

ONCE A RUSSIAN, ALWAYS A JEW: (AUTO)BIOGRAPHICAL  
STORYTELLING AND THE LEGACY OF DISLOCATION

Devora Neumark

Almost 20 years ago, I came across a call for participation in a book project aimed at linking women and their fathers through written and visual exchanges. I can still remember gagging—literally— at the thought of contributing to such a collection. I soon came to realize that such an intense visceral reaction to the call for daughter-father collaborations meant that it was time for me to focus my attention on the relationship I had with my own father. By that time, I had been working on the links between trauma and memory as an interdisciplinary artist and community activist for more than a decade. I resolved to creatively explore ways in which to move beyond the past and repair the rift that had been caused not only by vast ideological and religious differences between my father and myself, but also by the history of his violence toward me and my subsequent fear, which was still so resonant.

So in June 1997 I invited my father to participate in Public Art as Social Intervention: But Now I Have to Speak, an international symposium on violence against women that I initiated and co-directed with Loren Lerner and pk langshaw at Concordia University. In front of more than 700 people during one of the keynote events, I played a tape recording that my father had made for this event in which he stated: “Recalling, thinking back, it’s very painful for me to imagine the pain that you went through, that each time that I raised my hand or a strap it put in a lasting cut, a mark on your flesh and soul. I hear the voices: ‘Daddy no more! Daddy, please!’ I want to ask forgiveness.” For many of the people in that downtown Montreal auditorium, this apology apparently served as a proxy for the one that they yearned for themselves. Male and female audience members alike stated during the question-and-answer period or in private after the event: “This is the apology that I would never hear from my own father . . . uncle . . . teacher . . . and it will do—I can move on now and heal the past.” I felt the same. My father’s willingness to take up my invitation and respond in such a performative way contributed much to shaping the positive relationship that has since emerged between the two of us.

“As a victim,” my father stated at the start of his apology, “I’m sure I knew no other way how to bring up my children in their formative years.” Hearing him describe himself as a victim and taking responsibility for the years of abuse in such a public way, I could for the first time become curious about his childhood experiences and the forces that shaped his behavior as an adult. Inspired in part by the oral tradition and ritual practices inherent within the Jewish life cycle, I began to delve deeper into the relationship between trauma and memory and investigate how artistic contexts can create a “potential space” (Winnicott 41) within which to imagine new possibilities.

Now, almost 20 years after I came across the call for participation in the daughter-father publication, I feel ready and willing to respond. This writing is evidence of several long journeys. I have had to come a long way, as has my father. His travels from Poltava, Ukraine, where he was born, to Beit Shemesh, Israel, where he now lives comprise one through-line of this story; the paths we have taken separately and together toward healing make up another.

The purpose of therapy is not simply catharsis but rather the integration of memory (Herman). In this writing, I investigate how deliberately setting the stage for storytelling creates an environment conducive to accessing the past so that it can be more fully

assimilated and thus less likely to trigger unresolved emotions in the present. Bringing this process into the public sphere not only anchors the healing but also offers the possibility to connect with others in meaningful and potentially life-altering ways, just as my father's proxy apology did all those years ago. Indeed, "[h]istory cannot be held privately. No one person 'owns' a story. Any one story is embedded in layers of remembering and storytelling. [. . .] Remembering is necessarily a public act" (Pollock 5).

Each performance event that I have created over the years was deliberately enacted as a public art practice so as to provide a holding ground for honoring familiar stories and allowing for the emergence of new ones. Often the difference between the reinforcement of the trauma and its transformation is the quality and constancy of this holding ground: the telling — and often repeated tellings—of one's story has to take place, sometimes over extended periods of time, in the presence of a caring witness (Felman and Laub).

Many stories were told to me during my youth about the forced displacements of Jews over the millennia — some verifiable historically, others not. Several of these tales implicated members of my own family, some of whom I knew, others who were dead and buried before I was born. The stories about loss and forced dislocation that were not shared with me during my childhood included what my father experienced during his own formative years growing up in Soviet Russia. The legacy of these experiences and the stories—those that were recounted and perhaps especially those that were kept hidden — affected my own life as they became embedded in my psyche, a part of my own story, despite my not having been present during their unfolding.

Thirteen years after my father's public apology, he and I both sensed that we were finally ready to call out and care for the untold stories. Setting aside a two-week period during the summer of 2010, we completed nearly 20 hours of audio recording. For two or three hours a day, my father traced his family's multiple displacements in the period leading up to and after the Second World War, as Russian Jews intent on upholding their orthodox religious practices and participating actively in Lubavitcher Hassidic<sup>1</sup> life. I asked the occasional question, but most of the time it was he who chose the topic and the segment of his life he wanted to focus on during any given recording session.

