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I KILLED MY GRANDMOTHER: MARY ANTIN, AMOS OZ, AND THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF A NAME

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Only to hear those things made one sob and sob and choke with pain. People who saw such things never smiled any more, no matter how long they lived; and sometimes their hair turned white in a day, and some people became insane on the spot.

—Mary Antin, *The Promised Land*

Was my grandmother one of the people living within the Pale of Settlement who saw such things? Was she one of the many thousands of Jews who, after witnessing the sight of “babies torn limb from limb before their mothers’ eyes” left Russia for the West? (Antin 10). As I remember her, my grandmother rarely smiled, but was it because of blood Cossacks spilled in the streets of Kishinev, or because she was a lonely widow exiled in the Bronx?

Sheyndel Scholnick Kipnis was newly pregnant with my father Louis when she arrived at Ellis Island on April 4, 1906. She had traveled from Kishinev with her eight-year old son, Schulem, and her husband, Raphael, whose parents had already made the journey. My father was born on Delancey Street, on Manhattan’s Lower East Side. Did he, the family’s first American, inherit the memory of what their eyes had seen? Did they tell him?

He never said.

In the last years of his life, when he could still walk to the local branch of the public library on the Upper West Side, my father presented me with a cache of documents: photocopies of the index to articles published in *The New York Times* with red check marks next to the articles about the pogroms in Kishinev; pages from a reference work titled *The Russian Jew*, and a map of the Soviet Union, with the location of Kishinev circled. The documents were his answer to my periodic questions about why the Kipnises had immigrated

to the United States, and what happened to them when they arrived. “Pogrom” was the key and only word, followed by a helpless shrug and a slight welling up of tears. The door was closed, or I didn’t push hard enough. I didn’t think then that some day knowing more would become a burning issue.

The bare bones of the story: they came because of the pogroms.

Is it possible for an entire family narrative to be encapsulated in a word?¹

The difficulty of extracting a satisfying immigration story from one’s grandparents is rendered humorously in Amos Oz’s recent *A Tale of Love and Darkness*, in which Oz reconstructs the history of his family, whose cast of characters originally lived not far from mine in nineteenth-century Russia. In the early part of the twentieth century, like my ancestors, Oz’s grandparents,

the love-struck cousins, set sail for New York, as hundreds of thousands of other Jews from Russia and other Eastern European countries were doing at that time. Their intention was to marry in New York and take American citizenship, in which case *I might have been born in Brooklyn or in Newark, New Jersey, and written clever novels in English about the passions and inhibitions of top-hatted immigrants and the neurotic ordeals of their agonized progeny.* (91; emphasis added)

Instead, Oz explains, instead of staying in America, the grandparents married and “a great puzzle followed.” Soon after arriving in New York, “this odd couple had paid for another passage—or perhaps their parents helped them again—and embarked on another steamship, and without a backward glance they returned to Odessa” (91). And ultimately, because his grandparents and parents escaped from Europe and emigrated to Israel in the 1930s, Amos Klausner, his original name, born not in Brooklyn or Newark, but in Jerusalem, became Amos Oz, not Philip Roth, and wrote novels about the passions and inhibitions of immigrants to Israel and their agonized progeny.

In *A Tale of Love and Darkness*, Oz seeks an answer to the mystery of his ancestors’ return to Europe, a reverse journey almost without precedent.

“Grandma, what was wrong with America?”

“There was nothing wrong. Only it was so crowded.”

More questions. More evasiveness. Finally, Oz tries his grandfather, who answers with a small increase of narrative detail.

“What didn’t we like? What didn’t we like? We didn’t like anything about it. Nu, well. It was full of horses and Red Indians.”

“Red Indians?”

“Red Indians.”

More than this I was never able to get out of him. (92)

Red Indians. Pogroms. What is there about this story that can't seem to get told in either direction?

Oz's grandparents left Odessa for Vilna after the October Revolution in 1917, but finally the anti-Semitism of the region came too close to home, and in 1933, "emigrated halfheartedly, almost against their will," to Jerusalem (104). When as a boy growing up Oz asked his father what it was like to be a Jew in Vilna in 1932, his father turned aside the question: "There's no way . . . that you can understand this. And it's better that way. I'm glad, even though you can't understand this either, that is to say, why I'm glad that you can't understand what it was like: I definitely don't want you to understand. Because there's no need, there's simply no need anymore. Because it's all over. It's all over once and for all. That is to say, it won't happen here."

