



TALKING ABOUT *LIFE* *AFTER THE* *HOLOCAUST*

Laura Levitt and Dan Morris

Laura Levitt offers this description of her book *American Jewish Loss After the Holocaust* (New York University Press, 2009):

Many of us belong to communities that have been scarred by terrible calamities. And many of us come from families that have suffered grievous losses. How we reflect on these legacies of loss and the ways they inform each other are the questions I take up in my book. Writing in a manner that is personal, creative and theoretical, I reflect on the experiences of a particular Jewish family (my own) in contemporary America and on the way Jews in the United States have tried to

make sense of the great communal disaster of the twentieth century that is the Holocaust. Throughout this book, I show what happens when public and private losses are seen next to each other, what happens when difficult works of art or commemoration are seen alongside ordinary family stories about more intimate losses. By presenting different stories of loss next to each other, I argue that there is a compelling need to make space for particular narratives of loss and mourning within the practice of Holocaust commemoration. In so doing, I offer a more individualized, less totalizing notion of Holocaust commemoration that acknowledges the or-

dinary losses in these enactments. *American Jewish Loss After the Holocaust* shows how different legacies of loss move in and out of each. By experimenting with standard academic writing, it invites readers into a space where critical texts and complicated works of art and commemoration of the Holocaust intermingle with ordinary stories of loss. It shows how these different legacies of loss are intertwined, both connected as well as distinct from each other.

Daniel Morris: Reading of your struggles to come to terms with the significance of a family mystery—the long silence about your father’s birth mother Lena, for whom you were named—my own memories—what you call memories of forgetting—flooded back. Your searching (or Benjaminian “digging”) inspired me to be an active reader, not only of your book, but also of my own murky familial past.

Laura Levitt: Dan, this is exactly what I hoped readers would be able to do as they read the book. I wanted the book to encourage others to take more seriously their familial pasts, the ordinary, and not so ordinary tales that are a part of them. I really did mean it quite literally when I wrote that the book is an invitation to others to do this kind of exploration. Although I expected that the way in might be through family photographs. That said, gestures, whispers, discomforts, and silences, as you so powerfully demonstrate, also can enable other readers to consider their own stories. This was certainly the case with “Secret Stashes.” When my friend Catherine Staples read various drafts of the chapter, she identified with my father as a child who had also lost her mother when she was very young. I think that this kind of identification is part of how I chose many of

the works of commemoration that I wrote about. Ravett’s films and the episode of “This American Life” share a kind of visceral resemblance, a structure of feeling that was familiar to me—an absence and its haunting presence.

DM: Why did you take the risk of writing an academic book that nonetheless involves telling your own story in the first person, and relating it (however taboo) to the Grand Narrative of Holocaust Loss? Did you hope to validate those ordinary and yet strange family stories of other American Jews as worthy of contemplation?

LL: Yes. And the feminist theorist in me is committed to precisely the idea that this kind of emotional and intellectual work can be empowering. Since completing the book I have worked with some amazing students who have taken on this challenge with me, writing about their own families. These include: the story of a grandfather and his estranged artist father and, most especially, a young woman who worked in multiple media to get at the story of her grandmother’s childhood. I want to empower and inspire others to do emotional and intellectual work that matters to them. And I want them to do this work as powerfully as they can.

In terms of my use of the first person in my academic writing, I need to say that I have been doing this a long time. My first book was, in some ways, more raw and maybe more gutsy because I wrote about being raped. I learned to think and write in these ways from feminist poets, activists and writers—Adrienne Rich, Audre Lorde, Irena Klepfisz, and Minnie Bruce Pratt, among others—who wrote eloquently about their obsessions already in the early 1980s as a kind of feminist identity politics. These writ-

ers inspired and helped shape what is now the mix-genre that is the form of much of my scholarly work. For me it is all about being honest about the desires that drive all scholarship, the passion that is the motivation for most of our best writing. For me, this is not necessarily “mediated autobiography” as Susan Suleiman calls it, but more about the interplay between issues, concerns, ideas that touch us but that are both about us *and* about lots of other things (in *Judaism Since Gender* I described these engagement as “textual embraces.”). In writing I am always concerned about not flattening out what I am doing and making it into just memoir or something only about me. That would deny the importance of the kind of close critical readings that are also central to my work. What I am aiming for is a way of expressing these practices together, showing how they inform each other.

I absolutely want to validate ordinary stories. The title of the book was supposed to have been *Ordinary Jews* because I wanted to validate a vision of everyday Jewish life as legitimate and important. I wanted to intervene in the need I saw among American Jews like my own family, to be extraordinary in order simply to be ok. Here I am indebted to Adrienne Rich’s account of her father in “Spilt at the Root.”

DM: Is your project an example of what Jean-Francois Lyotard in The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge referred to as a “critique of metanarratives?” You critique the notion that all viewers of the Tower of Faces exhibit should form a kind of communal circle of mourners. Can you comment on saying “no” to that elision of perspectival differences?

