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Past Controversies, Present Challenges, Future Feminisms

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A note concerning the intervening years in the lives of two of the women I wrote about in the paper (Zeferina Barreto and Olga Katunal) and in my own life:

Zeferina Barreto, who played a major role in my book **Being Indian in Hueyapan**, lived until 2001, well into her 96th year. In the paper I describe her unhappiness about having her life story published in Spanish, but let me hasten to add that she quickly changed her mind – something I should have said in the original presentation. In fact she thoroughly enjoyed the attention she received over the years from people who came to Hueyapan, from far and near, and asked to meet her.

In May 1990 Zeferina Barreto, at the age of 85, came to New York with two other grown granddaughters. She was invited to come to SUNY Purchase where I was teaching at the time, to give a talk about what it was like to have an anthropologist live with her and her family – a rather playful response to the epidemic of books coming out at the time by anthropologists about what it was like to do fieldwork. Speaking before a packed auditorium of students, she was a huge success. It was, in fact, very funny – at my expense, but very fanny. The event was written up in the Westchester newspapers and included a wonderful photo.

Being Indian in Hueyapan was published in 1975 (St. Martin's Press) and will soon be coming out in a new and expanded edition.

The second woman, whom I identify in the paper as Olga, did not, as I explain, want me to publish her life story – or at least so she said. During our many visits, however, she spent hours telling me about her life and watched approvingly as I took careful notes. When she died in 1988, at the age of 88, after 10 years of meaningful friendship, I spoke to a cousin of hers with whom Olga Katunal was very close, and he encouraged me to tell her remarkable story, which, in the end, I did in **Vilna on the Seine** (Yale University Press, 1990).

As for myself, I left SUNY Purchase in September 1990 to become Dean of Social Sciences at Hunter College. In 1993 I left Hunter to become Dean of the Graduate Faculty of Political and Social Science at the New School for Social Research. Then in 2002 I returned to Hunter, at the request of newly appointed President Jennifer Raab, to become Acting Dean of Arts and Sciences.

Who's Telling Whose Story and Why? Doing Oral History Among Mexican Indians and Jewish Survivors of the Holocaust

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Introduction

There is little need, or so it would seem, to discuss the interest feminist scholars and activists have in oral history. From the earliest days of the contemporary Women's Movement, feminists have claimed that "his story" was not "her story." Books and articles abound with titles like, "In Her Own Words."¹ We have archives to gather women's impressions, creative expression and experiences. To the question posed by this paper – "who's telling whose story and why?" – the answer is obvious. Women are telling their (our) stories because they (we) have not been heard from before. And there are many different stories from different kinds of women: working-class women, middle-class women; women of color, white women; women from other countries, from remote and exotic cultures; lesbian, bisexual and heterosexual women. Almost nobody challenges the effort. It is a given.

And we feminists are hardly alone. With the recognition social history has gained among historians, oral history has established itself as a respectable field, a legitimate way to record the lives of ordinary people who have come to figure so prominently in this new sociological approach to the discipline. Still, oral history has been the object of severe criticism. Some of us appear to have lost patience with the day-by-day ramblings of courageous unknown people. We tend to prefer more focused analyses.

Take the case of Domitila, the union organizer and wife of a Bolivian miner, who tells her story in Si me permiten hablar (Let Me Speak).² While the book was enthusiastically received in the late 1970's, today people still interested in the subject probably look to anthropologist June Nash to explain the historical and social problems that have plagued Bolivian miners for centuries.³ We no longer bother with Domitila, and, I might add, have let her disappear once again into oblivion. First we – and when I say "we" I mean the "we" of the international Women's Movement – helped bring out her story in Spanish, English and many other languages (did Domitila make any money from the royalties?); we also featured her in the film The Double Day⁴ and invited her to Mexico City for the

UN International Women's Year Conference in 1975. But since? Well, we have moved on to other problems, to other approaches to Domitila's problem. And she? The Labor Movement, not feminism, has continued to support her.

Why this change of heart? Are we joining the conservative turn in politics and scholarship, silencing again the voices our Movement claimed to represent? Perhaps. Certainly Domitila's example suggests this. There is, however, another way to look at the question: Are oral histories truly representative of other voices, or are they edited inventions made to fit an agenda – political, personal and intellectual? When we "let Domitila speak" a few years ago, did we know how to listen? Did we want to listen, or were we hoping instead to create a version of her story that would support our views?