"But what exactly did they do to you?" was the question Oz had asked his father (101). "What exactly happened during the pogroms?" Maybe that's the wrong question to which there seems to be only a generic answer, an answer that finds its form in a genre, a ritual narrative. For of course the story of Russian Jews leaving Europe for America has been told, often in memoirs, often in Yiddish.² As Irving Howe puts it in *The World of Our Fathers*, "The statements one finds in the memoir literature are persuasive through their very repetition. We came because we were hungry; we came because we were persecuted; we came because life in Russia or Poland had grown insufferable. These are the answers one gets over and over again, and there is not the slightest reason to doubt them" (57). But, he adds, what the memoirs "do not, perhaps cannot, explain is why some Jews acted on these urgent motives and others did not" (58). Why did my great-grandmother leave with two children after the major 1903 pogrom in Kishinev immortalized in the poem of Bialik, and why did my grandparents wait, apparently in Kishinev, until after the pogroms of 1905? What were they waiting for?³

Mary Antin's bestselling autobiography is an exception to the rule of not telling. Published in 1912 to wide acclaim, *The Promised Land* describes in detail how her family decided to leave Russia for America, and what the costs of the journey were in her formation as a writer. "I was born, I have lived, and I have been made over." This is the dramatic opening of *The Promised Land*. "Is it not time to write my life's story?" the Mary Antin narrator asks rhetorically at age thirty-one. "I am just as much out of the way as if I were dead, for I am absolutely other than the person whose story I have to tell . . ." (1). Antin left Russia for the United States with her mother and siblings in 1894, near the beginning of the great waves of immigration Oz mentions. Although Antin spent her childhood in Polotsk, 1500 miles to the north of Kishinev, she describes life within the Pale of Settlement in a way that evokes the conditions

that affected most Jews in the region—with both enough detail and generality for me to feel implicated in its emotional and psychological geography, albeit at several temporal and spatial removes.

In what follows, I'm going to read the two very different autobiographies together as the story of a writer's coming of age—the story of a name and renaming—and in the wake of that history, my own.

* * * * *

What's in a name?

In some of the earliest discussions of what defines autobiography, Philippe Lejeune, the reigning authority on the genre in France, emphasized the importance of the name, in fact making the generally accepted claim that the “deep subject of autobiography is the proper name” (20). In this view, the verifiable fact that the narrator's name matches the author's becomes one of the founding criteria, if not the key guarantor of an authentic autobiographical practice. In the case of *A Tale of Love and Darkness*, as well as *The Promised Land*, the writer's name (last, but also first) is also intimately connected to matters of origins and identity—above all, to the narrative of vocation.

I begin with Oz, since the name change is highlighted in the autobiography as a central turning point in his life story: “And so at the age of fourteen and a half, a couple of years after my mother's death, I killed my father and the whole of Jerusalem, changed my name, and went on my own to Kibbutz Hulda to live there over the ruins.” That declaration ends a chapter, and in the next, Oz elaborates: “I killed him particularly by changing my name.” The name Oz abandons at age fourteen is not only his father's. His father's name had been made famous by his father's uncle, Professor Joseph Gedalyahu Klausner. Oz's father dreamt that one day he would emerge from the shadow cast by his uncle the “childless professor” and become “a famous professor” himself (464). When that dream seemed to elude him, the father hoped that his son would inherit the mantle of the name.

In a way, though, that plot did reach fulfillment. The son became a famous writer. But it was not under the name of Klausner. Oz, the name the boy Amos chose for himself at fourteen, is a Hebrew word, meaning strength and valor. The Oz decoration is the second highest medal given for heroism in the Israeli army. The new name coincided with the boy's double choice to live on a kibbutz and to become a writer, after a bookworm's childhood spent in a damp, ground-floor Jerusalem apartment. The choice of the Hebrew name to replace the European one represents both the deliberate turning away from the old, fetishized models of European Enlightenment culture and the journey toward the forging of a new world on new terms, if always also in part

upon the ashes of the old. And it's indeed this sense of movement out of Europe before and after the establishment of the state of Israel that led critics like the novelist, the late Batya Gur, to describe *A Tale of Love and Darkness* as a "national autobiography, if there is such a genre."⁴

Faced with his father's silence, Oz looks for clues to family history in the visual evidence of a "battered photo album" that miraculously survived the family's days in Vilna (101). Studying the portraits of family and friends captured in these snapshots of Eastern European life before the disaster, Oz guesses that his father may be the sole survivor, the only one who managed to escape in time. "What was the fate of the other girl in the picture," Oz wonders, riveted by this record of loss, "the pretty girl in a striped dress, with a little black handbag tucked under her arm and white socks and white shoes? For how long after the picture was taken did this pretty girl go on smiling?" (103).

