Suzanna Eibuszyc

Memory is our Home

Loss and Remembering:
Three Generations in Poland and Russia 1917–1960s

Suzanna Eibuszyc

MEMORY IS OUR HOME

Loss and Remembering:
Three Generations in Poland and Russia
1917–1960s

Edition Noëma

Bibliografische Information der Deutschen Nationalbibliothek
Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek verzeichnet diese Publikation in der Deutschen Nationalbibliografie; detaillierte bibliografische Daten sind im Internet über http://dnb.d-nb.de abrufbar.

Bibliographic information published by the Deutsche Nationalbibliothek
Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek lists this publication in the Deutsche Nationalbibliografie; detailed bibliographic data are available in the Internet at http://dnb.d-nb.de.

Cover images:
Kesu01/Bigstock.com; josefkubes/Bigstock.com; Elena Odareeva/Bigstock.com; Aleksei Zakirov/ Bigstock.com; Viselchak/Bigstock.com

ISBN-13: 978-3-8382-1482-5
Third, expanded and revised edition
Edition Noëma
© *ibidem*-Verlag, Stuttgart 2022
Alle Rechte vorbehalten

Das Werk einschließlich aller seiner Teile ist urheberrechtlich geschützt. Jede Verwertung außerhalb der engen Grenzen des Urheberrechtsgesetzes ist ohne Zustimmung des Verlages unzulässig und strafbar. Dies gilt insbesondere für Vervielfältigungen, Übersetzungen, Mikroverfilmungen und elektronische Speicherformen sowie die Einspeicherung und Verarbeitung in elektronischen Systemen.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in or introduced into a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form, or by any means (electronical, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise) without the prior written permission of the publisher. Any person who does any unauthorized act in relation to this publication may be liable to criminal prosecution and civil claims for damages.

Printed in the EU

The past is never dead. It's not even past.

William Faulkner

This book is based on my mother Roma Talasiewicz-Eibuszyc's diary, her writings about Warsaw, Poland during the years following World War I and the six long years of World War II, and how she was able to survive in Soviet Russia and Uzbekistan. Interwoven with her journals are stories she told to me throughout my life, as well as my own recollections as my family made a new life in the shadows of the Holocaust in Communist Poland after the war and into the late 1960s. By retelling this story I try to shed light on how the Holocaust trauma is transmitted to the next generation, the price my family paid when we said good-bye to the old world, and the challenges we faced in America.

For my daughters:
You possess the voice that Roma's generation was forced to silence.
S.E.

In loving memory:
Bina Symengauz and Pinkus Talasowicz,
Adek, Pola, Sala, Anja, and Sevek
Their five young children
Icek Dawid Ejbuszyc and Ita Mariem Grinszpanholc,
Sura-Blima and Dwojra and Jakub-Szaya

Dedicated to:
Mother and Father and the memory of
their generation that perished in the
Holocaust

8

"Seen and Unseen"
A foreword to *Memory Is Our Home*

There are many reasons why survivors decide to record their memoirs. In cases recounting the pre-Holocaust and Holocaust periods, memoirists are often explicit: to bear witness to human cruelty; to speak on behalf of those who were killed; to help successive generations understand what happened to families and a people; to describe how they survived; or to warn about the possibilities of injustice and therefore to seek justice. All these reasons are represented in this memoir, but I am particularly interested in one apparent reason that memoirists, as a rule, don't mention: memoirs give victims a "voice." Memoirs are expressive as well as instrumental. They play a key role in memoirists' transition from victims to survivors. They achieve standing by reconstituting their self-respect after periods of profound humiliation, helplessness, and traumatic fear. As such, survivors' memoirs are important for deliberating on life after ambient death. No other genre is dedicated to exploring this surprising reversal of the natural order.