Many of us involved in gathering oral histories have been concerned about the exercise for a number of years. Among the most important recent attempts to open up the subject is Joan Ringelheim's self-criticism, "Women and the Holocaust: A Reconsideration of Research."⁵ In this piece Ringelheim challenges her own undertaking of collecting the stories of women who survived the Holocaust. As she was looking to find the special or different strengths of women, to identify the ways they were able to give support and sustenance to one another during this monstrous campaign of genocide, she began to question the political implications of the project. Without realizing it, cultural feminism, which she now rejects, led her to make some troubling assumptions:

... I seemed to be saying that in spite of rape, abuse, the murder of babies; in spite of starvation, separations, losses, terror, violence – in spite of everything ugly and disgusting, women bonded, loved each other... But the bonding was limited and exclusive. It wasn't a bonding against the enemy in solidarity with women. Did the terror of isolation and death not affect the women because they bonded? Perhaps these friendship stories cover a deeper and more troubled story of intrigue, bitterness, hurt, pain and brutality. What else happened in the groups? Between groups? The talk about friendship allowed those of us who heard the stories to admire these women, even to receive some peace and comfort. It helped lessen the terrible surrounding sounds of the Holocaust. This "woman centered" perspective and the questions it addressed were misguided.⁶

Ringelheim suggests a new set of questions which will help us "break down this dangerous alliance between trying to understand oppression and needing to mythologize our strengths in oppression or in spite of it."⁷ Are we truly interested in transforming society, or finding individual solutions for surviving? As we create our history by collecting stories, must we not be clear about our political objectives and recognize how they inform our understanding of what it means to be true to the material we collect?

Oral history, like *cinéma vérité*, is clipped and spliced. The better the cutting, the more focused the story, the more successful the final presentation. Sometimes the interviewer knows in advance the purpose of collecting a particular account, sometimes the purpose emerges from the flow of the story. But the life history only takes shape as the

interviewer writes it up, creates a readable narrative, often by eliminating the questions asked, obscuring the contrived circumstances of the encounter.

In Latin America, a new literary genre has become popular: the "novela testimonio" (testimonial novel). Speaking in what passes for the authentic voice of an actual person, the author takes liberty with the testimony; s/he invents and elaborates. For example, a Mexican peasant woman, Jesusa Palancares, is the inspiration for Elena Poniatowska's novel Hast a no verte Jesus mío⁸, much in the way Hungarian folk melodies are for Bartók's "Improvisations on Hungarian Folk Songs" (Opus 20). In both instances, the peasant woman's life and the peasant tunes provide raw material for highly personalized creations, for works of art which follow the canons of a twentieth century aesthetic. And in the process, another story is told, one we have heard many times before, about the anonymous folk, obliged to serve the interests of the dominant classes.

But Elena Poniatowska's novel, soon to be published here in Magda Bogin's English translation (Here's Looking at You, Jesus),⁹ is brilliant in its ability to capture the Spanish of rural Mexico and the problems of a tough and abused peasant woman. If it weren't for this masterful work or others like it, most middle-class Mexicans would be entirely ignorant of the lives and inner-thoughts of people like Jesusa, despite the fact that they have women like her cleaning their homes and cooking their meals. Even if Jesusa has been transformed, she approximates a reality that rich Mexicans should know something about – and North Americans too.

Yes, it is important to hear from Jesusa, Domitila and the women who survived Auschwitz. And if we are going to try to listen, why not give them voices which have been worked into artistically and politically satisfying forms? Because it is dishonest, dishonest, that is, if our purpose is "to let them speak," to hear from people who have been silenced by history.

A number of anthropologists tried to address the problem from a different angle. Unlike oral historians who cut and pasted or novelists who took artistic license, some anthropologists of my generation (trained in the 1960's) introduced the dialogue, an exchange which tried to do more than just give both sides of a conversation. It was the encounter of people whose world views and associations might be totally different.

