

The impossibility of names

my early 21st century diaspora

Wendy Oberlander

Three years ago I visited Germany for the first time. My mother and I were invited by the City Senate of Berlin — an earnest welcome-home extended to former citizens who were forced to leave during the 1930s. Treated to operas and receptions, boat trips and history lessons, this motley collection of diasporic Jews toured against a backdrop that was simultaneously charming and repulsive — and always surreal. What an odd thing for my mother, a highly assimilated German Jew. As she peered into museum cases of recovered religious artifacts, a Jewish and a German face was reflected together for the first time.

During conversations about our trip, wondering if the tour was the right occasion for a return visit, my mother inadvertently articulated my project with a single question: “Why should I go to Berlin as a Jew if I did not live as a Jew before the War?”

This is precisely the knot that turns in my hand.

It is our first evening in Berlin. The food at the restaurant is familiar. I am excited and awkward and out of my element. I look across the table to see if my mother is in hers. She says loudly in English, as the server brings the food to the table: It’s just like the olden days. Friends and I laugh nervously. Does the server recognize something familiar in us tourists? When she brings the after dinner schnapps, my mother asks in English, What is this? The server answers, in German: Ganz neu. Very new.

Walking down Grosse Hamburger Strasse in the former Jewish district, I look into a shop window. Toys and books are on display, the toys and books I had a child. Why had this never occurred to me, that I would see these things here? Max und Moritz. Emil und die Detektive. Wooden farm animals. I catch myself in the glass window: I look ruffled and distracted. I am wholly unprepared for this full-length mirror.

Both my parents were forced to face their Jewish heritages at a time when their generation sought to live free in modern Europe, where nationalism promised to



Nothing to be written here explores one short chapter in the Jewish Diaspora of the 20th century. This is not exclusively a Jewish story, but common for those unable to name a home of their own.

The video traces the internment of Austrian & German refugees in eastern Canada, from 1940 to 1943. This is the story of my father's arrival in Canada, and the unraveling of my inheritance.

In both Jewish religion and culture, the Book occupies a central position. On the page is inscribed the unspeakable – the name of God, questions without answers, an eternal exile. It reappears, as image and symbol, throughout the video providing a space in which to break a silence, and on which to write my story.

Nothing to be written here
written, directed and produced by Wendy Oberlander
edited by Jennifer Abbott
camera by Kevin Matthews, Bo Myers & Wendy Oberlander
© 1996

erase differences. Yet here I am, living in the luxury of Canada — a potent mix of all things multi-cultural — struggling to answer my German Jewish question. This two-fold inheritance was transplanted to Canada and grafted onto the 1960s of my youth. Although I could not name it at the time, I grew up in a European home. The gesture, the clothing, language, food — the gestalt of our home suggested something different from the homes of my school peers. My social life was defined by the family, my sense of self circumscribed by the proper, unquestioning habits I wore — silently and with great discomfort.

Helène Cixous is an Algerian Jew, exiled to France in 1955. She writes: “What interests me is what I do not know. And it leaves me first of all silent. It strikes me with surprise, with a certain silence. But at the same time, it strikes my body, it hurts me.”¹

This blow against my body is also where I begin. Feeling prefigures my work. Often words fail me, and this makes it difficult to speak.

At this late date — sixty years after the leaving — as an antidote to the missing words, I discover that I am a collector.

I find myself stooping to the ground to see what lies there. A postcard, a photograph, a scrap of a letter. What makes me want to look behind the glass, to turn the letter over and hold it up to the light? As a child I noticed the backsides of things — ordinary things and precious things. I don’t think I asked questions; that would have been annoying and far too loud. My curiosity was forced underground.

I also noticed the backsides of people. I developed a sideways glance. I was looking into something that was fascinating and forbidden: feelings. This too ran underground — far underground. Here, there was no daylight. I tried to make room: “Couldn’t we talk about something other than politics?” I asked. “Such as?” “Well, um...I don’t know.” What else was there, in this carefully ordered life.

It is no surprise that I find myself collecting the mundane, the cast-off, the hidden. This is where I found myself, at the margins of the family — towing the line, in appearances and accomplishments, but always squirming. There must be another way, I told my 8 year old self.

In all of this digging and collecting, I find more and more complexity. I am not a red diaper baby, a political Zionist, a child of survivors. I am not religious, and at the same time, not strictly secular. These days my art practice stakes out a Jewish niche, yet I continue to push the work beyond this one focus. A paradox remains between my legacy of assimilation and my affinity for things Jewish. Daily, I wrestle with my desire to blend in and my need to discover.



Still (Stille) looks back to the world of assimilated European Jews during the 1930s. Sixty years after the exile, Wendy Oberlander returned with her mother to Berlin—only to find the dissonance of her family’s diaspora playing in real time. *Still (Stille)* transforms a collection of archival footage into an indelible montage of faces, piecing together the filmmaker’s inheritance from her mother’s story.

An original score by Lori Freedman playing bass clarinet, plus sections of improvisations played by Freedman and cellist Peggy Lee, amplify the tensions between memory and history. Picture, word and music surround each other in a retelling of the endless Jewish story.

Still (Stille)

a film by Wendy Oberlander

Music created by Lori Freedman, bass clarinet with Peggy Lee, cello

edited by Jennifer Abbott

© 2001

And so — why is it that I find my Jewish self speaking out in public, with words and pictures? Hearing my voice in public challenges my visibility. I notice that I can pass: why don't I?

I have a box of names here, in front of me. Reaching in, you might choose educator, artist, Jew. Others might pick writer, lesbian, first generation Canadian, filmmaker. Today my hand comes up empty.

Some days I want to see myself one way; other days, another. Sometimes I want to know myself without these names. Truth is, I want all of them and none of them.

What a fugitive place this is — and of course I thrive on it. The mix is the magnet that pulls me back, repeatedly, to the centre of my experience — different, changeable and particular to my times and my places.

What came before and after the Shoah is the story that inflects my work. Indeed, I might say that its genesis is the inheritance of my parents' life-stories, but I cannot easily say that it is about the Shoah. It happened that my parents placed their losses aside — each into separate cupboards — not solely out of fear and pain, but also out of an anxious and sincere desire to move into the bright future that Canada promised.

If I must find one word, I would say that my projects lie with the *hidden* — what survives in the margins is what prompts my curiosity and questions. Here the silences and the gaps are revealed, alongside the paradoxes: the past is past, do not forget; speak up, do not volunteer; find your own way, do not ask too many questions. This in-between is what disturbs, and begs me to look.

I am privileged to participate in this conversation — and yet I am always drawn back to the silence. Here lie the questions and the answers, and the unraveling. I do know that I do not choose these projects. They appear to me as an imperative, waiting to be revealed.

I can only look again and again at my story, my diaspora — informed as it is by rich and diverse forces, full of contradictions and detours.

I can barely name myself. I cannot fix the narrative. I must simply pay attention to the beginning, the middle, and the endless ending. Only here will I find some coherency.

Notes

Special thanks for on-going conversations with Cathy Corman and Susan Moser.

1 Hélène CIXOUS, *Rootprints: Memory and Life Writing* (London: Routledge, 1997), 71.