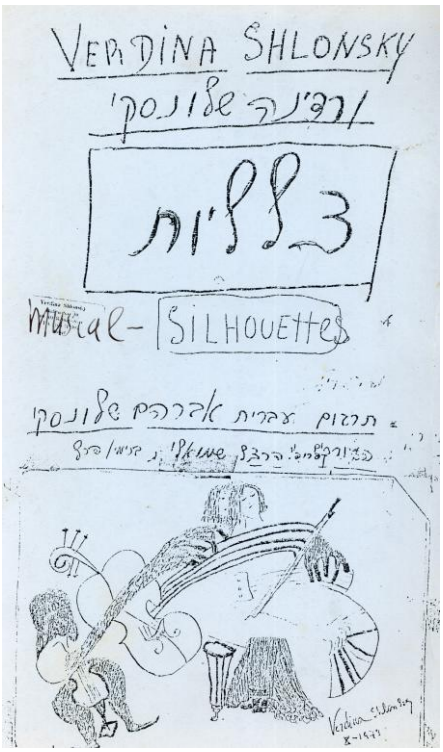


Figure 2. The title page of Verdina Shlonsky's Hebrew manuscript, titled *Tzlaliot* (*Silhouettes*). By permission of the Felicja Blumental Music Center.

The rest of the story is told to us by Dorothea, who kindly permitted us to publish her translation. "She was obviously short of cash," Dorothea recalls, "and while at first she was able to pay me for my services, after a certain point her funds ran out and she begged me to take one of her paintings instead." The painting, inscribed "to dear Dorothea, November 1980," is reproduced in Figure 1.

Both the Hebrew manuscript and English translation by Dorothea Shefer-Vanson, as well as other parts of the legacy and papers of Verdina Shlonsky, are kept at the Tel-Aviv Felicja Blumental Music Center & Library.[3]

[3] With special thanks to Anat Viks and Olga Filatova of the Felicja Blumental Music Center for their kind assistance with this publication.

Three Profiles:
Fragmented Memories of Pre-War Paris

VERDINA SHLONSKY

Translated by Dorothea Shefer-Vanson[1]

Whenever I walk through a park in the autumn, treading on damp, fallen leaves, thoughts of the past arise and memories refuse to be dispelled; we were and we are, there was and there will be. When we speak of the future, are we not forgetting that we act in the present and rely on the past? It is good, then, to retreat into nature, which gently touches our thoughts and persistent memories. It is good to walk through a park in the autumn, treading on damp autumn leaves and to cast the rod of one's imagination into the great sea of what was once and is no more. Is it really no more? Can it be that what was once is no more?

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. . . Paris in 1933–34 was like a great ship which had come to the rescue, putting down myriad lifeboats to gather up the drowning people from the sea. There were a great many drowning people who were saved. The boulevards and cafés were filled with the fresh faces of the foreigners. At that time the French did not pay much heed to the political changes taking place in Germany, and out of habit (Paris was used to foreigners) the French metropolis continued to take in the unending stream of "guests," absorbing them effortlessly. The foreigners continued to flow into the city, though this time their flow was different, not a pilgrimage or holiday trip but a flight for their lives. And this could be felt.

* * *

The great sensation of Paris musical life then was the arrival of Arnold Schoenberg. It was the talk of all the musical circles and, of course, caused particular excitement among the young composers, who were grappling with the problems of "modern music." Naturally, the arguments and discussions

[1] Editor's note: The translation has been lightly edited for accuracy and consistency. Footnotes in the original translation have not been reproduced. All notes to the English translation and all material in square brackets were added by Irit Youngerman. Ellipses appearing without square brackets are present in the source text.

swelled with the coming of the "leader of modernism in music"—Arnold Schoenberg.

How could one meet him? How could one talk to him? That was the desire of all the young composers of the time. It was the end of summer, a time of tension in nature, of commotion and impatience, just as in social life. The salons continued their activity, parties were given and receptions held. The salon over which the singer Marya Freund presided was particularly memorable, humming like a spiritual hive with guests of every kind, and constituting a veritable treasure-chest.