The album bears the traces of a fantasy of assimilation on the part of educated Jews enamored of a culture that ultimately repaid their love with exclusion and extermination. It is this doomed fantasy that the adolescent wills behind him by moving to the kibbutz. The name Klausner is the name belonging to the Europhiles who hoped one day they would be "accepted," that they would "belong," that as an outcome of their "frantic courtship" they would "be loved . . ." (104). For the boy, choosing Oz means refusing the terms of the old equation—what it means to love and be loved—just as his grandparents moved from the exile of Diaspora to the promised welcome of the "homeland" (105). Born in Jerusalem, Oz leaves home without leaving the country. His migration is a journey that performs a separation, a split, within his identity—a departure from his father's house that is nothing less than the autobiography of a name.

Antin's story, as we'll see, is also shaped by the rupture of immigration and a renaming, even though the location of the "promised land" in America makes a crucial difference to the writer's journey. Antin shares a passionate, if ambivalent, desire to please, to be accepted by a culture of gentiles, of the sort that animated the Klausner family in Europe, and the fantasy of assimilation that failed in Europe succeeds in America (at a price, of course). *The Promised Land*, with the Statue of Liberty on its original and current cover, embraces immigration as the deepest meaning of America; it's in this sense that I would be tempted to call it too a "national autobiography," to the extent that America's story about itself is a story of coming to America.

In the first part of *The Promised Land*, Antin evokes the atmosphere of panic and despair that overtook the inhabitants of the Pale of Settlement in the 1880s that my epigraph invoked. "It was a little before Passover that the cry

of the hunted thrilled the Jewish world with the familiar fear. The wholesale expulsion of Jews from Moscow and its surrounding district at cruelly short notice was the name of this latest disaster. Where would the doom strike next?" (112). And in the context of the Passover ceremony, this question became one of destination: "But what said some of us at the end of the long service? Not 'May we be next year in Jerusalem,' but 'Next year—in America!' So there was our promised land, and many faces were turned towards the West" (113). Antin's father left the family for America when she was ten—in 1891. The girl found his letters home exciting, for they seemed to be "inspired by a vision," a vision called "America" (114).

Unlike most families in the Pale, the Antins believed in education for girls, and Antin describes going to school with her older sister Fetchke. The Antin parents don't want the younger, precocious sister to advance in her studies at the pace of the older one, and so they encourage her to go and play during the Russian lessons. But determined to keep up, the younger girl steals a Russian primer in order to learn how to read and write by herself. The girl's thirst for knowledge, and desire to have her talents recognized, come together in a crucial scene in a chapter from the first part titled "The Tree of Knowledge." Antin recreates this moment: "and what I was doing then, *I, Mashke*, was bending over a stolen book, rehearsing A, B, C, by the names my sister had given them" (95, my emphasis). *I, Mashke*. Why does Antin refer to herself in this way, not just "I," but "I, Mashke"?

The importance of the name is bound up with Antin's sense of her self as not just the subject, but the heroine, as she puts it, of her story: "I suppose I ought to explain my own name also," she writes, in the course of describing the members of her family, "especially because I am going to emerge as the heroine by and by." Antin then proceeds to enumerate the variations on her name:

Be it therefore known that I was named Maryashe, for a bygone aunt. I was never called by my full name, however. "Maryashe" was too dignified for me. I was always "Mashinke," or else "Mashke," by way of diminutive. A variety of nicknames, mostly suggested by my physical peculiarities, were bestowed on me from time to time by my fond or foolish relatives. My uncle Berl, for example, gave me the name of "Zukrochene Flum," which I am not going to translate, because it is uncomplimentary. (55)⁵

Let's move forward to the second part of the autobiography, the chapter titled "The Promised Land," to follow out the question of the name. "With our despised immigrant clothing," Antin writes about the family's first trip to a department store, where they disposed of their "hateful homemade

European costumes,” “we also shed our impossible Hebrew names.” There is nothing in itself remarkable about the change of immigrant names, common to the experience of thousands of families. Thus, sister Fetchke becomes Frieda, Deborah Dora. The renaming, as often the case, respects the initials of the first name. But Antin says she was “cheated.” She doesn’t get a new name. “My Hebrew name being Maryashe in full, Mashke for short, Russianized into Marya (*Mar-ya*), my friends said that it would hold good in English as *Mary*; which was very disappointing, as I longed to possess a strange-sounding American name like the others” (149–50). There is, however, a compensation of sorts. When her father becomes “Mr. Antin,” as was not the case in Polotzk, so too does the daughter become “Mary Antin.” “I am forgetting,” she remembers, “the consolation I had in this matter of names, from the use of my surname, which I have had no occasion to mention until now” (150).