This dialogical approach¹⁰ emerged as anthropologists began to wake up and shake off the blinders of the 1950's. With social unrest at home and abroad, we became suspicious of our discipline's close ties to colonialism, and looked for ways to talk about the West's domination of the Third World in dialogue with the exotic peoples we had come to study. We wanted to challenge those who were preparing indigenous groups for cultural and economic "development." We wanted to question as well programs based on nostalgic visions of cultures destroyed long ago that some governments, like Mexico, were interested in retrieving, if necessary inventing, for tourism. Distressed by the implications of the role of the anthropologist and bitter about the world we had inherited, we tried to find the authentic voice of the other as we recorded our dialogues. In the process, however, many of us found it hard to resist the temptation to turn the subjects of our

study into the enraged revolutionaries we thought they should be. Yet we had been trained not to interfere. Participant-observation should not lead to action-anthropology.

Our hands tied by political convictions and the sacred rules of our profession, many of us gave up studying the other, producing instead a veritable epidemic of "true confessions,"¹¹ which, in general, took two forms: the fieldworker's experiences among the "natives" and the anthropologist as "native." This new approach freed us from false pretenses. We no longer claimed to speak for or with the other, and we gave up trying to find ways to give exotic peoples a change to be heard. Striving, as we were, for an authentic voice, we ended up doing the anthropology of ourselves.

In the early 1960's most anthropologists still interpreted the cultures of non-Western peoples, worked in societies they had previously known nothing about. Today, however, more often than not we find Jews studying Jews, blacks studying blacks, women studying women, lesbians studying lesbians and Jewish lesbians studying Jewish lesbians. We have justified this turn as politically correct, "the personal," after all, "is political." If we are going to change the world, we must understand our own oppression. We have also wanted to preserve fast disappearing traditions. Bushmen and Australian Aborigines are not the only ones threatened by cultural annihilation.

A brilliant young anthropologist told me recently that his work on Eastern European Jews is his personal contribution to young Jews who have lost their history and culture. Through his research, he has also become a practicing Jew and is, in fact, far more observant than the old people who served as subjects for his study. An interesting case of going native, his work has put him in touch first and foremost with his own needs. While it is true that the people he interviewed were delighted with the interest he showed in them, his interpretation of their lives and the personal decisions he has made for himself challenge the way they chose to live and call for a return to traditions these old Jews passionately reflected.

There is of course the well-known case of Barbara Myerhoff who explained why she decided to study elderly Jews in Venice, California after having done field work in Mexico: "However much I learned... [in Mexico] was limited by the fact that I would never really be a Huichol Indian. But I would be a little old Jewish lady one day; thus it was essential for me to learn what that condition was like, in all its particulars."¹² Perhaps this is true, but does it justify, or more importantly, enrich the work? Number Our Days is certainly a masterpiece, but so is The Peyote Hunt, her book on the Huichols.¹³

Let me share parts of two experiences; one in Mexico, one in France, one with Indians, one with Jews. One where anthropologist and subjects faced each other as exotic strangers, one where they shared the same heritage – at least in theory. My trajectory from Indians to Jews resembles that of Barbara Myerhoff. In my case, however, I explained the change of areas in political terms: White Americans had done enough harm in the Third World; the time had come to study ourselves.

I wish to review some of the rough edges of these experiences, confront the voices I did not want to hear in my attempt to create neat interpretations. As I describe my work, I try to illustrate the tensions that existed between my analysis and the interests of the people who agreed to speak to me. I have used the stories of Mexicans and Jews to give my own view of the world they live in. This is not necessarily a crime, but it is not the same thing as recording life histories. It also does not free me from my responsibility to those who shared their experiences with me.

It is a great burden to take on somebody else's life and interpret it. We have to be clear about the project; clear to ourselves, the reader and the subject. Even if we recognize that the story is ours, should we not give the subjects the chance to veto parts of the narrative?

I have tried to be faithful to the people I wrote about. The challenge, however, is awesome: I want to represent their perceptions and respect their desire for privacy while I describe their lives for my own purposes. Our dialogue is a debate and a struggle, fraught with ambivalent feelings. One invited me into her home and watched over the project only to decide when the book was published that she did not want me to write it. Another sought me out to tell her story and then changed her mind in the middle of an interview. Release forms used regularly by social scientists in the United States are meaningless in a Mexican Indian village and threatening to people who survived the horrors of World War II. How can you draw up a contract on the contents of a person's life?