One evening the "Metro" took me at top speed. I was going to meet Arnold Schoenberg and other new arrivals. Marya Freund's salon was distinguished from others by being her studio, which she occasionally turned into a "salon."[2] This immediately banished the artificiality which was an unpleasant characteristic of some salons, making them merely superficial.

On one side were Ernst Toch and Rathaus, on another Chagall, with his wife and daughter.[3] We talked. Suddenly, with a flowing movement, as was her wont, our hostess detached me from the group and took me over to the chief guest—Arnold Schoenberg.

How fortunate that just then the guests fell upon the sandwiches and busied themselves consuming them. I could think about the nervous tension in his face, the strong line of his eyebrows, which seemed to disclose something of his character, something powerful and penetrating. He is a philosopher. Every sound he makes and every sight he sees pass through a philosophic prism. One might say that he does not look like "just a musician." There is something else which stirs his creative spirit.

Then I remembered what one of his pupils had told me with unbounded enthusiasm: "Whatever you do, get hold of his book, *The Theory of Harmony.* Read it as if you were reading Dostoyevsky. Read it when you rise up in the morning and before you lay you down to sleep. Then you'll understand." Some time after that I did, indeed, obtain the book and read it, "when I rose up in the morning and before I laid me down to sleep," and concluded that it was no mere textbook on harmony but a book of Schoenberg's thinking on the problems of mankind.

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[2] Marya Freund (1876–1966) was a German-born soprano associated with contemporary music and a noted interpreter of Schoenberg's works.

[3] Both Ernst Toch (1887–1964) and Karol Rathaus (1895–1954) left Germany amid the Nazi Party's rise, initially settling in Paris before continuing to the United Kingdom and, ultimately, the United States. Marc Chagall (1887–1985), who had settled in Paris in 1923, fled Nazi-occupied France for the United States in 1941; he returned permanently to France in 1948.

* * *

Special circumstances led me to play an active part in his private affairs. It was common knowledge that many years earlier, in the atmosphere of Vienna, Schoenberg had been baptized into the Protestant faith.[4] Now, as a refugee in Paris, he had decided that he and his family would return to Judaism in a demonstrative way. Matters became complicated and I was indirectly involved in the procedure (it should be noted that it was one of the signs of the times that people who had grown away from religion deliberately stressed their Jewishness).

He had decided that if he was to return to Judaism formally he would also do so spiritually, for creative purposes. I remember how Schoenberg's guests assembled in the imposing hall of the Hôtel de l'Opéra.[5] Two subjects concerned him at that time: his private affair and establishing a "Conservatory in Palestine."[6] Everyone gathered for a "general meeting." The guests included Oskar Fried, Ernst Toch, [Karol] Rathaus, [Solomon] Rosowsky, and others. Schoenberg had summoned the people to hear his plans. Nervously he paced up and down the room, talking loudly and with mounting excitement. Suddenly he stopped in the middle of the room and fell silent, reviewing his guests briefly and agitatedly, then proclaimed: "*Bin ich kein Jude?* Am I not a Jew?"

There was a strange, excited pause, but this did not last long. Schoenberg resumed his pacing of the room while revealing his plans for the conservatory in Palestine, the flight of his imagination overcoming any concrete obstacle:

"All the world forces will participate in this conservatory," he continued, and was so swept away by his excitement that he began believing his own illusions. "All the world forces, the essence of the genius of the generation!"

His excitement did not diminish, and he spent many days drawing up a precise plan and preparing a manifesto, which he asked leading Jewish members of the musical world to sign, which they duly did. Many others, many leading personages, made promises, fired by his enthusiasm.

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[4] Schoenberg, who had converted to Protestantism in Vienna in 1898, formally returned to Judaism in Paris on July 24, 1933. The ceremony was conducted by Rabbi Louis-Germain Lévy, with Marc Chagall serving as a witness.

[5] Shlonsky names the Hôtel de l'Opéra; however, Schoenberg's declaration of June 28, 1933, which was also signed by Fried, Milhaud, and Toch, gives his address as the Hôtel Regina. It is unclear whether Shlonsky is recalling a separate gathering or misremembering the hotel.