If the drama of renaming is a familiar step in the classic pattern of assimilation, of Americanization, there is nonetheless something curious going on here. In the manuscript pages from *The Promised Land*, the passage I quoted earlier reads: “*what was I doing, I Malke*” (emphasis added). In the manuscript version, Antin names herself with her Hebrew (or Yiddish) name. Why this change from the manuscript to the published text?⁶ Antin explains to the reader that Maryashe was her Hebrew name. In *Call it English*, Hana Wirth-Nesher notes acerbically that “Maryashe” was “hardly a Hebrew word,” and that this adjustment to her self-portrait corresponds to Antin’s habit of “homogenizing important [linguistic] differences” (70). Following Wirth-Nesher’s lead, I would suggest that in the move from Malke to Maryashe/ Mashke, Antin chooses to represent herself as *already* Russianized the better to become Americanized, rather than being identified by the name closer to her origins: born into the mother tongue of Yiddish. Malke is a name both Hebrew and Yiddish. What Malke as a name is not, is Russian. It’s as if in the story about vocation she wants to tell, Antin finds it to her advantage to have been on the road to “Mary” all along. Better Russian than Jewish. The subtitle of the autobiography in its original version was “Autobiography of a Russian Immigrant.”⁷

Like Oz, Antin was a bookish child—burning her lamp late into the night: “Of these I remember with the greatest delight Louisa Alcott’s stories” (201). But of all the books in the library, the one that drew her greatest attention was the encyclopedia. She’d read the biographical entries—beginning with George Washington—and then about her “favorite authors,” and fantasized that they were happy to die the better to be remembered in the encyclopedia. This was her dream too, and her ambition:

But it grew on me in spite of myself, till finally I could not resist the temptation to study out the exact place in the encyclopaedia where my name would belong. I saw that it would come not far from 'Alcott, Louisa M.'; and I covered my face with my hands, to hide the silly, baseless joy in it. I practised saying my name in the encyclopaedic form, 'Antin, Mary'; and I realized that it sounded chopped off, and wondered if I might not annex a middle initial. (202–203)

Although Antin claims to make light of her literary ambition and mocks her youthful vanity as she recaptures this phase of her life, her “child’s dream-secrets” (203), in looking to place Antin after Alcott in the alphabet of successful American writers, Mary Antin expresses the mixed joy and shame of the desire to become not only American, but famous, to rid herself forever, for posterity, of the part of her who was still the little Yiddish-speaking girl from the Pale.

In what the adult autobiographer calls “the borderland between the old life and the new” (198), through her success writing poetry “printed in an American newspaper,” Mary Antin practices for becoming “Antin, Mary.” At the same time, and this is the founding paradox of the immigrant writer, Antin’s poems, published in the newspaper, make her famous not just because of her singular talent, but because “the whole Jewish community claimed kinship with me, simply because I was a Jew” (199). Mary Antin alone possesses her name, but its story is one that represents the aspirations of thousands. “And I am the youngest of America’s children,” Antin declares boldly in her closing lines (286).

The Promised Land was wildly successful in large part because it was perceived to express the immigrant experience in America: Antin bore witness to an American story in the language she acquired. Oz responded to the response of identification his book created this way: “I was digging in my own back yard, and I must have touched an underground cable; suddenly the lights in all the windows began to flash.”⁸ If both autobiographies express a self-conscious sense of national representativeness, there is a further thread of connection I’d like to darken, respecting the obvious differences of location. When Oz jettisons Klausner, when Antin fantasizes about becoming “Antin, Mary,” the stakes of the renaming are very high, a matter of life and death—at least rhetorically. Oz refers to his severance as murder; and as we saw earlier, Antin refers to her previous self in the third person as dead: “*she* and not *I* is my real heroine. My life I have still to live; her life ended when mine began” (1). For both Oz and Antin, as their metaphors suggest, there is an experience of history—of a particular kind of displacement from one’s original home—that comes at great cost in order to become the writer—and

the new citizen—each longs to be. Both writers grapple with the existential dilemma (in this case Jewish but characteristic of much immigrant autobiography) about what it means to have your individual identity entangled with a collective, diasporic history shaped by the trauma of departure.⁹