As Herman argues, the conflict between the will to deny horrible events and the necessity to proclaim them aloud is one of the central dialectics of psychological trauma (in Strozier and Flynn). However, much it is affirming to share one's experiences, and however much talking about one's traumatic experiences can be performative and productive, these processes also often leave both the teller and the listener feeling quite vulnerable. By the time we embarked on this process, my father and I had developed enough trust in each other to allow ourselves to openly talk about what had been eclipsed by old survival strategies up until then. Despite the fact that the process was not always easy, by the time we completed the recordings our capacity to affirm the tenderness of our love for each other had been strengthened enormously.

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<sup>1</sup>For English equivalents of these and other Hebrew and Yiddish terms, which are not explained within the text itself, please consult the accompanying Appendix.

ONCE A RUSSIAN, ALWAYS A JEW: (AUTO)BIOGRAPHICAL  
STORYTELLING AND THE LEGACY OF DISLOCATION

Devora Neumark

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My name is Avrom Neumark. My name in Russian is Abrasha, although at home they called me Avremel. I was born August 10, 1932, in Poltava, Ukraine, and when I was an infant my parents moved to Kutaisi in Georgia, Soviet Russia. The reason we moved is because it was much easier to live as a Jew. We had a chance to observe our faith. We had three synagogues. We kept the Shabbat and Jewish holidays as the people in the free world.

. . . We had a nice theatre, parks. I used to love to swim in our river. We used to get dressed our best and go to the movies. It was a lot of propaganda, which I didn't mind to watch. Let's not forget, we thanks God we did not live in Siberia. We used to go summer to the country. We would spend a month in different resort places. Sometimes we went to Suchumi and Borjomi. But everything was in danger. People lived from day to day hoping that tomorrow would be a day that we could survive; even in Georgia, life was tolerable, but constantly the eyes of the NKVD were always on us. My mother, she was petrified from police and even to the day before she passed away in Canada, when she would see a policeman, she would shiver.

. . . It was just a week or so before Pesach. There was a new head of the police and he was a Russian Jew. I don't know exactly how it came to his attention that my father refused to work on Shabbat. [ . . . ] He was told that he has to keep the factory open on Shabbat. So my father and together with my mother and some of the workers were told by my parents that they were going to do the following, which was a very big risk: they took one of the important machines and they went in reverse which broke practically all the needles. And of course the machine was not capable to work. When the inspectors came and they found that people are not working I don't know if my mother or my father said: "Look there was an accident and the machine went the wrong way and the needles all broken; we are waiting for the mechanic to come and take out all the needles and put in new needles." Somebody within the people that worked for my father in the factory must have tell the inspectors that he suspect that this was a sabotage.

And my father was arrested and he was taken in and somebody was put in the factory to supervise and my father was send away for three years. Everything goes fast there: there is no court hearing. There was a saying in Russia: "Give us the people, cases we will find, accusations we will find." He was sent to the prison near Baku. And lo and behold, thanks God, that the chief of the jail happened to be from Kutaisi and he knew my father and my father broke out in crying.

Oh! Before he went to jail to Baku, they forced his beard to be shaven. That was a part of the punishment because they knew that to wear a beard was part of the religion.

So my father recognized the chief of police in the jail near Baku, but the other guy did not because he didn't have the beard. So my father spoke to him, identified himself and told him. And so finally he recognized my father as well. He says: "Don't worry you will be Pesach home." [ . . . ]

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At the night when we had to do bdikat chametz came a knock on the door. We all froze and my mother asked: “Who is there?” And she heard my father’s voice. And when she opened the door, she saw a strange man because she did not recognize him without a beard. And she says: “Who are you? Get out! My husband is not here.” And he started telling in Yiddish: “Listen, listen to me. I’m Moshe, I’m Moshe.” Finally, she almost fainted, and he told the story that two days before Pesach . . . and the chief of the jail — because he had the rank of a Polkovnik, which means like a Colonel — and he took his private driver, chauffeur, and told him that he has to drive straight to Kutaisi to bring Moisay Neumark home. So he ended up to be in jail for about less than two weeks. Only because Hashem did a miracle the person recognized, otherwise I don’t think we would ever see our father back.

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Because so many of my father’s early experiences required him to develop and practice survival strategies, much in the same way that my early experiences forced me to develop and practice my own, I intend to highlight just how important a role storytelling can play in letting go of the coping mechanisms that are no longer necessary, or worse, have become detrimental to living a healthy life. Unfortunately, I can only too well identify with the confusion and the contradictions that my father experienced in trying to make sense of what was acceptable within the public sphere and what was or was not acceptable within the private domain. The story of the differences in moral standards between what was done vis-à-vis the state and what was not tolerated within the factory helped me to make sense of what always seemed to me to be a set of arbitrary rules and inexplicable codes of behavior that one simply had to accept without really understanding.