[6] Shlonsky's "conservatory in Palestine" evidently refers to a proposal advanced by Solomon Rosowsky (1878–1962), at that time a resident of Palestine, for the establishment of what Schoenberg described as "a national Hebrew institute of higher musical education." In a declaration addressed to Rosowsky on June 28, 1933, Schoenberg pledged his support for the initiative; Oskar Fried, Darius Milhaud, and Ernst Toch added their names to the declaration. Arnold Schoenberg to Solomon Rosowsky, June 28, 1933, Arnold Schönberg Center Correspondence Database, B060889, https://repo.schoenberg.at/urn:nbn:at:at-asc-B060889.

One day, as if tired of his own fantasy, he asked in a low voice: "Where in Palestine should we establish this Conservatory?"

S. Rosowsky jumped up and cried out loud and clear: "In Jerusalem, of course! It is the holy city of the past and the future. The eternal city! Only in Jerusalem should the conservatory be established. Only in Jerusalem!"

Schoenberg looked penetratingly at Rosowsky, who smoothed his mane of hair with one hand and clutched his case containing his essay on the cantillations in the other.

. . . Schoenberg's face changed, his eyebrows seemed to relax and their intimidating arch to vanish. With a soft expression and gentle voice he turned to me: "Now let us hear what Verdina has to say on the subject."

I was extremely embarrassed, not having expected that question, and said: "I think that the conservatory should be in Tel Aviv, Herr Professor. Jerusalem is mountainous while Tel Aviv is flat, and it is easier to walk on flat terrain. In addition, in Palestine the pedagogues go from one town to another!"

Schoenberg listened, his face as innocent as a child being told a fairy tale, then declared excitedly: "We will establish the conservatory at the junction between the three cities of Jerusalem, Tel Aviv, and Haifa, and students will go there from every corner of the country. That is the solution!"

My visits to Schoenberg became more frequent. His stubborn desire, his ambition, to return to Judaism and make this public via the press would not be quelled.

"But without procedure! Without unnecessary ceremonies!" Schoenberg declared. "Why should I go? There is the phone. We'll arrange everything by phone. That's all. Send Chagall in to me. I want to talk about it."

The necessary letter was written.

"Now it has to be sent, it has to be posted," I told him as we were walking in the street. "It's not enough to write a letter, it has to be posted too."

"Maybe we can post it here, in this wire basket on the pavement," Schoenberg said with a smile as he accompanied me to the Metro.

One fine summer's day Schoenberg invited me to his place for tea.

"But just you, without any 'musicians,' without any witnesses, I'm very tired."

In a pleasant, comfortable room which hardly felt like a hotel stood a table upon which was a white tablecloth. His wife laid the table, setting out the cups with the concern of a housewife. Some cherry jam added a family atmosphere.

In a relaxed and happy mood, Schoenberg was playing with his two-year-old daughter, who was amused by her father's acrobatic tricks and as yet unaware of his greatness, other than in size. She brought pleasure into his gloomy world. His wife poured the tea and he took some of the appetizing cherries.

I thought about the simple emotions which were reflected so uniquely in Schoenberg's works, in his melodies based on the twelve-tone system, in which simplicity and complexity were combined. He's right, I thought, he's absolutely right; without him we would not have uncovered the secrets embodied in the bridge between the old and the new.

* * *

In Paris the "Schoenberg sensation" continued. The refugees still streamed into the city. The atmosphere became increasingly tense. Henceforth, musicians no longer talked about music, writers about writing, and painters about painting. Everyone talked politics.

The composer Hanns Eisler pulled his hat low over his eyes and reviewed Montparnasse's "pulsating cafés" sarcastically.

"What are you doing here?" he would shout. "Why are you wasting your energies? What are you looking for? Can't you see what's happening in the world?"

Hanns Eisler did not remain long in Paris. He did not hold the Parisian composers in very high esteem (he tended to follow the Moscow line in those days).

"No, no! They are playboys, just idlers! Very few contemporary composers will be remembered for long and in the memory of the world for their work."

On another occasion he said: "A creator must write something—especially today—which is easy on the ear. I have begun to write popular songs. We must live there, among them, among the masses, at a time like this! That is where we must create. Only there, only among them, otherwise all is lost! Can't you see, can't you feel, where this crazy world is going, that it has been abandoned, that the creative people and the intellectuals have left it down there, in the nether world, while they are supposedly focusing on higher spheres . . . ? A whole world is being lost, and you can't see it."