I've been talking about these two autobiographies dispassionately as a literary critic and a student of autobiography. But I must confess that that's not how I read them. I read these stories—autobiographically—with a kind of envy, ancestor envy, because their authors both know so much more about their genealogies and family than I ever can or will. My own family history is located somewhere between these two autobiographies that are themselves almost 100 years apart. I have started to look for my story belatedly and very late in life—perhaps too late. But I am hoping that between the lines of Antin, Oz, and others, I can find enough resemblances to help me relocate my family history within the grand immigration narrative of the twentieth century. In other words, for me the question of autobiography, and these autobiographies in particular, is not a purely academic matter.¹⁰

The door on my family history opened unexpectedly in the year 2000, when a real estate investor specializing in property in Israel that belonged to absentee foreign owners contacted my sister and me about a tiny plot of land that my grandmother had bought in 1926, during the British Mandate of Palestine.¹¹ This story finally came to an end in 2006, when after an almost Dickensian inheritance saga the property was sold for a very small (slightly ridiculous) sum of money. The requirements of the legacy (finding all the heirs) led me to meet my first cousin—whom I'd never met—and his daughter, who, for reasons of her own had begun to dabble in genealogy, which in turn led me to research of my own, and the discovery of photographs and documents I had scooped up unsorted in the hectic aftermath of my father's death. The photographs led to new information and new puzzles: the existence of great-grandparents and what seemed to be other mystery relatives, as well as the original documents about the acquisition of the property. At the time, I was finishing a book (*But Enough About Me*) and the unfinished story seemed the perfect ending to an argument about the fascinations and frustrations of life writing. I thought the anecdote about my belated inheritance was amusing—and a good story. But, a few years later, just before the property narrative came to a close, developments sent me back to this tale, to new material and photographs that my sister had in her possession, and to questions I had set aside. I suddenly found myself wondering again—with something resembling an obsession: who were these people I was related to, and what had happened to them.



Kipnis family portrait, circa 1906 (© Copyright and reprinted by permission of the author).

The most important addition to the emerging genealogy was a receipt signed by my grandfather for a cemetery plot for his father—my newly discovered great-grandfather. The precise date allowed me to write for his death certificate. The information on the death certificate led to the revelation of his father's name: Raphael, like that of my grandfather.¹² The death certificate reconfirmed his existence—and that of his wife, Sarah, who had signed for it. The signature of her existence made me reexamine the ship's manifest I already had obtained from the National Archives—and to realize that I had clues as to the mystery people. Why was it taking me so long to accept the existence of this generation?

Because it had no story, just the markers of dates and cemetery plots.

The picture, I believe, was taken in 1906, immediately after the arrival of my grandparents from Kishinev, in a photographer's studio on the Lower East Side. The portrait joins a family that had been separated for several years by separate and successive immigrations, a pattern common to many

Eastern European families in this period: first my great-grandfather in 1899; then, as I mentioned earlier, my great-grandmother and two adult children in 1903, immediately following the famous Kishinev pogrom that year; then my grandfather, grandmother, and uncle in 1906, following the pogroms of 1905. The severe looking woman to my great-grandfather's left is his wife Sarah; the young woman standing behind my grandfather and great-grandfather is Zirl, a 25-year-old seamstress, according to the manifest. The boy with glasses is Itzvchok, an 18-year old laborer (later Isaac, finally Isidor). All three are headed for the home of my great-grandfather, who had arrived a few years earlier. According to the manifest, Chaim (soon to be Harry) paid the passage for his wife and children and gave them \$100 with which to travel. (The tall man with the strangely shaped head thus far remains unnamed, though his features resemble his mother's.)

By 1906, when this picture was taken, images registered quickly enough for the sitters to smile, but the tradition of not smiling well established from the slower photographic sessions of the nineteenth century may have carried on. It's also possible that there just isn't much smiling in this family—though there seems to be the trace of a benign mood on two of the faces. Is it because I know that this group arrived in America separately that I see the divisions? My grandmother and her little family at one end, her husband's side of the family at the other. Daughter-in-law and mother-in-law as far apart as possible. Who touches whom? Daughter Zirl touches her brother and father. The son touches his mother's shoulder (I'm touched by the way Itzvchok's sleeves hang below his wrist—perhaps the jacket was borrowed for the occasion?). Some hands and elbows press against each other, but on the whole, against the implausible backdrop of a Fragonard forest with its filmy trees and potted palm in the corner, this strangely arranged family looks like a group of lonely monads, each encased in staring solitude, and even sadness. My grandmother seems the most uncomfortable as she adjusts her dress over her pregnant stomach, and holds her purse, suspended awkwardly from her fingers. If the Kipnis family was happy to be reunited, you wouldn't know it from this picture.

