Ido Govrin Silent Maps

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Inclusions[1] trapped in amber are often found in the Baltic Sea region of Northern Europe. Fossilized from tree resin and formed through a long period of petrification, these inclusions don't easily share their mysteries. Early amber hunters of the region used to measure the amber's value according to the inclusions found within it. Their assessment was based not only on the object caught within the resin, but also on the narrative they could generate from the particular inclusion. Vernacular Baltic legends about how a certain insect or plant ended up trapped within this once viscous material highly affected their overall evaluation. By contrast, an inclusion found and presented as an orphan fragment caused great confusion. Mysteries entangled and exchange rates followed promptly. Extensive landscape descriptions, maps and drawings were made by the hunters for future reference. Their outlines had to be reliable; however if mistakes occurred, one could always revisit the landscape to decipher the problem.

My grandfather once told me about a story he was planning to write. It was about a journey he had taken from his hometown of Vilnius to the Curonian Spit, which separates the Curonian lagoon from the Baltic Sea's southeastern coast. He departed on that journey, as a somewhat modern Baltic hunter, in search for the earliest catechism written in Old Prussian, around AD 1400, and said to be buried within the dunes of the spit. The catechism also included, so he was told, a mysterious "footnote," written in Hebrew and serving as an important key to the text, without which the text could not be fully deciphered. Being fluent in both languages, he was hired by a local archbishop eager to find the original text and its footnote (though he already held a printed copy in his hands from the 16th century). He equipped my grandfather with a crumbled map that indicated the catechism's exact location. Because it seemed completely hopeless, my grandfather was astounded to find the catechism, including its footnote, in the exact place indicated by the map. He could not immediately recognize nor read the footnote, because it was written densely, by an encumbered hand. Back in Vilnius, feeding the archbishop's discontent, all he managed to ascertain was that its subject matter was maybe one of the earliest references to what later came to be known as the Hermeneutic Circle.

Questioning the authenticity of this story, a thought came to my mind: that it might be possible to retrace his journey and see it for myself. Then the journey, including the various inclusions in the form of silent maps that I would find along its way, could possibly turn into my next solo exhibition . . .

1. In mineralogy or gemology, inclusion is any fragment (once animated or not) internally encapsulated within a mineral that functions as its "host."