This memoir, however, is unusual. It is not only the result of a conversation between mother and daughter; it is also constructed in two voices. We learn about the past and the present, or more technically, about intergenerational transmission. I am drawn to the mother's direct account of her experience in Poland between the two world wars, the new realities she encountered, and her life-changing disillusionment that resulted from an exposure to aggressive behavior that came as a complete shock to her and her generation of Jews who were looking forward to an affirmative life. "Home," as in the title of this memoir, would have to materialize where it could: in survivors' memories.

This story takes place after Poland gained its independence in 1918. Roma was born the year before. We overhear Roma telling Suzanna about her family and its Jewish traditions, her romances, and her Jewish and Catholic neighbors. We learn about the family's economic hardships and struggles for its livelihood. These stories matter to Roma, but she concerns herself with the deterioration of life for Jews in the 1930s as a result of popular and organized anti-Jewish hostilities. She reflects on the destruction of Polish Jewry during her and her sister's relocation to Russia during World War II. As acute as her observations are, they are deeply emotional. Suzanna tells us that her mother suffered irreparably: "She was forever haunted by horrific memories....She never stopped mourning." Roma, herself, recalled the "unrest" she felt each day. Virulent anti-Semitism

would surely explain that, but it didn't help that she played an active part in the political opposition to the ascendant fascist National Democratic Party: "The mailman looked at me suspiciously. I was sure that police inspection would follow. Being guilty by association was one of the biggest fears in those days."

Suzanna writes about inheriting the emotional burden. One of the significant narratives in this double memoir is the urge for both mother and daughter to remain invisible, to live in psychological hiding, or, as Suzanna commented about her own life, "to be unseen and to be afraid, lest be subject to some kind of harassment." Being invisible was, indeed, the price Roma paid for self-protection from political reprisal and anti-Semitic attack. The fatal paradox of Roma's predicament – indeed, for all members of a vulnerable minority, whether by political choice or by dint of pedigree – was the exigent condition of secrecy, for a furtive existence fuels a vicious cycle of suspicion and further self-concealment.

Roma's story provides testimonial confirmation of a landmark scholarly argument for local culpability in the destruction process during the Nazi era. Launched in 2000 by the Polish-Jewish émigré intellectual Jan Gross, the case for villagers turning against their Jewish neighbors has revised the standard view, which is still salient among students of the subject, that the central Nazi state was exclusively responsible. As she reminds us, Jews felt vulnerable before the Nazi invasion of Poland in 1939. She tells us about her neighbors' dedicated hostility. Indeed, Roma observed that Poles did not see Jews as true Poles, a reality reflected in the distinction she made – significantly, in passing – between a Pole and a Jew. She referred to her childhood's building's courtyard as a self-imposed "prison" where she felt safe. It's surely not by chance that she devoted considerable space to actual prisons where local officials detained her political comrades. Life before the Holocaust became progressively restricted for Polish Jews. Suzanna ratified the account: "Poland, as a nation, has to face its demons."

Importantly, Roma also recalled feeling hopeful. We often read survivors' memoirs as testaments to human degradation, and, indeed, Roma felt "an obligation to bear witness." As Suzanna rightly states, her mother's memoir is a story of tragedy and triumph. But for Roma triumph was not something to declare. Her decisive inclination to look forward, even as anguish darkened her daily existence, was evidently important enough for her to recall that she did so in great detail. Congruent with her time, Roma was a true believer. Her cause was the achievement of human and common national fellowship. We get hints of this early on in these pages: her youthful zeal for learning the Polish language, or her love for the movies and Polish (not Polish-Jewish) literature that opened her eyes "to [the] world outside my immediate surroundings." Her description of Warsaw's streets

was particularly evocative – the magic of its beautiful boulevards and elegant store windows. After returning from Russia, she reminisced about "my once beloved city" and her "beloved Poland," a disposition that Suzanna confirmed, for herself as much as for her mother.