Mexico

In 1969-70 I went to Mexico, originally to study a group of people who wanted to give Mexico back to the Aztec Indians. They were middle-class urban professionals; school teachers, business men, a lawyer or two, who believed that the Mexican Revolution had not accomplished its mission. For Mexico to be truly free, it had to rid itself of Spanish and North American culture and return to the values of prehispanic Mexico. A major goal of the Movimiento Restaurador de Anauak was to make Nahuatl, the language of the Aztecs, the national tongue of Mexico. I assumed the group had much in common with the Black Power and Native American movements in the United States. I was wrong.

The group infuriated me almost immediately for ideological and personal reasons. The chemistry was off. I simply could not stand working with people who claimed to be interested in the plight of Indians in Mexico, but had no social program; who spent their time instead creating "hoaky" Aztec ceremonies and promoting a language which none of them spoke even minimally well. So, I left, rationalizing that I should not remain with the group if I had contempt for them. Still interested in the Indian question, I decided to look for a pueblo where the villagers would be considered Indians, that is one in which they spoke an indigenous language and had other traditions that in Mexico marked one as Indian. Finally, I settled on Hueyapan, in the State of Morelos.¹⁵

My entrance into the field was like a dream. I still cannot get over it. I fell in love with Hueyapan, its breathtaking scenery and with Doña Zeferina Barreto, a local inhabitant who took me in five minutes after I arrived in the pueblo. Looking me over as I stood at

the entrance to her home, this old woman candidly observed, "You can tell from your eyes you're not from around here, but come on in and have something to eat." I felt like the Eastern school teacher in a cowboy movie as I followed this tough woman into the kitchen to have some breakfast and meet the rest of the family.

Doña Zeferina's son, Maestro Rafael, was a school teacher in the village's elementary school and he invited me to give English classes in the late afternoons, after regular school let out. I agreed to do so four times a week and spent the rest of my time studying Nahuatl, interviewing people about their lives and the problems they had as Indians. Much of the day, I just "hung out," doing what anthropologists call participant-observation.

We were fourteen living in Doña Zeferina's home: Doña Zeferina, her husband Don José, Maestro Rafael, his wife Doña Juana, their six children, a son of the Maestro's by his first wife, Doña Zeferina's daughter, Angelina, separated from her husband and her little girl; then myself. Twelve of us shared two bedrooms and for much of my stay I slept in a bed with Angelina and her little girl.

My book begins with a day in the life of this family. Then I give the life history of Doña Zeferina, a truly remarkable woman who had four children by three different men and who, when I met her, was married to a fourth. All of her husbands died on her, including the last – soon after I left the pueblo, poor Don José fell off the roof of the bus as he was taking down a package and hit his head. He was drunk as usual.

Doña Zeferina was and remains the anthropologist's ideal informant. She sells in the market; she is a healer; she has more comadres and compadres than anybody in town. She is outspoken and one hell of a good story teller. What is more, we were deeply attached to each other. By the end of the year we spent together, she called me her North American daughter and I referred to her as my Mexican mother.

But. We spoke Spanish together. Since she was much older than I, of course I used the respectful "Usted" form with her and she did the same with me because of my class. Only in the last few years has she begun to use the "tú." Yet, every time she told an anecdote about us in my presence and quoted me talking to her, she had me address her with the familiar "tú." No rich white Gringa, not even I, could possibly treat her with the respect implied by "Usted."

But. Doña Zeferina knew that I was writing a book. She seemed pleased about this and took a proprietary interest. If I did not have my notebook, she would bawl me out. I would surely forget what she or somebody else was saying. When the translated version of the Spanish edition was ready, I went back to Hueyapan and read through the manuscript with the family to make sure I had in no way offended them or said something wrong. Then the following year I proudly returned to the village to present the book officially to the community.

Everybody received me with the usual kindness and enthusiasm. The villagers expressed their delight that the book was in Spanish. They knew what I had said because I had summarized my argument about the problem of being Indian at a town meeting several years before and gained the pueblo's support. The Hueyapeños had voted to have the name of the pueblo kept and their personal names too. So, I had had Doña Zeferina's okay for the biographical sections and that of those in attendance at the town meeting for the rest of the book.