As I listened to my father recall his experiences, I realized that I was deeply troubled by — and yet admiring of — the strength of his belief in Judaism. I found myself thinking that for him being a Jew was both an act of faith and a process of affirming that faith in even the most mundane of daily gestures. He was not alone; this unshakable belief was common amongst his extended family. For example, I remember visiting my great-uncle Nanos and his wife, Chacha Rosa, with my father just before my great-aunt died in the mid-1990s. We went to their home not far from the old Botanical Zoo in Jerusalem. Uncle Nanos was a large man but frail and hunched over; his legs could barely hold the weight of his sizeable body. He apologized for sitting down so soon after we arrived and explained that the severe cold of the gulag and the beatings he had received in captivity had permanently affected his circulation, and as a result, he was in constant pain. Sitting for him was less painful he explained, at least somewhat, than standing.

After completing the tape recordings with my father, I managed to find a copy of Uncle Nanos’s memoirs translated into English from the original Hebrew manuscript. In “*Subbota*” *My Twenty Years in Soviet Prisons*, published under his pseudonym Avraham

ONCE A RUSSIAN, ALWAYS A JEW: (AUTO)BIOGRAPHICAL  
STORYTELLING AND THE LEGACY OF DISLOCATION

Devora Neumark

Netzach, Uncle Nanos writes: "I found work as a bookkeeper even in Siberia. I continued to wear my beard and my peyos, the sideburns, which may not be shaven off completely according to Jewish law, and I didn't work on Shabbos. What the NKVD did not understand was that it was only Shabbos and religious observance that sustained my existence." As with my father's telling, Uncle Nanos's autobiography pitted the oppressive regime against faith and religious practice. Furthermore, both my father and my uncle drew an unbroken connection between their yearning for freedom and their lifetime affirmation of the devotion to Jerusalem in their daily prayers.

In the course of the interviews, my father recalled how he listened clandestinely to the Israeli National Anthem while still in Kutaisi, years before the May 1948 declaration of Palestine's independence from British colonial rule and the establishment of the State of Israel. This information was startling to me. The anecdote revealed just how prevalent were his early Zionist yearnings for settling in what was then called Jewish Palestine. The yearnings explain a lot about the choices my father has made throughout his life and about the Zionist teachings that were so prevalent during my youth. Hearing this story has enabled me to understand more clearly why it has been so difficult to dialogue with father about my concerns for what I see as Israeli oppression of the Palestinian people — a situation that I feel compelled to address in my artistic practice, community involvement and public engagement.

The dual, ideological constructions of self and place as written in the twentieth century by Jews trying to make sense of and come to terms with the anxiety about and concrete threats of anti-Semitism in Europe and growing concern around Jewish assimilation into North American culture are evident in my father's telling, as he structured his narrative about displacement and home linking his Jewish identity with first the vision and later the actualization of homeland in the Promised Land. Indeed, throughout my father's storytelling — as with Uncle Nanos — the emphasis was on how the conditions were found and created to live as Orthodox Jews in the face of great threat from without the Jewish community and sometimes even from within.

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In Georgia, the Communists really did not oppress as we know; yes the government controlled, but you could bribe the officials and if people went to jail most of the times they were let go because the officials were given money. The problem was that there were Ashkenazic Jews or Russian Jews who came to Georgia. They were kind of our nemesis because either they were jealous of the Georgian Jews or they thought that they are superior and as a result they caused trouble to the Georgian Jewish Community in Kutaisi. They were always trying to inform on the Jewish people.

. . . I was just after Bar Mitzvah; it was the end of '44 going on '45: Kutaisi became a dangerous place for the Yeshiva; they moved to Gori for a short while but then we found out that in Uzbekistan, cities such as Samarqand or Tashkent, there is a Jewish religious life going on. So, there were six boys, four older ones



ONCE A RUSSIAN, ALWAYS A JEW: (AUTO)BIOGRAPHICAL  
STORYTELLING AND THE LEGACY OF DISLOCATION

Devora Neumark

— they were in the twenties — I was about 13 going on 14. We traveled all the way from Kutaisi to Samarqand. Can you imagine? This is the war going on. And the parents let us go. First my father did take us to Baku. My father made arrangements for a boat that crosses the Caspian Sea and we went on the Sea, which was a ride for about a day or something and he was instrumental to buy us tickets from the other side of the Caspian Sea.

I don't remember the name of the city, maybe Derbent; because those things were not important to us. The most important thing was to watch out of strange people and people should not start up with us and try to befriend us and so on because we had no protection whatsoever. I don't know if we had proper passports and then we boarded the train that went all the way to Samarqand. I don't remember too much of the trip itself. Somehow we managed to have food. The train was packed with Russian wounded soldiers or soldiers that ended their service and they were going home to deeper Russia.