Roma joined organizations before World War II that promised a future when Jews and Poles could "coexist." The Socialist Bund movement represented her commitment to making Poland a great country "for all workers." She also joined a workers Esperanto movement to help promote communication across social factions. She participated in the currents of the Jewish Haskalah, or Jewish enlightenment, that, from the 18th century on, redefined Jewish tradition in terms that could ease modern Jewry's integration into secular society. For Roma, this meant affirming her Polish patrimony, but also following a Jewish way of life that, for example, permitted her to venture out to the movies on a Friday night, the Jewish Sabbath that traditionally proscribed such activities, or to regard romance and marriage as a matter of love and not as a means of preserving religious or ethnic boundaries (though she respected those boundaries for herself). A member of her family elected to live in a Polish (Christian) neighborhood. As Suzanna remarked, "My mother's homeland never stopped being part of her very essence."

The real story we can glean from Roma and Suzanna's tandem memoir is what Holocaust survivor Primo Levi called inner "unseen realities." From the outside, the historical narrative about modern Jewry is a delineated story of Jewish attempts at social integration and anti-Jewish persecution. But from the inside, as Roma made amply clear, life for Jews was a "riddle." On the one hand, Jews, like Roma, understood that they did not belong in Polish society. They could see, and feel, that they were disfranchised. On the other hand, many, including Roma, were committed to the prospect of their social acceptance. Did they delude themselves, preferring an illusion to reality and believing, contrary to evidence, that, as critic Jan Błoński noted "the future [for Polish Jews] would gradually become brighter, [when] what actually happened was exactly the opposite"? Perhaps. But I would rather address the riddle from the perspective of those who lived out history from within rather than from hindsight. Roma's recollections help us.

Roma's attachment to Poland and Polish culture; her preference for secular values and a humanitarian ethos was, above all, emotional and beyond anything that she could or, just as important, wanted to calculate. Notwithstanding the evidence, her love for her homeland was paramount. This surely led to some confusion: at one point she refers to the police as a symbol of protection; elsewhere, she describes its wanton brutality. What actually helps us to achieve some clarity is Roma's expression of "rage and sadness": She expected more from her beloved homeland. She comment-

ed on the complexity of romance after having previously been betrayed, but I feel that betrayal is the conceit of her story overall. Her commitment to the future was not a matter of self-delusion, something pathological. Even, if not especially, against the background of deterioration, it is the human condition, often with unexpected and sometimes with tragic consequences.

Roma survived. Her life after death granted life to Suzanna and her second generation. Suzanna talks about the third generation. We know that Roma, by writing this memoir, was thinking about posterity. We cannot know for sure, however, what the future looked like for her. Suzanna tells us that her mother died of a "broken heart." This memoir looks forward but is simultaneously burdened with heightened caution. For her, exceptional cruelty was the rule, not an exception. Aggressiveness, she believed, was endemic. She remembered when one of her boyfriends carried a gun "just in case he needed it." Incarceration by the authorities had nothing to do with the law or any other rational standard. It was plainly and crudely an instrument of power. The new order exalted might, not right. Suzanna, like the rest of us, inhabit this new order, knowing "what people are still capable of doing."

The future for Roma and other survivors of extreme violations was surely not as hopeful as she believed it was before the Holocaust. After the catastrophe, fellowship among former enemies, or what we sometimes refer to as meaningful reconciliation, would be an idle dream for her, if not impossible to imagine. Our world is post-rational. We need to understand Roma's unseen realities. After reading her memoir, we can now see that coexistence is a matter of power relations, not comity. Conflict is a normative state of human existence. We should enter unstable circumstances with this significant awareness so that, in defeating impracticable expectations, we are not surprised by and helpless before the relentless evidence. We should recognize human fellowship as a protean negotiation among insiders and outsiders. In light of this memoir, how can we regard human rights without acknowledging the reality of tribal intransigence? Yes, we now should know that, at heart, Jews are Jews and Poles are Poles. Common ground, as crucial as it is for civilization, is brittle. I believe we would be in a stronger position to achieve a more stable world once we fight for it with our eyes open.

Dennis B. Klein
Professor of History
Director of Jewish Studies Program
Kean University, NJ, USA.