When I returned with the published version, however, Doña Zeferina confessed that she was very unhappy that the book had come out. Why? Well. I had made no mistakes, but now everybody would know the intimate details of her life. After I had left with the corrected translation the year before, despite her agreement at the time, she got cold feet. And this after I had been so careful, I believed, not to write about sex and scandal – mine would in no way resemble Oscar Lewis' The Children of Sanchez.¹⁶ There was not a story in the book that people in Hueyapan did not know already and not a detail in it was scurilous. Still, I was using Doña Zeferina's life and she should have felt comfortable with the way I presented it.

But. In 1974 I came to Hueyapan with a film crew, the International Women's Film Project. They were preparing two films for International Women's Year – The Double Day and Simplemente Jenny.¹⁷ – and I accompanied them to Hueyapan to film the Virgin of Guadalupe fiesta. Some of the footage is featured in Simplemente Jenny. The Director, Helena Solberg-Ladd, wanted to show the inside of a home to impress the viewer with the poverty and oppression of rural Indian women in Mexico. To get as dreary a picture as possible, she asked to start the cameras before the beds were made in the morning. Doña Zeferina objected. She is a proud woman. Her home is always neat. She believes that one should hide poverty. So they compromised: the crew would take the children making a bed.

In the actual film, there is what I experienced as an endless pan of the room before the girls came in to straighten up. I am sure Doña Zeferina would have felt the same way. Even if they did not mean to, the editors of the film have produced a scene which insults the family. The film then goes on to insult the entire village for reasons I am embarrassed to admit.

Indians in Mexico do not believe that "black is beautiful," or dark brown either, for that matter. The fairer you are, the prettier. In the film, however, given lighting problems, everybody looks far darker than s/he is.

The film also took sides with one family member over another, because one said what the editors wanted to hear. In 1974, Doña Juana was the mother of nine children (in 1985 there are eleven). She did not want to have any more. Doña Zeferina actually agreed that her daughter-in-law had brought enough children into the world. Among themselves they talked regularly about the need for birth control. Nevertheless, Doña Zeferina forbade Doña Juana to discuss the matter before the camera and instructed her accordingly in threatening tones in Nahuatl. The interview which followed was understandably a bit

confused, but with careful splicing back in the U.S. the film has Doña Juana expressing tentatively the very sentiments Doña Zeferina felt were none of our business.

I could go on. The problems are numerous. The "real" story that we feminists and politically conscious people want to tell is not necessarily the story the "people" want inscribed in books or projected on the screen in their one chance for immortality. The Hueyapeños are proud and do not enjoy looking like sad, oppressed saps.

Paris

I am presently writing a book on the Jewish question in contemporary France as seen from the perspective of Eastern European Jews. The book is based, in part, on over twenty in-depth interviews conducted in 1978-79 with Lithuanian Jewish immigrants who presently live in Paris, but who grew up in or around the cities of Vilna (Vilnius) and Kovno (Kaunas) between the two wars. I draw parallels between the rise of Jewish nationalist movements in Eastern Europe earlier this century and the development of ethnic politics in France today. Whether they sought to assimilate into the dominant society or develop their own national cultures, Jews, I argue, have used Western European nationalist definitions about culture to secularize and transform Jewish traditions, not only in Israel, where it is obvious, but in the Diaspora as well.

In Paris I found another Doña Zeferina. Her name is Olga. When I say another Doña Zeferina, I mean that once again I have a main "informant," whose life story and perceptions have deeply influenced me, have helped me refine my arguments. But there the comparison stops. I am the uncultured Indian in this case, she the one with all the knowledge. In Mexico I might have been uninformed about indigenous customs, but everybody saw me as a cultivated representative of a great civilization, highly educated and sophisticated. In Paris, however, my ignorance about things Jewish – and I am a Jew after all – and the holes in my knowledge about Western literature and philosophy appall Olga.

This extraordinary woman must be in her late 70's or early 80's. She has never told me her age. She speaks Russian, German, French, English, Polish, Yiddish and Hebrew fluently and has a working knowledge of Latin as well. We speak French together, but she writes me in English, a formal, impeccable English which she learned as a child in Latvia. She never lived in an English-speaking country. Still, we speak French, because she does not like listening to the American accent.

