

How to Find Ovid

Vasyl Gabor

We were staying at Salt Lakes—my goodness, what a pleasure it is to bathe there, as the water supports you on the surface even if you can't swim and you aren't in the least afraid of drowning—and we had missed the afternoon train in the Small City. There was plenty of time before the evening train, so we decided to set off to the Big City. We had been coming to Salt Lakes for many years but had never actually been to the Big City, so we were glad to have the opportunity now. In any case, we only had a few things with us, including a little book of Ovid that I always take with me when I travel—it weighs nothing at all, and it adds pleasure to the trip. We asked passers-by for directions to the center of town, but to our amazement they shrugged their shoulders in surprise, as though they had never heard of its existence. Then we started to ask what the largest square in their Big City was, and where the main shopping center was to be found. They said you had to go past the old salt mines and across the market square where military barracks had once been, and from there it wasn't far to the first shops.

We walked at a leisurely pace past the Small City. The low, neat houses made it look more like a village. In front of the gates to the houses, goats were grazing contentedly, tethered to the trees, and hens and geese were wandering about without a care in the world. The road then led us under an old, gray concrete bridge, among mounds of salty earth, which must have been the old salt mines. In the distance, the long structures of the former barracks were already coming into view.

When we reached the marketplace, we were taken aback by its dreadfully dilapidated state. All the windows and doors had been stripped from the barracks. Undoubtedly the floorboards had been ripped out as well, but we didn't feel like approaching the buildings, with their deserted air, any closer. Yet not long ago soldiers had marched about here. I seemed to still hear orders being given and the rattle of weapons. Strangely, though, it was not our soldiers who came flooding into my mind but Roman legionnaires, drawn up in rows and standing to attention. The legionnaires shouted loud greetings to the commander who had led them all this way, to Scythia, quite unaware that before long these barren, inhospitable lands would become the last resting place for many of their good friends and countrymen, exiles from the empire. Among them I saw Ovid, whose fortunes had changed. He trod the dust and the marshes of this land, and an icy chill overcame his spirit in its cold snowdrifts.

At this point I heard my wife's voice, and the vision disappeared. I saw that I was walking through a former barracks that had been converted into a marketplace between the Big City and the Small City. It seemed very inconvenient. No buses came this way, so everyone struggled to the market on foot. It was deserted now. Everywhere you could see torn newspapers along with empty tin cans and bottles. At the far end of the marketplace we saw several women and men dismantling the remains of one of the barrack buildings. Wrapped in old rags, they were using axes to pry bricks out from the walls and stacking them in small piles. It looked as if the Tower of Babel had collapsed here and these people were scavenging what they could for their houses.

"Let's walk faster," said my wife.

"Don't be afraid, Natie," I said reassuringly.

The sun was high in the sky, and walking side by side we cast short shadows on the ground.

On the former parade ground stood crooked rows of fading grayish tables, protected by makeshift wooden shelters. They looked like temporary shacks. The wind swirled along the empty rows, stirring up the dust. There wasn't a living soul anywhere, except for the dark-skinned gypsy caretaker we saw over by the gate. He was stripped to the waist and a substantial paunch overhung his belt. He was sweeping up the litter.

I greeted him and inquired about the quickest way to the Big City. He understood me, but he replied in Hungarian. He pointed out the shortest way: it led through the rubbish dump, beyond which the Big City was visible.

"Isn't there a better way?"

He nodded, indicating the asphalt road that led to the Big City but followed a big arc.

I had no desire to walk across the rubbish dump and we set off on the longer route.

The Big City was built in an extraordinarily chaotic manner. A cluster of high-rise buildings stood in one area, five hundred meters away stood another cluster, over there yet another, and so on. It seemed as if the town had been cut apart and scattered in all directions. And besides, something was missing in this town, though I couldn't figure out what.

On the way we met the occasional, peculiar-looking passer-by: a cripple who resembled a black spider with crooked arms and legs, a woman with a deformed face and bulging eyes, and a man shouting in a loud voice and spluttering as he stumbled awkwardly on crutches along the path.

Having reached the middle of a somewhat larger group of buildings, we realized that this was the center of the Big City. We began to look for a café, and instead came across a kiosk that was selling beer. In front of it were two tables with benches, so we decided to rest for a while. No sooner had we sat down and poured out the beer than another cripple trundled up to us in a wheelchair. He stared at the bottle of beer and began gesturing for

some to be poured for him as well. He gave off an awful smell.

I was furious. The arrogance of the cripple's unceremonious demand annoyed me. Besides, I had no particular wish to share his company or to put up with that stink.

"Sir, would you kindly leave us alone?" I requested coldly. The cripple, displeased, rolled his wheelchair away as he rebuked me:

"Well, Ovid would never have acted like that."

My jaw must have dropped in surprise, because at that moment I recalled the little book of Ovid that was in my shoulder bag.

"Which Ovid do you mean?"

"The Roman with the big nose, of course," he replied indifferently, turning sideways to us.

"Naso?"