Finally we came to Samarqand. We were brought to some Lubavitch families because this was all under the auspices of the Lubavitcher Chassidim. And I stayed in Samarqand for about two months. In Tashkent, there was a yeshiva all under the auspices of the Lubavitcher Chassidim. And I stayed in Samarqand for about two months. In Tashkent, there was a yeshiva for younger kids; that's where I came to learn. In Tashkent, my uncle and my aunt were very nice to me. I had a nice bed. I had good food. And I almost lived there like I would be living at home.

By that time the war ended, and my parents had decided together with a few other Lubavitcher families that this probably was the best opportunity to get out of Russia. My mother and my father decided that they're leaving and so did my two uncles and my aunt, whose husband was killed three days after he was sent to the front. So my father had a problem he would not leave Kutaisi going towards Kiev and from there try to go to Limburg because I was not in Kutaisi. During that time also, I didn't know, but my youngest sister was stricken with polio.

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Dialogic processes and creative products almost inevitably invite an awareness of interdependence and reinforce the mutuality of identities. For example, I remember feeling so upset when, during one recording session, my father talked about how even with all the physical and emotional pain he had caused me in my childhood, he would like to be given at least some credit for my achievements. Despite the intensity of my inner child's kicking and screaming, I know that this is necessary for the healing to be completed. As his daughter, an artist and an activist, I can soothe myself in the process of forgiveness — and become stronger for it — when I see how much I resemble him in the way that I take to the street in protest of the Israeli government oppression of Palestinians just as we took to the streets when I was a child in protest of the Russian suppression of Jewish cultural life.

ONCE A RUSSIAN, ALWAYS A JEW: (AUTO)BIOGRAPHICAL  
STORYTELLING AND THE LEGACY OF DISLOCATION

Devora Neumark

It was not obvious or easy to write these lines any more that it is to leave in certain anecdotes in which my father reveals experiences that were difficult for me to hear. I feel exposed in those moments, and yet I have come to recognize just how important they are to understanding the forces that shaped my father's life view and, by extension, my own.

I was, for example, outraged when I heard the story of his Aunt Tzilia and cousin Vovka for the first time during one of the taping sessions. My father and I ended up arguing as I accused him and his mother of what I thought was unacceptable behavior and he continued to justify what they had done in the name of their religious beliefs.

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When the war broke out, my Aunt Tzilia lived in Rostov — matter of fact, all my father's brother and three sisters lived in Rostov; another sister lived I think in Kermanchu. They were lucky they escaped and of course they come to Kutaisi. And my father and my mother helped them a lot with places to live; first for them to stay in our house . . . . Tetya Tzilia, she came with her two children — a girl and a boy — his name was officially Vovka. She was a Communist; she was the black sheep in the family. She always was a rebel even when she was young and . . . she didn't even make a Brit Milah for Vovka. . . . A major goal of my mother was that in our family — the Neumark/Lipsker family — there is no one without Brit Milah. And it was impossible; she wouldn't allow to make a Brit. It happened to be that she got sick, I think with breast cancer, and she needed to see a specialist. My father took her from Kutaisi to Tblisi and I think she underwent a breast operation or some other kind of procedure. And while she was away, I explained to Vovka that I have circumcised and he is not and he liked what's going on in our family about Shabossim, yom tovim [holidays], and so on. Because to meals and so on, even Chacha Tzilia used to come.

While she was in Tblisi they made arrangements with the mohel—we had two mohelim—of course they used to do brisim; some, especially the Georgian Jews, used to do that very openly, very festive; not so much the Russian Jews because it was against the Communist system to have circumcision. Meantime my mother and I talked to the boy—that if you want to be like Avremel we will do a procedure. He didn't mind. And he was a boy; we were 12 —before Bar Mitzvah.

Two o'clock in the morning Vovka is up, I am up, the mohel asks in Yiddish or in Russian "Where is the little kid?" And he stands up and says: "Etahyah" — it's me. The mohel, not so much the doctor, but the mohel grabbed his satchel and he tries running out of the house. He says: "I'm not doing this. I'm not! I don't want to risk my life, my family life." And my mother stood in the door and she says: "You'll not get out of here. You won't get out. You have to do it!" He was also a Lubavitcher Chassid. So they did the operation. The doctor was there. Things went well. But on the 2nd or 3rd day after the operation she comes back.

ONCE A RUSSIAN, ALWAYS A JEW: (AUTO)BIOGRAPHICAL  
STORYTELLING AND THE LEGACY OF DISLOCATION

Devora Neumark

I don't know how she found out. This is a mystery: we still don't know. In Russian, she starts screaming: "I am going to turn you into the NKVD." And "I want to see my kid." We were only afraid that she would turn around and rush to the police. But she came to see Vovka. While she was in the house my mother got hold of her. She says: "Listen Tzilia, you come from the Naimark's" — she wouldn't listen. "This is my child; you had not right to do it." My mother said to her: "Tzilia, are you going to destroy the whole family? You want that we really all rot in Siberia?" My parents really saved all my uncles, Aunt Tzilia; brought them over. They knew the Germans are coming. She was indebted to our parents for in a way saving her with the children. We didn't need permission. The child did not have circumcision. To us in our family was not an acceptable fact, period! There is no questions, no discussion. My mother did not need to explain. It was done because that's the way they lived, that's the way they had to do it, and I'm really very proud.