Unlike Doña Zeferina, Olga lives alone – she never married or had any children, but did have a very interesting and full sentimental life. Her small, two-room flat is on the top floor of a pension located in the Fifth Arrondissement where intellectual Russians, Jews and Gentiles, tended to live before the Second World War. In the 1950's Olga attracted a small group of French students, many of them Jewish, who had rooms in the same pension and who would climb the four flights of stairs to debate Olga on a wide range of subjects. Some of these students have gone on to become major figures in French university and literary circles. Today, the pension houses Vietnamese students. Olga

seems to have little to do with them, but she continues to receive regular visits from young people, philosophers and students of Judaism, who long to speak to this erudite person in her cluttered rooms, filled with books, journals and newspapers in many languages.

A fascinating woman who lived through and participated in some of the most important political and intellectual movements of the twentieth century, Olga refuses to be the subject of anybody's book. The ideal "informant," at least for me who takes to women like her, she simply will not accept the role I want to give her. I can cite her insights, but not her life.

Since I am not at liberty to talk about her personal experiences, I will give one example of her intellectual style. For a variety of reasons, Olga is highly critical of Gershom Scholem and we talk about this renowned scholar of Jewish mysticism frequently. Once I suggested, in response to her insistence that I spelled his name wrong, that "Gershom" was a poor transliteration of the Hebrew "Gershon":

Excuse me, I can't help insisting on a question already pointed out in my previous letter. Dear Judith, do read my remarks attentively! You see, I am greatly surprised. Are you a believer? Do you believe whatever you see in print? I'm afraid you do, otherwise you would not imitate the illogical spelling one comes across nowadays in America and perhaps elsewhere. The name you spell "Gershon" cannot be and is not (Gershon); it is (Gershom). You are totally wrong about "the way the name has been transliterated, into English." Translitterators don't always know what they are doing, they sometimes just muddle on. Still, they are not altogether blind or deaf; they would hardly mistake (nun) for (mem). Is ethnography or what is now called anthropology keeping you busy day and night? Don't you ever open the so-called "Holy Bible," not even the English one of King James? Genesis 46, 11: "And the sons of Levi; Gershon, Kohath and Merari." The descendants of Gershon were known as Gershuni. If you were interested in our history of the last few centuries, you would, know that Gershuni, Gershenson and other surnames derived from Gershon were quite frequent in Central and Eastern Europe. The name Gershon (Gerson in German) has been familiar to me since early childhood. Yet Gershom, too, is a Hebrew name. Exodus 2, 22: "And she (Zipporah) bore him (Moses) a son, and he called his name Gershom; for he said, I have been a stranger in a strange land (stranger, there)." Has (Gershorm) ever been a customary name among European Jews? Maybe, though it seems unlikely. I never met a Gershom. Well, I am not omniscient, on the contrary: If your information on that subject is wider than mine, please let me know, I am always eager to learn... As to Gershon Scholem [sic] whatever I think or don't think of him, I do think that everybody called him, (Gershon) which is a traditional Hebrew name and must be left unchanged.

Be well, dear Judith, I shall be happy to see you!
Love,

All this because I made a rather silly comment about transliteration. I had not bothered to check to see that both names existed in the Bible. Actually, Gershom Scholem was

called "Gerhard Scholem" in Germany. When he moved to Palestine, he changed his name to Gershom. Perhaps this was his given Hebrew name, perhaps he chose it because he too had been a "stranger in a strange land." Perhaps he wanted to honor his great-grandmother Zipporah. His autobiographical memoirs do not say nor does his biographer, David Biale.

Although not the focus of my study, I spoke about the Holocaust at great length with everybody I interviewed, including Olga, who objected to the misuse of the term. Here again I had to confront the conflict between the analysis and the subject and question the purpose of my endeavor. How could I possibly tell these stories without distorting such painful memories?