"That's right. Everyone around here knows him. He's easy to find but difficult to meet."

"Does Ovid live here, then?"

"You'll see for yourself. There's no need for me to show you," replied the cripple brusquely and he trundled away in his wheelchair.

I had now lost interest in the beer, and we set off along the street, which took a sharp turn towards the river. The street was laid with old, pale-gray paving stones, hewn in a uniform rounded shape and packed tightly together. But they were laid in such a way that they looked like waves, in the troughs of which people who walked up the middle of the street could easily find support for their feet. I had never seen anything like it before.

From what visitors to Salt Lakes had told us, I already knew that everywhere around here the ground had a high salt content, so people drew water only from the river as they had done for many hundreds of years, carrying it in buckets on a yoke or driving it in barrels placed on carts.

We slowly made our way downhill, and suddenly I stopped in amazement in front of an old two-story building. On the external wooden front with its boarded-up windows I had caught sight of a Gothic inscription in English: "Death."

"Death lives here," I involuntarily exclaimed, as all my dreadful encounters passed before my eyes as if on a screen, and I still clearly heard the cripple's words about Ovid. This all seemed to be total fantasy. Even here at Salt Lakes, it seemed, I was continually thinking about Ovid and imagining that traces of him were surely to be found in these outlying lands.

"Bendas, I want to get back to the Small City and catch the train," my wife called to me.

I nodded in agreement, but I couldn't tear myself away and stood staring at that strange building. The entrance was through a shady courtyard paved with square paving stones, green with moss. There was a tiny first-floor balcony, boarded up with crossed planks. The grapevine growing over it was so dense that it must have grown wild from neglect. The deserted

garden, paved in gray stone, was full of wild roses. A happy, well-to-do family with a love of beauty must have lived here at one time, I thought. The husband and wife must have enjoyed sitting in the garden or on the balcony of an evening, admiring the sunset, drinking red wine, and serving the children rose tea with all sorts of sweet treats. Then one day, after a visitor had come to their house, the family's happiness had been ruined. The same thing had happened to Ovid. To all appearances, nobody had lived in this house for years and years now. I wanted to ask the neighbors about it, but I didn't have the courage.

"Let's get away from here, Bendas," my wife pleaded.

I took one more parting look at the house, the steep paved street that I might never have the chance to stroll down again. And then my gaze wandered over the roofs of the houses and I stared into the distance, where blue mountains rose beyond the river—that was already in a foreign country. I spotted a small town—it could have been a painting—with many church spires and red-roofed houses, and suddenly I realized what it was that was lacking in the Big City: I hadn't seen any churches anywhere. My wife and I were just reaching the top of the street when the cripple came trundling straight toward us in his wheelchair. Apparently he had been waiting for us a long time.

"I have Ovid's last letter," he said.

"Bendas, he wants a drink, give him some money," my wife quietly suggested.

"No," the cripple shook his head. "I can read it to you without getting a drink." And he began to read without waiting to be asked.

"Naso sends greetings to Celsus!

"One day your face came into my mind and I thought you were the only person to whom I could entrust my last thoughts. I believed you would accept them not as the fruit of a sick mind but as a farewell to you and my city of Rome, so I am writing this letter. Read it aloud, so that at least in words I can once more stroll through the streets of my city, Rome..."

I was terribly intrigued by what the cripple in the wheelchair was telling us. After all, Naso really did have a true friend named Celsus. But I saw that it was no good asking my wife to wait, so I shrugged my shoulders apologetically and offered him some money. He would not take it and just gave me a sympathetic smile.

"Who lived in that house?" I ventured to ask the man as we were departing.

"Couldn't you sense it?" he said and gave me a sad glance. We walked on in silence to the Small City. In the west, the sun's red orb was settling behind the mountains. I kept wondering over and over why the cripple in the wheelchair had started to tell us about Ovid.

"Bendas," said my wife, "somebody in that town of theirs must have been nicknamed Ovid."

"Probably, but the man in the wheelchair did mention the name of Naso's friend in that letter. It's a pity that we didn't wait."

The last rays of the sun shone on our backs. We cast such enormous shadows on the ground that they stretched as far as the first houses in the Small City. It seemed that they too, like my wife, were very frightened by something and were fleeing ahead of us.

I tried to imagine Salt Lakes as an outpost of the Roman Empire. The harsh terrain and natural environment make human existence unbearable here. As it was for Ovid in his old age. I tried to remember where and when I first had the feeling that Ovid once spent some time here, but my memory failed me. In the end, that wasn't actually important. I was convinced of just one thing: that the shadow of the Great Exile had once fallen on this long forgotten land, and that it had left a deep mark on the soul of one of my distant ancestors.

Translated by Patrick Corness and Natalia Pomirko

Original publication: Vasyl' Gabor, "Iak znaity Ovidiia," in his *Knyha ekzotychnykh sniv ta real'nykh podii* [A Book of Exotic Dreams and Real Events], 2nd ed., Lviv: LA Piramida, 2003, pp. 58–62.