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I wonder how different my own life would be if I could hold even a fraction of the belief in Judaism that my father has sustained all his life, but I cannot and I do not — not only because I see contradictions and false constructions within the orthodoxy but also because of the ways that the religion has served to justify behaviors I simply cannot accept. When, in reading an earlier draft of this writing to my father, I came to this segment and made the connection between the state-sponsored violence he experienced in his youth, the violence of this episode and the violence he perpetrated in the home I grew up in. He said: "Do you really need to put that in? Haven't you mentioned enough about that?"

I responded by saying that in this particular passage I was making a link between the dynamics of power in the public and private spheres, something that I had not done quite so clearly up until then, and, furthermore, it seemed necessary to draw out just how decisive a marker the violence that I grew up with was and still is for me. I went on to point out how he had repeatedly affirmed the significance of the Jewish religion and his faith — affirmations that I was careful to retain — despite and perhaps especially because of the centrality of these repetitions in his life and in shaping his narrative. This exchange between us provided me the means to assert that I wish I did not feel compelled to have the issue of the victim-to-perpetrator cycle so central to my creative practice and community activism. My father, to his credit, was able to hear this and accept the validity and pertinence of my choice.

When pressed into the service of healing, private and public cultural transmissions, such as my father's storytelling and this writing, can provide us with the means to accept the complexities, even the contradictions, of another's behavior and lessen the emotional drama around what is incomprehensible so as to create the conditions to heal. As I wrote in a previous essay in which I explored the significance of remembering in the context of the post-Holocaust art, such tellings can fulfill the dual function of highlighting a particular



ONCE A RUSSIAN, ALWAYS A JEW: (AUTO)BIOGRAPHICAL  
STORYTELLING AND THE LEGACY OF DISLOCATION  
Devora Neumark

moment in time and acting as a catalyst for change.<sup>2</sup> Because these transmissions are by their very nature part of a social engagement, they participate actively in the struggle to become aware of, integrate and transform the powerful emotions associated with the wounds of the past and their intergenerational effects. They do not and cannot, however, represent the original trauma itself nor even what is called traumatic memory.<sup>3</sup>

Participating in the social sphere by shaping previously unformed stories is already, in and of itself, a sign that the teller is not (or is, perhaps, no longer) inhabiting the space resulting out of the original affront and that the ones who listen are ready to hear. Storytelling, much like other co-creative endeavors such as community art practice and the enactment of ritual, empowers the storyteller/artist/ritual participant as an active agent in the construction and communication of meaning and history. Deliberately choosing to shift the focus from the trauma to the agency inherent in its creative telling is both evidence of and further reinforcement of resilience.

Yet this process is not without its problematics. The question of a story's truth-telling function versus its identity function involves looking at social accountability, affect, and the performance of "normalcy" (Eakin 120). Linking the popular disclosure of the personal to the question of risk, Eakin claims that "while our lives are increasingly on display in public, the ethics of presenting such revelations remains largely unexamined." He asks: "What is the good of life writing, and how, exactly can it do harm?" (Eakin, Ethics 1). Both the question of what good could come of sharing this narrative and the question of what possible harm could come of it were debated within my family before, during and after the recordings were completed. As this was not the first time I have worked with difficult family material, discussing the various ramifications of this project was a familiar process for us all.

What was unfamiliar and surprising was how in hearing about the happy times my father experienced as a child, I could find a way to connect to what was wholesome in my own childhood. Recently I found out that one of the side effects of long-term stress is the suppression of good memories.<sup>4</sup> It comforts me to know that both my father and I can now access and share what was positive in each our early days.

In her investigation into how adults shape their housing experiences to create

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<sup>2</sup> "Between Terror and Belief: Exploring the Relationship between Creativity, Healing and the Judaic Injunction to Remember" is the title of the catalogue essay published in 2001 for Lily Markiewicz's exhibition entitled Promise.

<sup>3</sup> Bessel A. van der Kolk's and Onno van der Hart's writing "The Intrusive Past: The Flexibility of Memory and the Engraving of Trauma" in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* edited by Cathy Caruth (The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), refers to Pierre Janet's observation of the differences between "traumatic memory" and "ordinary" or "narrative memory." The three most relevant observations for the purposes of this writing concern: (1) the nature of the almost helpless and seemingly endless repetition of the traumatic memory prior to its integration, (2) the length of time a memory takes to recount depending on whether it has been integrated or not as ordinary memory and (3) the solitary nature of traumatic memory versus the social component of ordinary memory in the narrative form.