A couple of years ago I presented a paper about a woman who survived the war in Poland by passing as a Pole. She never recovered from the trauma. Although M. wanted to tell me about it, the interview was too much for her and, finally, for me also. She left without ever finishing her tale. The paper has provoked heated debates, but it illustrates, I believe, the tensions we must expose as we try to come to terms with the story and the analysis. Let me quote from the first few pages:

During the final months of the war, M. hid out in a small Polish village under a gentile name. She had but one valuable possession: a set of false identity papers. Otherwise she was desperately poor, with little to eat, rags for clothing, a hovel for shelter and a few burlap bags to cover her at night. Times, to be sure, were difficult for everyone, but only a Jew escaped from the ghetto could have lived as miserably as this. To invite people over was a risk she dared not take.

One day there was a knock at the door. It was the mayor. "You know," he threatened, "rumor has it that you are a Jew." To answer, "Who, me? I'm not a Jew," would have given her away as quickly as if she were a drunk who denied she touched liquor. Instead, she looked him straight in the eyes and replied, "Where I come from, they say Jewish women are built with slits running horizontally." The mayor howled with laughter and the questioning stopped. No Jewish woman could have said a thing like that.

Blond, tall, intelligent, determined to live, M. managed to survive in a world that was systematically annihilating the Jews. She did so by passing as a Pole. Maybe she could have come through the war as a Jew; certainly some did. But when the opportunity came, M. dissociated her fate from that of her people. Husband murdered, the Vilna ghetto liquidated, M. avoided the last round-up and escaped the walled quarter, leaving her baby with peasants in one village and making it on her own in another.

We met in Paris in 1979, thirty-four years after the war, and M. was still running. As she told me her story, she began to cry, requesting we stop, promising to return, but she never did. In a way I was relieved, for anger and shame had crept over both us, M. could not forgive herself for some of the choices she made and I, to my surprise was having difficulty as well.

I did not mean to be intrusive, but M. felt exposed. By the end, she was no longer really talking to me, but bitterly criticizing the lawyer she saw in the 1940's who insisted on learning every painful detail to prepare his brief for the reparations hearing. The nightmare of the war years, her personal losses, became a commodity whose value was based on the sum of money an attorney could win in exchange for these few morbid, tales. Now I too seemed to be grabbing at her past and she fled, leaving me to imagine the part of the story she did not tell.

I interviewed over twenty individuals, Jewish women and men, all from the same part of Eastern Europe as M., many the victims of far greater hardships than she. Still it is M.'s story that haunts me the most. Courageous and humiliating, it illustrates with excruciating clarity how difficult it is to choose to be yourself when born into a group that is persecuted for being different. Obviously we do not need the Holocaust to see this dilemma, but the force of those circumstances dramatizes the more general problem faced by minorities in Europe and the United States.

M. grew up in Poland between the two wars, in a country newly constituted by the League of Nations and strongly influenced, on the Right and on the Left, by the conflicting ideals of Western European democracy: freedom, civil rights, nationalism and assimilation. By the time the Germans invaded Vilna, M. knew well the practical value of being just like everybody else. True, the ideological landscape in Poland during those years did not lead every Jew to try to pass as a Pole. Many joined the Partisans and an even greater number bowed to Jewish destiny and ended their lives in concentration camps. There were people who spent the war in cellars and some fortunate enough to have left Europe in time. Thus given the wide range of experiences, why focus on this one case?

M.'s account is important because it is troubling in ways that the others are not. In contrast to people who remained Jews to themselves and before the world, M. chose to resist by lying to the enemy. Challenging fascism on its own terms, M. denigrated herself as a Jew and a woman. Her triumph was not in the preservation of personal integrity, but in the satisfaction of proving that the fascists were wrong: the Jewish woman in her was invisible. Inviting the mayor to-see-for-himself, M. privately evoked the progressive voices of European history, who, since the 18th century, have maintained that everybody is virtually the same. According to this view, freedom for the individual can best be achieved by minimizing differences.¹⁹

In the rest of the paper, I discuss the contradictions within democratic theory for women and Jews, two groups who have been discriminated against because they were different. I do this through the works of Simone de Beauvoir (The Second Sex) and Jean-Paul Sartre (The Anti-Semite and Jew) and then return to a detailed summary of M.'s life – as much as she gave me that is – to illustrate the painful logic in the choices she made and analyze the trouble she had with them.