LL: What I am doing is postmodern or informed by various strands of post-structural

theory. Lyotard is not my frame of reference for this move. I come to these critiques from feminist literary theory, postcolonial theory, critical work on Holocaust and representation, and the feminist first person writing I described above. These all contribute to my desire for specificity, for complexity, and for an appreciation of affect in these engagements. This is why I turned to works of art and literature and not theology, philosophy or history. I feel compelled to resist the flattening out of the messy realities of these legacies and do not want to contain them. Here you are absolutely right that for me, “post-memory” becomes too neat, a kind of placeholder that either forces all viewers or readers into a single stance that we cannot really approximate, or it works more broadly as a placeholder for the complex and messy specificities that mark individual engagement with these legacies. Often I find that the term helps people avoid dealing with precisely these things by simply calling whatever is going on post-memory.

Saying no to the elision of perspectival differences was for me all about being brutally honest about what I experience and not pretending to conform. And it was scary and hard. I did feel shame when Lori Lefkowitz spoke up about how she took no pleasure in seeing her relatives on the walls of the Tower of Faces. I felt a keen sense of my own unentitled position. I felt that I had inadvertently said something that was disrespectful to survivors and their families and was horrified and yet, having said it, I felt that I needed to own it and figure out what this whole dynamic was about. I also suspected that I was not alone in these feelings. I think all of these positions exist next to each other. I cannot dictate a correct stance for anyone else. I can only talk about my own desires and where they come from, what they mean,

and how they are connected to these larger narratives, stances, and postures. For me the future of Holocaust remembrance is really about being open to this cacophony. This is where memory and affect are alive.

DM: Like a modernist collage, your book is a pastiche of disparate but related materials that resist coherence into a simple shape or meaning. American Jewish Loss includes your detective-like memoir concerning your father's silence about the fact that he had two mothers, as well as your analysis of the poetry of Irena Klepfisz, the films of Abraham Ravett and Alain Resnais, among others. Discuss your decision to compose a scholarly book with a university press as a kind of modernist collage?

LL: The modern and postmodern are deeply entwined. The post can be a kind of continuation of the modern. This may be the case in my work. The pastiche—the collage, the partial pieces together—enact what it is like to engage the past. For me the frame of reference is more to writers like Sebald and Christa Wolf. I guess I am less concerned about the labels here and more with trying to get at what for me are the ways these fragments connect and touch each other without simply melding into something more whole or smooth. Memory, loss, and trauma are never smooth. These narratives are in pieces—partial and incomplete—but gesture towards each other. I wanted to show that and argue for it together, both formally and in terms of the argument. It is very much how I think. I love Eric Santner's *Stranded Objects* and Barbara Hahn's *The Jewess Pallas Athena*. Santner's book is held together through intuitive connections. In Hahn's book, the chapters are arranged as a series of what she calls "constellations." For me, form

was a way of making visceral to readers what I was doing. The formal elements helped me bridge the chasm between the Holocaust and my ordinary family story.

DM: Discussing photos of your then-child father from the 1930s "before" and "after" his mother died, you admit you engage in "hind-sight" interpretation. You see the relaxed smile of your father in the "before" image and stiff aspects of the portrait taken "after" his mother's death in 1936 as indicative of her passing. Say more about this desire to read meaning into gestures like smiles. Is this excessive interpretive mode a form of mourning? You describe "excess" as a response to "loss."

LL: Yes, excessive perhaps all around. I wanted to honestly convey my desire to see this shift, to see that something had happened to him. I wanted evidence, but also wanted to signal to readers that I was self-conscious about this desire and the way that it may have colored what I was seeing, the fact that this might not really be visible at all or to other readers. I know the danger of both over-determination, and reading the ending back into the pictures, and simply pretending that I was conveying something empirically true. These truths are just not necessarily the case. In my reading of the two photo books of the 2400 pictures from Auschwitz-Birkenau, *The Last Album* and *Before They Perished*.... I reject quite firmly that "we must complete the story," or read the images through their ending. Instead, we need to try to respect the agency of those depicted in these images and those who held onto them so fiercely and not deny their agency by making their endings or not endings, for that matter, inevitable. I firmly believe that they did not know what was coming and that at every point along the way

there were all kinds of possibilities. The ending is neither one nor inevitable. It happened that way, but it might have turned out differently. This is a contingency I believe in strongly. And it informs how I see my father's ordinary snap shots. He too did not know what was to come and I cannot be sure what is being pictured in these shots of him with his siblings before or after his mother's death. In terms of excess and my close readings, yes, I suspect this is how I compensate for how little I have, the sparse quality of what I experience as a loss that I have no access to. This echoes some of the excess in Holocaust commemoration more generally. It is about wanting something to hold on to. Loss opens up a space that is unbridgeable and reading and writing are for me attempts to fill in, to compensate. These efforts are both impossible and necessary. I cannot fix anything nor can I bridge the gap but I have to try.

DM: How do you avoid blurring distinctions between Holocaust tragedies and the issue of coming to terms with your father's "secret stash" of photographs concerning a mother he for a long time failed to acknowledge. In terms related to your discussion of The Talmud and the Internet by Jonathan Rosen, how do you manage not to see the legacies of loss—small and large—in ways other than oppositional terms, and yet not merge the two categories of loss?