<sup>4</sup> This information was shared with me by psychologist Sylvain Savard as I prepared the Training and Exchange Program for the artists involved in *Agir par l'imaginaire* — a three-year pilot project that I co-directed with Aleksandra Zajko of the Société Elizabeth Fry du Québec linking professional artists and incarcerated women in four Montreal-area prison facilities.

ONCE A RUSSIAN, ALWAYS A JEW: (AUTO)BIOGRAPHICAL  
STORYTELLING AND THE LEGACY OF DISLOCATION

Devora Neumark

home-like conditions, design psychologist Toby Israel cites Cobb as she explores the relationship between early development and the sense of place that often motivates adult choices related to home, however unconsciously. The time when a child is between 5 and 12 is a time when “the child [ . . . ] is poised [ . . . ] halfway between inner and outer worlds” (Israel 6). Cobb believed that our nonverbal, childhood experience of place retains a poetic, creative power that acts upon our choices of how we live as adults.

I cannot help but wonder for example how my father’s childhood experiences of nature, which he recalled in great detail during the recording sessions, were replayed in his choice to take my siblings and me to the mountains every summer when we were small. While there was much pleasure associated with living in such close proximity with nature, there was also great anxiety at being so close to his rage.

Howes writes about the ways in which the line between autobiography and biography is drawn, maintained and in some cases erased in the recent discourse about personal narratives. He cites Smith and Watson and others as he explores the ethical dilemmas inherent in constructing (inter)subjectivities and suggests that the bifurcation between autobiography and biography has aesthetic and ethical ramifications. “Only writers exercising full control over their materials can be trusted, because as anyone familiar with biographies—or criminal trials—knows, reordering facts can make them serve a variety of ends that often have nothing to do with establishing the truth” (250). It was significant to have my father actively participate in the process of shaping this material not only because of the ethical ramifications but also because of the enormous healing capacity in this performative dialogic process and cultural production. This entire process has made it possible for me to have a greater appreciation of the restorative force of nature separate from the hauntings of my childhood.

By sharing his own appreciation for the beauty of nature, my father invited me to think differently about the facts of my youth and shape a more coherent truth about the complexity of his life and his efforts to be a good father, despite—and perhaps even more-so on account of—the surges of violence. I have come to see these early visits to the countryside as my father’s way of getting beyond the state-sponsored violence that he experienced in his own childhood and which found its way into the intimate domestic quotidian of my youth.

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Post-war in Russia was a somatocha, a disorientation of the highest level; it was a turmoil, a total turmoil. My father risked his life and he again followed the same route as I did. He had a ticket for me to come back. My uncle helped my father to obtain necessary documents and tickets to go back. My father stayed in Tashkent two or three days. And we traveled back to Kutaisi.

When I came to Kutaisi this time, my parents were already not living in the house because planning to escape Russia they had to get to another neighborhood where they wouldn’t be known that much and my parents already made arrangements to travel to Kiev. Again, my parents did have money and we

ONCE A RUSSIAN, ALWAYS A JEW: (AUTO)BIOGRAPHICAL  
STORYTELLING AND THE LEGACY OF DISLOCATION

Devora Neumark

traveled by a truck from Kutaisi to a city called Rioni. People thought that we are refugees.

We came to Tblisi where my father had some contacts and we took a train that went through Rostov. I don't remember if we stopped in Rostov and we got off; my father maybe wanted to go to the cemetery to visit his parents' graves, or maybe there was just talk about it. I can't really remember. And two of our sisters died because of dysentaria [sic]; they could not be saved. Each one was very young, not even a year or so. There was no levaya.

Now we are traveling through Rostov — we came to Kiev. All along we had to really watch out every step. My father and mother were very daring, very risk taking and so was my uncle and my aunt. And this was the only opportunity to get out of Russia, not because of economical needs but because we knew in the free world we would be able to live full religious life. Not always I understood exactly the details; we just followed from one city to another.

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These stories came as a total surprise to me not only on account of how difficult all the experiences must have been for my father, his parents and his younger siblings, but also because he had never shared them with me before despite multiple bouts of illness that could have taken him from this earth years before. What shifted, what made him want to share his stories with me — and by extension with a larger audience extending beyond my immediate family — is also what has compelled me to make these stories public with his permission.

As I listened to the recordings, choosing what to highlight and what to edit out, I found myself checking facts and finding out about historical events I knew nothing about. I had a map open before me and traced the route my father and his family took as they left Georgia through Poland, Czechoslovakia, Austria, Germany, France and beyond. Then, as now, I am amazed at the daring and ingenuity necessary to undertake such a perilous trek.