My father never mentioned the existence of his grandfather, who died a few years before his own father, nor his grandmother. He never mentioned his father's siblings—who would have been his aunt and uncle. My sister and I never met his brother, Sam, our uncle, or his son, Julian, though we knew of their existence. But my father saved many letters and photographs from his brother and nephew, clippings about their life in Arizona, as well as tightly wound honey-colored sausage curls that might have been the severed payess (sidelocks) of a young man's rebellion against orthodox Judaism, or a bride's

locks cut before a wedding, in anticipation of a wig. (The mystery of the hair's origins remains intact.) For whom was my father saving the remnants and traces of his family history? Maybe the family pictures and other mementoes had been saved by his mother, my grandmother. Maybe he just emptied her possessions into a box when she died, as we did with his—something to look at later, to be organized into an album, but forgotten about in the back of a deep closet.

In the years he lived alone after my mother's death, before he completely lost his mind, my father could have shown us the photographs, told us the stories that perhaps my mother didn't allow him to tell, or that his mother told him not to pass on. But instead, he lived the end of his life in a present tense absent of memory, consumed by the immediacy of illness and the disintegration of his mind.

It's probably impossible for anyone who works on autobiography to resist the temptation of telling her own story. I've already succumbed to the temptation many times and I still haven't gotten it right. Or rather, the story changes over time with every piece of new information, as well as every rereading of the old. But that's not quite it either: the more I look, the more eludes me. The serial autobiographer wants access to buried secrets and untold stories.¹³ Like serial killers, serial autobiographers can't stop; and every attempt to tell the story resembles the compulsive reenactment of a crime—whose motives are often lost in time along with the buried bodies. Like my fellow obsessives, I return obstinately to this quest, to what Oz calls the "puzzle," long after the facts, beyond the point when those, notably my father, who could have answered the questions, can speak.¹⁴ I didn't ask when I could: I didn't ask and they didn't tell. And now? Now, I'm trying again.

In the case of the descendants of Kishinev, history is tied to three interlocking traumas: pogrom, departure, arrival. Here is an example of that story from a colleague's grandfather who, at age nine, witnessed the pogroms in Kishinev. Written as a letter when he was eighty-seven to his grandson, the narrative contains some of the detail I crave:

I lived through 2 pogroms in 1903 and 1905. The 1903 made an uproar all over the world. 145 people were killed, hundreds of people were wounded. I remember we huddled together in a corner of the house and we tried for the children not to cry. We were afraid the people will hear us, the children cried because the parents cried, it was no way to conseal it; only one pearson did not cry is my grand mother. She carried her tragedgy with her. My grand dady was killed when he went to the sellar to bring up some wine and some goim killed him. He was a very inteligend man and my Grand Mother knew how to admire a man of this kind.

He goes on in his letter to describe leaving alone for the long overseas journey to America and to his discovery, almost directly upon arrival, of the “taste” of freedom.¹⁵

I have no comparable document from my Kishinev family, but here is a story my uncle Sam told his granddaughter Sarah, and that she shared with me recently on email. My uncle was about the same age as my colleague’s grandfather:

Grandpa told us that when he was young the Cossacks would come to their town and give the children a ride. At that point they were very friendly. His dad [my grandfather] had a tobacco store, and I guess they were people of means. The very same men who gave them rides came through the town killing and looting. He used to say they came in the front door and he and his family fled through the back. They went to the Black Sea and on to England. Then to the States. Of course, they lost everything but what they could carry.

The part about the Black Sea is contradicted by the documents, but the reference to the tobacco store resonates with vague memories I have of hearing about life before the failures of America, and confirmed in my mind by my grandfather’s slender, sterling silver cigarette case, monogrammed with his initials, that sits empty on my desk.

I love the image of my unmet uncle riding with the Cossacks, just as I am moved by imagining the children and parents crying, huddled in their house, but it doesn’t take me very far. When I add these minuscule details to what can be reconstructed from photographs, death certificates, gravestones, ship’s manifests, and internet searches, what do I have? Can I combine these shards of knowledge together to create some kind of patchwork? This would be a story never told, an example of what we might call “unstoried memory”—a narrative cobbled together with pieces of the truth, tiny squares of facts, embroideries on a date. Of course, a narrative cobbled together with pieces of the truth could be a working definition of memory itself, or any family story that is passed on through the generations, and changed over time and the telling. But I want to insist on a difference here. I’m referring to a story that *could have been told*, but never was, at least within most families.¹⁶ Does it make sense to call this skeletal construction memory at all? To whom would the memory belong? Is generic memory—public and formulaic—still memory properly speaking?

