



The Unfinished Ethnographies of a Jewish Anthropologist

Rebecca Golbert

As I begin this essay, it is the eve of Holocaust Remembrance Day. I am participating in a virtual program that culminates in the living testimony of Ernst Valfer, a ninety-five-year-old German Jewish refugee, child survivor of the Kindertransport, and a retired clinical psychiatrist. As a scholar, I have interviewed Holocaust survivors, yet Ernst Valfer's testimony models reflexivity and vulnerability in a way I have rarely seen. He turns a critical eye on himself, naming the fortress he built as a young boy to protect himself from trauma, whose walls he acknowledges will never be fully undone but which now allow in some shards of light.

The anthropologist Ruth Behar has written extensively about vulnerability and subjectivity, those of the communities we study and our own. Mixing autobiography and ethnography, her book of essays *The Vulnerable Observer* profoundly influenced my approach as an ethnographer and the ways I think about my obligations to the communities I have studied. However, what happens when life gets in the way, when I have failed in my obligations to write the stories entrusted to me, when I am so haunted by these failures, that my unfinished projects revisit me in my dreams? In those dreams, I complete the unfinished—the unpublished articles, the book from my dissertation, the postdoctoral research on Holocaust memory in Ukraine—that my waking moments never allow. Who am I if not the academic at the core of my self-identity and self-worth?

I am the executive director of an academic institute at UC Berkeley. As I have found my way professionally

within an academic setting, I have struggled to maintain my identity as a scholar. The demands of running an institute have precluded full engagement with my fields of expertise. I am an unfinished academic, lacking in my own eyes and those of others. My research sits unfinished in a doctoral dissertation, field notebooks, recorded interviews, file cabinets full of archival documents, an article cut from an edited volume, research papers written but not revised.

This chasm between my self-identity as a scholar and others' perception of me as an academic administrator was made most painfully apparent when students sought collaboration on a program for International Holocaust Remembrance Day. They were inviting a survivor of the ghettos in Transnistria; I have written on Holocaust memory in Transnistria. I proposed the possibility of introducing the event; they chose a historian of Francophone Jewry instead.

One recurring challenge has been that my work spans several areas of expertise—anthropology of Jewish identity, post-Soviet Jewry, Holocaust studies, mediation, and conflict resolution. I have experienced both the strengths and weaknesses of trying to be the anthropologist among Jewish Studies scholars, historians, or lawyer-mediators, and sometimes, the Jewish Studies scholar among other fields. Occasionally, translation has worked, as when I published an article (and won an award) in the *Cardozo Journal of Conflict Resolution* called "An Anthropologist's Approach to Mediation." However, disciplinary crossover has not always been appreciated. My article on Holocaust commemoration ceremonies in contemporary Ukraine, an invited chapter for an edited volume, was cut by the publisher; I was told simply that the anthropologist's lens on ritual and commemoration was not appreciated in a volume of essays by historians. I was so shocked I never resubmitted the article to a journal. I picked it up recently, with a thought to submit it in this moment of quarantine limbo, but what if it is outdated? Further salt to the wound, I was asked to review the subsequent published volume; I declined. What could I say that would not be compromised by bitterness? Sometimes I regret this decision.

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particularly Holocaust survivors, who entrusted me with their testimonies. What are my responsibilities to get their stories into the light?

A few years ago, I was invited to join a research workshop of scholars writing about absence in postwar Holocaust memory. During a week in Italy, we shared insights and feedback on papers in process. However, when final drafts were due for a special edited journal, I could not meet the deadline, hampered by other work obligations. I could see the story I wanted to tell, feel the presence of the survivor Arkady P. walking beside me through his childhood home in Shpikov, driving together to the site of the transit camp in Rogozna, where we could no longer find the mass grave, and then on to the Pechora camp, former Romanian camp of starvation and death, now restored to a sanatorium on the idyllic grounds of the Bug River. We followed the very route he and his family took, except that they were driven on foot, in winter. Walking on the grounds, Arkady told me how he survived the camp with his mother; they were some of the few prisoners who remained in the camp until liberation in March 1944—others fled to nearby ghettos in those last months of occupation. The absence of physical remnants of memory, except in the stories of Arkady P., invoked a Holocaust narrative unfinished, meant to find shelter on the pages of my essay in the volume.

Other stories haunt me—hovering between ethnography and autobiography—unwritten except in my mind. How can I capture in words the nauseating anguish I felt on September 12, 2001, as I stood before the mass graves in the woods of Pechora, accompanied by two Holocaust survivors, trying to fathom the horrors of the past while wracked by the horrific images of the day before? The strong associations in my mind's eye still seem inappropriate when committed to paper, but the two moments for me are forever intertwined.

In this period of quarantine, I thought maybe I could return to the unfinished tasks. I turned to my journal to write reflections, but the time needed for academic writing has been absorbed by new tasks—virtual

programs, Zoom meetings, grant proposals, strategic planning in the context of new uncertainties. Articles sit unread; papers remain unedited. Who am I kidding? In our home, we have also been cooking and baking—perfecting challah, meringue, ice cream, meatballs, hummus—small creative challenges that bring a sense of completion and accomplishment. In contrast, a colleague responsible for a series on anthropology and Judaism asked me recently about my dissertation on Ukrainian Jewish identity. Shame and embarrassment mixed with hope and possibility: Is my work worthy of reconsideration? How would I go about the daunting task of revision?

I think again of Ernst Valfer, who strives to be a better father, husband, and friend, still struggling to overcome his childhood trauma, even at the age of ninety-five. So it must be for me, as I grapple with the dilemma of

unfinished work and the feelings of vulnerability it imparts. Unfinished work has taken on new meaning in these weeks of protest—our collective work of reckoning with the underbelly of racism girding American society and its institutions. We are all vulnerable here. I am reminded by a Holocaust survivor that we are always unfinished, even as we strive to finish our stories. Yet, we must keep struggling to be good, to be accountable—to our families, to ourselves, to the communities we study, and to the societies in which we live and work.

Finishing this essay is but a small start.

REBECCA GOLBERT is the executive director of the Berkeley Institute for Jewish Law and Israel Studies at UC Berkeley, where she oversees the activities of the institute's academic programs as well as its work supporting students and faculty.



Mira Sucharov. "Unfinished wall of doughnuts, with apologies to Wayne Thiebaud," Cambridge, England



Mira Sucharov. "Coffee break," Montreal