Just as I was finishing off transcribing my father's words from the audio files, I happened to hear a re-broadcast of Eleanor Wachtel's December 27, 2009, interview with Azar Nafisi, author of *Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in Books* (2003) and *Things I've been Silent About: Memories of a Prodigal Daughter* (2008) on the CBC program "Writers and Company." I was fascinated by the echoes between how I had opted to build my narrative by weaving together three aspects of my life experience — the personal, the creative and the activist — and the way in which Wachtel and Nafisi addressed these three elements during the interview.

What also got my attention was how Nafisi spoke about waiting until after her parents had died to write about them and how her life was shaped by their domestic dynamics and public positions in power. Unlike Nafisi, I felt driven to complete this work during my father's lifetime. Not only was this important to me because of the ethical commitment I made years ago when I began working with my family's experiences, but

ONCE A RUSSIAN, ALWAYS A JEW: (AUTO)BIOGRAPHICAL  
STORYTELLING AND THE LEGACY OF DISLOCATION

Devora Neumark

also because having collaborated with family members on previous artistic projects that have in one way or another touched upon our individual and collective histories, I could trust that by including my parents into this process, healing would be possible.

Speaking about the militia and the numerous raids on his family's house and factory was not easy for my father, but it seemed to do him well to have me listen and for him to know that I could hear how fraught with danger his own childhood was. Often my father would pause and take a deep breath as he did when he began to speak of what happened with the Sabbath candles one Friday evening. Unlike many of the other stories that were told to me for the first time during the audio recording sessions, I had heard this story once before.

I had been invited to participate in a temporary public art exhibit sponsored by the City of Montreal on the occasion of the millennium celebrations. Rather than create a large-scale photographic or sculptural installation, my work entitled "The Art of Conversation" was performance and story-based. After setting up my living room furniture on corner of Frontenac and Ontario streets every Tuesday between 12:00 and 4:00 PM for the duration of ten weeks during the summer of 2000, I engaged with passersby in conversations about home, memory, choice making, domestic abuse, political terror, exile and comfort, amongst many other things.

My father joined the sitting one Tuesday and was visibly upset and uncomfortable throughout. When I asked him a few days later what it was that disturbed him, he told me of how sitting on the couch in the middle of the street had triggered a long-forgotten memory. While living in Kutaisi he was the one in the family responsible for closing the curtains before his mother would bench light — before she would light the Sabbath candles.

Sitting in the living room space I had temporarily created outdoors, he recalled how one Friday night he had forgotten to close the curtains. A Jewish neighbor spotted the lit candles and promptly denounced his family—forcing an eviction that left them no access to their belongings for several months. This is what was making him so uncomfortable. He had long carried the fear, guilt and anger from this incident without being aware of how it had influenced our home as I was growing up. Indeed, every time my mother would prepare to light the Sabbath candles, my father's stress level would rise, making the greeting of the Sabbath a particularly anxiety-ridden ritual.

The question I posed to my father about his unease during his visit to the living room I had created on the street corner had triggered a recollection of this memory and the story told then and again more recently this past summer increased my comprehension about the long shadows cast when traumatic experience is passed from one generation to the next.

The conjunction of the personal and the political as played out in the dramas of my immediate ancestors and my own life is as central to this auto/biography as is the healing process. "In the midst of dislocations and relocations, personal and collective storytelling can become one way in which people claim new identities and assert their participation in the public sphere. It can also become a way of maintaining communal identification in the face of loss and cultural degradation. [ . . . ] In all cases, storytelling functions as a crucial element in establishing new identities of longing (directed toward the past) and belonging (directed toward the future)" (Schaffer and Smith 19). Not only

ONCE A RUSSIAN, ALWAYS A JEW: (AUTO)BIOGRAPHICAL  
STORYTELLING AND THE LEGACY OF DISLOCATION

Devora Neumark

do Schaffer and Smith articulate the important connection between the personal and the collective, but they also implicate the passage of time as central to the aesthetics and politics of telling stories about displacement.

I shared with my father all that I had written in response to his tellings. I could not imagine doing otherwise, however much it has not been an easy process. The most important thing, my father says before I hang up the phone after reading this entire text to him the first time, is that we are family. I am taken by surprise by how liberating this truth telling has been for the both of us.

On the dining room wall in the Beit Shemesh house where my parents now live, just by the chair in which my father sat during each of the recording sessions, hangs a monoprint I made from a photograph I had taken of my father's shadow as he stood by the Wailing Wall in the Old City of Jerusalem when I was still a teen. This same image was hung in a similar position for the more than 20 years my parents lived on Montreal's West Island. One day I asked my father why he kept this work hung in such a prominent place. He confessed to how challenged he felt by the image — how each time he sat at the dining room table for Sabbath meals and holiday celebrations or while teaching one boy or another their Bar Mitzvah chapters he had to confront the image of his shadow side. My father went on to tell me how he had, on more than one occasion, felt pressed to remove the image, but that each time he determined to keep it in place, thinking that if he could sit with it long enough he would be able to emerge from that dark place and stop living in his own shadow.