Probably not. Nevertheless, I’m going to suggest that this almost blank sheet of the past weighs on the present, on the generations that emerged from the survivors of the “pogrom narrative,” the Kishinev story, *as if it were* inherited memory. In her poem “Song Stanzas of Private Luck, To Be Added

to Sometimes and Sometimes to Be Subtracted From As Events Prove One More Wrong than Right,” Grace Paley evokes the times from before she was born, “the terrible pogroms / of Kishinev and Berditchev” and the “pogrom of 1905 in which / our Rusya our brother our uncle waving the workers’ flag / was murdered.” And through stanzas the refrain of silence returns like punctuation, “no one told me any of this / none of the above was mentioned” (80). What inheres in the prose of what was not passed on through memory, but later reconstructed as history? The descendants of the Pale have inherited a story not to be passed on to children, but not to be forgotten either.¹⁷

This belated and contradictory transmission of the past creates a kind of narrative insecurity in the members of the third generation, although its effects are more diffuse than the particularized, sometimes nightmarish psychic consequences of what Marianne Hirsch has called postmemory on the generations (primarily second generation) of Holocaust survivors: the inherited, recounted experience in the form of narratives that belonged to and were lived by the previous generation.¹⁸ Almost the opposite, unstoried memory is precisely an *absence* of story that leaves the third-generation heir feeling cut off from the familial narrative, the historical legacy that has nonetheless played an important role in an individual’s formation. One is bereft, without a true subject of grief, but at the same time aware of a lost dimension, a phantom past. The Kishinev syndrome, if I can coin the expression, results from a silence, from gaps that can be bridged only partially through research and through the stories of others.¹⁹

Recreating the story, as I’ve tried to do, reading back through unsmiling photographs, is at best a strategy of interpretation, of speculation, when dealing with this particular immigration that now belongs more to history than memory.²⁰ History and memory do not need to compete—they can collaborate—but in the case of missing stories, history takes over. But history or memory—why, you may ask, do you need to know? What difference does it make to learn, especially when your life has already taken shape, the names and birthplaces of your great-great-grandparents? Maybe the better question would be, what does obsessing about one’s ancestors do, when one is worried, as I am, about the future? If I still don’t know where I come from, what good will it do to add pieces of the story now? The older I get, the closer to my own death, the more I seem determined to unearth the secrets of the dead, of family members long gone: a genealogy of ghosts, phantoms, and fantasies.

“Lineage,” Roland Barthes argues in *Camera Lucida*, his partly autobiographical essay about photography and our affective responses to images, written after his mother’s death, “reveals an identity stronger, more interesting than legal status—more reassuring as well, for the thought of origins soothes

us, whereas that of the future disturbs us, agonizes us” (105). What Barthes found unbearable was the prospective of life without his mother. What he wanted to find was an image that represented her to sustain his memory, his memory of what he loved about her. Because I didn’t ask and didn’t hear, I go back to my photographs, the silent witnesses, to create an imaginary bulwark against the empty future, the way Barthes looked through his collection of family photographs to staunch his loss, the wound from which he did not expect to heal. I too succumb to the vertiginous pull of the past. The difference between us is that I’m looking for what I don’t remember, and it has more to do with shame than with love.

Which brings me to the unexplained part of my title. Here is how I killed my grandmother the first time.

It was January 1954. I was about to turn thirteen. One evening after dinner I was talking on the telephone to a classmate. I’m sure it was my friend Marilyn Wisely, a girl who fascinated me because she was Irish, not Jewish, and because her nose pointed straight up into the air. I used to peer with wonder into her nostrils. I was talking for, as my parents would say later, hours. I have no idea. But as soon as I hung up the phone, a hospital in the Bronx rang to say that my grandmother, my father’s mother, was in a coma. My father turned to me in a rage and hurled me across the living room. I crashed into the piano: “You killed her,” he expostulated, beside himself with grief. By the time my parents returned from the hospital in the middle of the night, I had been exonerated from the murder—had my father reached the hospital one hour earlier, he acknowledged, it would not have kept his mother alive—but I still felt somehow subject to blame. Grandma Kipnis, as she was called, was dead. I have no memory of a funeral.

“You are so cold and selfish,” my mother would say bitterly, faced with my adolescent silences. “You’ll end up like Grandma Kipnis, alone and friendless.” A Jewish curse, a fate you would wish on your worst enemy, which for my mother, my grandmother was. There were indeed stories about my grandmother, but none had to do with the pogroms of Kishinev.