Conclusion

There is no simple conclusion to the problems discussed here, but we can review some of the major questions raised. In the name of history, anthropology, science or art, we do not have the right to do what we wish with the stories of others. We might see more clearly than our subjects and have positions that are more politically correct. We might be able to transform the lives of ordinary people into poetry or a poignant description with universal meaning. We might even manage to solve the conflict between the interpreter and the story-teller and find a way to record somebody else's life faithfully. Still, no matter what we can do we have very real obligations to our subjects.

Does that mean we must give our subjects veto power? How and when should we assume we have the okay? Should I have pulled the books off the shelves of bookstores when Doña Zeferina announced she had second thoughts? No? She had her chance? By whose rules? Should I ban Simplemente Jenny or bawl Doña Zeferina out for wanting to lie on the screen? Or confront the entire village about their racism when they scream that they look so ugly in the film? What about freedom of the media? What about our right to challenge the corrupt and help educate the ignorant?

Are the rules the same when we work with poorly educated Indians in Mexico and intellectual Jews in France? If I publish irresponsibly in Paris, the people I interviewed will do something about it. But how can Hueyapeños voice their objections in a way they would be heard?

And what about the authentic voice? Will we give up the struggle to engage other points of views and experiences? Must we be reduced to solipsism and speak only of and for ourselves? Hopefully not, for this leads to the kind of work that should be done on the analyst's couch and not in the name of anthropology, oral history or feminism.

End Notes

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Elaine Showalter, A Literature of Their Own, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1977.

2. Domitila B. de Chungara and Moema Viezzer, Let Me Speak: Testimony of Domitila, a Woman of the Bolivian Mines, Translated by Victoria Ortiz, Monthly Review Press, New York, 1979.

3. June Nash, We Eat the Mines and the Mines Eat Us: Dependency and Exploitation in Bolivian Tin Mines, Columbia University Press, New York, 1979.

4. The Double Day and Simplemente Jenny, two films directed by Helena Solberg-Ladd, produced by the International Women's Film Project, based in Washington, D.C., were made for and partially funded by the United Nations for International Women's Year, 1975.

5. Joan Ringelheim, "Women and the Holocaust: A Reconsideration of Research," Signs, Vol. 10, No.4, Summer, 1985, forthcoming.

6. Ibid., quote taken from manuscript.

7. Ibid.

8. Elena Poniatowska, Hasta No Verte Jesús Mío, ERA, Mexico City. 1969.

9. Ibid., Here's Looking: at You, Jesus, Translated by Magda Begin, Pantheon, New York, 1986, forthcoming.

10. Kevin Dwyer, Moroccan Dialogues: Anthropology in Question, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1982.

And

Johannes Fabian, Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes its Object, Columbia University Press, New York, 1983.

11. Paul Rabinow, Reflections on Fieldwork in Morocco, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1977. This is the best known of many.

12. Barbara Myerhoff, Number Our Days. Simon and Schuster, New York, 1978, p.19. While I am generally critical of using anthropology for personal quests, it is a great tragedy that Barbara Myerhoff's remarkable study never had the chance to help her grow into a little old Jewish lady. On January 7, 1985, just before her fiftieth birthday, Barbara Myerhoff died of cancer.

13. Ibid., The Peyote Hunt: The Sacred Journey of Huichol Indians, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 1974.

14. Judith Friedlander, Being Indian in Hueyapan: A Study of Identity in Contemporary Mexico, St. Martin's Press, New_York, 1975, Chapt. VIII.

15. Ibid., Chapt. VII.

16. Oscar Lewis, The Children of Sanchez, Random House, New York, 1961.

17. See Double Day, op. cit.

18. Gershom Scholem has written a number of volumes on Jewish thought and mysticism. Among his best known works are: Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism, Schocken Books, Jerusalem, 1941 and The Messianic Idea in Judaism and Other Essays on Jewish Spirituality. Schocken Books, New York, 1971.

19. "The Anti-Semite and the Second Sex: A Cultural Reading of Sartre and de Beauvoir." A Century of Change: Women in Culture and Politics, Edited by J. Friedlander, et. al., Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1986, forthcoming.

The essay has been published in French translation: "Question Juive et féminin universel," Stratégies des femmes, Edited by M.-C. Pasquier et. al., Editions Tierce, Paris, 1984.