Like quicksilver, Eisler wandered from one café to another, never settling in any one place. When I asked him about this he replied: "Only someone who knows all Paris really knows Paris; it has so many faces."

He never went to concerts. "I'm sick of them!" he said, gazing anxiously at the noisy gaiety of the Parisians. "There'll be war, it'll blow Europe up, then they'll see, then they'll come to their senses . . ." he shouted agitatedly.

* * *

The light of the street lamps was reflected in the damp streets.

In a long, narrow alley, Rue de la Gaîté—the Street of Joy, in Montparnasse—light fell from the houses into the puddles and then back to the

houses. Some powerful, unknown force drove people from one quarter to another.

I was in Montmartre, looking for "The Artists and Writers Friendly to the U.S.S.R. Club," which was situated in a tumbledown old house whose very stairs seemed constantly to be about to give way beneath me.

Cautiously I climbed to the top of the shaky house. I opened the door to find walls covered with posters and portraits. Poverty and darkness were everywhere.

From another room I could hear singing. I listened. A choir was learning songs. They began with French songs, which seemed to me to be banal and careless. Then they went on to sing Eisler's songs, which contrasted with the first ones in their special dynamism. They were learning the songs of various nations. All the nations, I thought to myself, then is this not the place for [Eretz-]Israeli songs too?

A young Frenchwoman came over to me and asked: "What interests you in this club?"

"Everything."

"But you can't go into the main room now. There is a discussion, we have a guest."

"A discussion? Actually, that's what I'm interested in."

"Are you a friend of the U.S.S.R.?"

"Yes."

"Then come in."

I went in. The room was gloomy with a single window overlooking a deserted courtyard. There was a clumsy table, two or three chairs, and a rickety bench in a corner. I fixed my gaze on the table. Hanns Eisler was sitting there! Was this their guest, then? He was sitting there, telling them about the U.S.S.R., which he had visited not long beforehand. All I heard were his concluding sentences, but they led me to think how appropriate it would be to tell this club about Palestine, from which I had returned not long since. And there was plenty to tell, especially there!

* * *

When the light of a weary day began to fade in the bustle of the Paris streets at dusk, the sights seemed to emphasize the events to come. People stood at street corners in groups, discussing things frenziedly. At that time Paris's homeless citizens were getting themselves ready for the night on the benches of the boulevards by the bridges of the Seine.

The cafés were crowded.

Eisler sat in one of them, calmly and confidently watching the panorama of Paris life. There was something ominous, presaging impending doom, in the

hurried rustle of women in evening dress on their way to a ball. And the hidden director who is so good at setting the scene of street life, of that great story known as the city, brings on a woman begging with outstretched hand from behind a corner.

"Charity!"

"Don't give charity!" Eisler's mental balance broke suddenly. "Don't dare to give charity!" he repeated angrily, nervously gulping some French *vin rouge*.

Then, in a rather tired voice: "Don't give charity. There's no need, that's not the solution to the curse of poverty in this lousy world."

Some coins glittered on the table. A *petit sou* caught my eye.

"Just a *petit sou*, just one *petit sou*," the woman begged.

"Well—" Eisler cut her off severely and changed the subject.

"You were telling me about life in Palestine. Go on!"

"There are a great many blue shirts," I continued from where I had left off. "That's the traditional garment of the Jewish workers."

"And what is the color of the Arab workers' shirts?" Eisler asked, suddenly beginning to stamp his feet rhythmically.

"They sing your songs there," I said. "And they love them. It's interesting how they blend in with the general rhythm. But you should know that in Palestine there is a nuance connected with nature and man in nature."

"All the better! Try to write songs for the masses there," he concluded.

Eisler did not speak much about music in general and did not like talking about his own compositions at all. The crisis he underwent—the transition from the twelve-tone system to popular songs—was not the result of his musical viewpoint but primarily the outcome of an ideological approach, a natural point from which he could see the development of his clear melodic line.