Back in 1997, as part of the apology he recorded for the Concordia University Keynote Event, he stated, "I always try to atone for those years that should have never happened." Indeed he has committed himself to this process. I am so appreciative of his courage to face the past and affirm the power of his own and my creativity. Once a Russian, always a Jew — my father has lived out his ideological dream and made home in the land of his Biblical forefathers and mothers. He has settled down and found a certain peace. He is active in his local community, takes care of his health, and enjoys gathering the family around for festivals and celebrations. After recording all he wanted to say, my father mused: "Having told you all these stories I realize that after all, I have had a good life — and despite being 80, I'm not so old."

As for me: I will continue working in solidarity with those who envision a lasting and just peace in Israel/Palestine, wherein people of all faiths and cultural backgrounds are equal under the law. I will take to heart the late Edward Said's critical appeal to halt the imagination of home as divorced from the actual reality of the people who inhabit the place in question as much in light of the ongoing conflict in Israel/Palestine as the ongoing struggles of the First Nations, Métis and Inuit peoples of Canada where I currently live. The paths my father and I have taken are not so different after all; we have each in our own way struggled to make sense of the state-sponsored brutality so endemic to the twentieth century and its impact on the individuals who were directly affected by it and who transmitted the effects to their children and grandchildren.

Smith and Watson explore how stories emerge at the nexus of memory and history. They invite their readers to consider the personal and political motivations of the individuals who author these narratives as well as those who circulate them. They ask about the implications of such motivations on the changing shape of history and personal identities, of



ONCE A RUSSIAN, ALWAYS A JEW: (AUTO)BIOGRAPHICAL  
STORYTELLING AND THE LEGACY OF DISLOCATION

Devora Neumark

those involved in the writing and distribution of the life stories and those who end up bearing witness to them in the form of books, audio recordings and other cultural transmissions. While it is difficult for me to know yet how or even if this writing will contribute to a new perspective on the Jewish experiences of the (un)making of home, I have already felt what a profound impact it has had on my family as well as on me personally.

Another strategy for reading life narratives that Smith and Watson propose is to examine who is the audience. As is the case with any other creative work, this paper's first addressees were the creators of the work: my father and I were our own first witnesses. Yet, as previously mentioned, from the onset we knew that we were creating this project for at least two other audiences. My family members now have access to the recordings, while I have worked with this material here and elsewhere in an attempt to engage critically in the cultural conversation about the ethics of storytelling, healing, and the performativity of disclosure.

Like so many Jews of my generation whose parents were caught up in the madness of mid-twentieth century Europe, I have spent the bulk of my life trying to cope with the legacy of violence, both personally and by contributing to violence-reduction projects within the Jewish community and as a member of Palestinian solidarity groups. Whether shared with strangers or intimates, I have come to understand that stories not only help construct one's individual identity but also draw on personal memories to shape collective histories, however much the past recollections are already tainted, borrowed and merged with others' stories, experiences and memories. "The truth of the memory is intimately related to how it is deployed and to the emotional and social meanings that are evoked in the telling and retelling of it" (Haaken 41). Co-emergent storytelling remembers the past as much as it shapes the future within the domestic interior and the public sphere.

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ONCE A RUSSIAN, ALWAYS A JEW: (AUTO)BIOGRAPHICAL  
STORYTELLING AND THE LEGACY OF DISLOCATION

Devora Neumark

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## APPENDIX

**Bar Mitzvah:** The Bar Mitzvah (literally, “Son of Commandment”) is the coming of age ritual for Jewish males celebrated on their thirteenth birthday.

**Bdikat chametz:** The final search for leavened foods—which are forbidden on Passover — takes place after nightfall on the evening before the holiday.

**Brit Milah:** (literally, “The Covenant of Circumcision”) is a Jewish religious ritual usually performed on eight-day-old male infants.

**Chassidim:** A Jewish movement the lineage of which stems from the eighteenth century in Eastern Europe. A Hassid practices joyful but strict Jewish observance.

**Hashem:** (literally, “The Name”). Because God’s name is considered to be too holy for common use, the term Hashem is substituted.

**Levaya:** Hebrew for funeral, the levaya process includes honoring the deceased by participating actively in the burial.

**Lubavitchers:** Hassidic Jews so called for the town in Russia (Lubavitsh) where, during the eighteenth century, their movement began. Lubavitchers participate in the Chabad movement, a worldwide network aimed at promoting religious worship among Jews.

**Mohel:** The Rabbi who performs ritual circumcisions (plural, mohelim).

**Pesach:** The Hebrew equivalent of Passover.

**Shabbat/Shabbos:** (literally, “rest” or “cessation”), the Hebrew and Yiddish terms for the Jewish Sabbath.

**Yeshiva:** (literally, “sitting”), refers to the Jewish educational institution dedicated to the study of the scriptures and religious life in general.