LL: This is a major challenge and argument at the heart of my book. Part of what I was trying to suggest is that there is normative stance that has taught us how we should engage with the Holocaust and that it needs to be challenged. I worry about any singular stance, even of reverence, when it comes to these engagements. Although the establishment of such a norm has done a great deal over the past number of

years to raise consciousness about this traumatic legacy, I argue for other ways of engaging with this past. My concern is that this now common stance, does not allow especially younger people and those at a further distance in time and space from these events, to fully feel, think and experience all that a place like the USHMM (U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum) might evoke for them. I am concerned that people like me who have no direct connection to the Holocaust ourselves come to these places with our own ghosts and losses and that the now seemingly proscribed stance does not allow us to be as clear as we can be about what we are experiencing. By deferring our stories to this grander and clearly more traumatic legacy, a completely understandable stance, I worry that instead of really showing reverence, we swallow our own ordinary stories and try and place ourselves in this horrendous story. In doing so, we end up losing sight of what is ours and what is not. I am concerned about appropriation, of trying to make the Holocaust our own when it is not quite ours to claim in any simple way. My book is a kind of experiment in terms of what happens if we allow ourselves to recognize and acknowledge that we come to places like the USHMM with our own stories, our own losses and our own ghosts and that these are the legacies that animate our engagement with the stuff in the USHMM. I want to be able to distinguish between what is and is not ours. I believe that our own stories can help make vivid the myriad of individual stories that are the legacies of the millions who suffered and died in the Holocaust.

In places like the museum we learn not only about the Holocaust in its specificity, we also learn a great deal about trauma and loss, about grief, and dignity in extremity, and what it means to live with devastation. Part of what I believe is so powerful about learn-

ing about the Holocaust and commemorating it, is also tied to the fact that so many survivors were able to continue living their lives after.

DM: You discuss both the edited volume Before They Perished...Photographs found in Auschwitz and Ann Weiss's The Last Album: Eyes from the Ashes of Auschwitz-Birkenau. You admire the passion and dedicated labor Weiss performed in re-photographing the photos over a period of years, but you are uncomfortable with the heroic narrative of redemption that she imposes on her efforts and prefer the more self-effacing, less dramatic account of the publication history of the other volume. Were you concerned, in your own detective labors to uncover information about your father's family and his own need to cover up a family secret, about the degree to which your study would leave too many of your own "fingerprints" on the narrative of this undertaking? Were you worried about making this book too much about Laura Levitt's struggle to come to terms with her familial past as well as her role as an American Jew impacted in indirect ways by the Holocaust?

LL: I am always concerned about what it means for me to write in the first person and what it can open up as well as what it can foreclose. In part I used the "we" language as my editor suggested, as a way of bringing in readers who do not know me. For many the collapse of any first person writing into some kind of memoir or just personal writing is always looming. My models are the brilliant and brave feminist first person writers associated with feminist and lesbian feminist identity politics who risked showing us through their writing how the personal is

political, the political implications of the personal, and the personal ramifications of various kinds of politics. My book is a hybrid. It mixes first person accounts with critical close readings of texts and works of visual culture. Both are present. I try to show and explain in the first person why academics care so much about our work; I show the seams. For me it was important to make clear the intimacies and passions that drive my work, and to try and encourage others to make these connections more visible in theirs. I think academic work has been dismissed for far too long for being obscure and pretentious and the truth is, such claims miss all that matters so much in virtually all academic work in the Humanities.

In terms of uncovering too much in my family's story, I think that I was operating under the perhaps mistaken premise that what I was doing would be a good thing for all of those in my extended family. I was working from the encouragement I got from my parents. As I now realize, I did not appreciate that my efforts would be upsetting to many of my relatives. I thought naively that I was doing something that might bring us all closer together but I was completely wrong. I misunderstood how painful all of this would be to them. I thought they would be happy that I had somehow made these stories matter, that I had done some kind of justice to these painful legacies, but, I was wrong. I reopened old wounds despite my best intentions.

It seems the people who talked to me were themselves outsiders and this is both what facilitated our conversations and drew us to each other. Speaking and writing in many ways set us all outside the bounds of the family and its silences. All of this seems clear and even obvious to me only now.

CONTRIBUTOR NOTES

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Daniel Morris is professor of English at Pur-

due University. He author of *The Writings of William Carlos Williams: Publicity for the Self* (University of Missouri Press, 1995), *Remarkable Modernisms: Contemporary American Authors on Modern Art* (University of Massachusetts Press, 2002), *The Poetry of Louise Glück: A Thematic Introduction* (University of Missouri Press, 2006), and *After Weegee: Essays on Contemporary Jewish American Photographers* (Syracuse University Press, 2011). He has also published two volumes of poetry, *Bryce Passage* (Marsh Hawk Press, 2004) and *If Not for the Courage* (Marsh Hawk, 2010). He is coeditor of *Shofar: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Jewish Studies*.