* * *

He was undergoing a general reaction to everything at that time, and Schoenberg's name made him (the enthusiastic student) feel restless, with the unease of a disciple who has rebelled against his teacher. He preferred to speak about politics or would constantly repeat the phrase: "One must write for the masses. Verdina, write songs, write popular songs!"

"Write songs for the masses." Eisler's injunction took root in my mind and gave me no rest. It seemed to me that even when I went to my study up on the seventh floor and hid myself from that tragic fairground, I was still walking through the streets and alleyways of the catacombs of Paris. Myriads of people were tramping endlessly through the paths of human history silently, without a song. I was beside the Seine. I went down and stepped aboard a barge. A fisherman was pulling in his net, and his wife took out merry, shining fish. There was warmth in the barge, a primordial yet intimate feeling. The fisherman loved

his net and his Seine. Up there, on the bridge, was the carnival procession: idle clowns, refugees from Berlin and Vienna, wandering around, agonizing, seeking a home. In my mind I could hear Eisler saying: "Write songs for the masses!" Memories flashed through my head like lightning.

* * *

Near the Bois de Boulogne stood a peaceful villa with an enormous garden. A host of birds sang, drowning the sound of human sorrow. Madame Chagall (may she rest in peace) spread a white tablecloth on the table which was surrounded by roses. Chagall fed his beloved cats while upstairs, in the studio, canvases waited to be painted.

I sank into the peacefulness—trying to distract myself from the thoughts which crowded into my mind.

"I hope you are not expecting any other guests today." (Often, there were only the three of us—Chagall loved talking about his life.)

"We're not expecting anyone. Only Oskar Fried."

The gates to the garden opened gently and the conductor Oskar Fried slowly came toward us. "Are you here?" he murmured into my ear. "It's good that you are here. In your presence I feel comfortable. I feel that there is some support which eases things."

We were all preoccupied with one plan: to get Oskar Fried invited to Palestine. But how?

Attentively and devotedly, Chagall offered the food, and with a strange—almost mechanical—effort Oskar Fried finished what was on his plate. I did not take my eyes off him: as if by an electric current all his worries and anxieties were transmitted to me.

Oskar Fried! The conductor Oskar Fried! The man whose name had echoed throughout the musical world! Only yesterday, only a few months ago, the Paris salons had held lavish receptions for him, the Parisian audiences had cheered his concerts in the Salle Pleyel. Gaining access to him was no easy matter.

Once, when I had gone to meet him at the house of the Princesse de Polignac (where he was staying), I had had to wait for him for hours, because the house barber was giving him a head massage just then.[7] And now he was here, frightened and anxious, confiding in me and telling me what he had been through. The fear of homelessness was in his heart and the terror of poverty in his eyes.

[7] Winnaretta Singer, Princesse Edmond de Polignac (1865–1943), was an American-born patron of music whose Paris salon supported numerous modern composers and performers.

The sun was setting in the distance and red bars painted the horizon. The stars emerged from their secret hiding-places, and the dim greenness of the dense garden seemed to thicken the descending night.

Secretly, Oskar Fried suggested that we should take a walk in the Champs-Élysées. Paris glittered and shone, imparting a brittle brilliance to everything. The special atmosphere made one want to wander.

"*Paris-Soir*! *Paris-Soir*!" the newspaper vendors cried.

But we did not want to break the special spell Paris by night had cast upon us by taking a look at the paper.

We wandered slowly, Oskar Fried and I, crossing the boulevards and talking endlessly.

In an undertone, as if not wanting to disrupt the bustle of the Champs-Élysées, he said to me: "Yes, yes. A flea market. Everything is cheap. Today we can be bought for half-price. As if we were up for sale at some end-of-season sale. Yes, it seems that a great period in history has come to an end. Do you know what I want now? I'm telling you the truth: I want to go to Palestine. To get up and go. But immediately! I agree in advance to the minimal conditions. I want to organize an orchestra and settle there. And I'll find a way to get to Palestine. I will. Of course I will. And I'll also conduct an orchestra there!"

With a sudden movement he drew out his wallet, took out some notes and said to me angrily: "Change this note into coins for me, but I want it all in shiny new coins, not dull ones! Do me a favor! I collect new coins!"