The second time I killed my grandmother was in *But Enough About Me*. Although all the documents of ownership clearly indicate that the property that I refer to earlier in this essay, and that I alluded to in that book, was purchased in the name of Sheyndel Kipnis, I never try to understand how a woman with no profession, no social security number, came to be the one who owned the two dunams in the promised land, despite the fact that my grandfather signed the checks. I assimilated the property to the legacy of “my paternal grandparents,” skipping over that rather interesting fact. I could have wondered—and didn’t.



My grandmother, Sadie Kipnis, and me, 1941 (© Copyright and reprinted by permission of the author).

If I knew more about her story, would I know more about me? Maybe, maybe not. The quotation from Barthes's analysis of lineage goes on to retract the comfort it appears to offer. "But this discovery," Barthes continues, the discovery of connection perceived through family photographs, "disappoints us because even while it asserts a permanence (which is the truth of the race, not my own), it bares the mysterious difference of beings issuing from one and the same family." This difference derives from what Barthes calls here "the inhuman distance of the Stock" (105). Barthes's skepticism about the meaning of genealogy provides a useful check on the quest for origins so popular today.²¹

Looking at a family photograph published in his autobiography, *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, Barthes writes, under the heading, "The family novel": "Where do they come from? . . . That young man with blue eyes and a pensive elbow will be my father's father. Final stasis of this lineage: my body. The line ends in a being *pour rien*" (left in French in the text, np). For nothing? What does that mean? The end of the line—the being after whom there are no more. None but the signature of the author. As Barthes writes in *Camera Lucida*, a few years younger at the time of writing than I am now, he wanted to write a book about his mother so that her memory would "last

at least the time of my own notoriety” (63). The time beyond the author’s death that would last as long as his signature. Barthes’s family romance, his love for his mother, and the story they lived, are inseparable from the authority of authorship.

I have told the story of my own name more than once, and when I tell it I explain that in the height of a certain seventies feminism I decided to jettison both my ex-husband’s name and my father’s name. I took the name Miller—my mother’s maiden name, or my maternal grandfather’s name—I say, as a gesture of freedom from the past. And also to associate myself with the side of the family I considered to be the survivors in America—as opposed to the Kipnis schlemiels. That was true, but not entirely true. Retracing this story back through the autobiographies of Amos Oz and Mary Antin, I see something else.

Although I kept Kipnis as a legal middle name, the trace of which is marked in my middle initial K.—an initial I regularly lose—I gave up the name more than thirty years ago as part of the record, as the signature. Women routinely do this when they marry, so why make such a big deal of it now? It bothers me now that like Barthes, as he contemplates his family tree, I find myself at the end of the line (like Oz’s great-uncle, the “childless professor”). Antin wanted to speak and write without an accent. Taking the name of Miller over Kipnis was my way of wanting to lose the accent, of the mark of the foreign, and specifically, the Jewish. I wanted what so many Jews of my generation wanted: assimilation. Nancy Miller. What anonymity. A name you’d never have to spell or explain. The last thing I wanted was “roots”—the very connection to the past that so preoccupies me today. There was in my giving up of the name a desire to rid myself of a feeling of shame, a shame that perhaps I inherited from that first immigrant generation, transmitted through the anxiety of the first Americans, my parents. Now I see, belatedly, that I have through that gesture lost the chance—if I ever wished to have it—of keeping the Kipnis name alive at least the time of my existence as a writer, as a part of the feminist project that made my work possible.²²

I said earlier that *The Promised Land* was taken—by Antin herself and by the critics—to represent the lived journey of many thousands of others. Oz, we saw, was deemed to have written a “national autobiography.” But every autobiography, however representative, has its own particular, intimate anguish at the center. On a less dramatic scale than the suicide of Oz’s mother that shapes his narrative, though equally powerful in its effects on the author’s psyche, is the sacrifice of Mary Antin’s sister, pictured with Mary opposite the first page of the autobiography: Mary’s sister Fetchke is deprived of an education and goes to work in a sweat shop so that Mary can go to school.

When Antin reflects on her father's choice to sacrifice her older sister, she comments: "I have no need of defending him. It is myself that I would like to defend, and I cannot" (159). Of course, she does—defend herself—because self-defense always drives autobiography.

In the end, both *The Promised Land* and *A Tale of Laughter and Darkness* tell the story of how their authors came to inhabit the names they made for themselves—names both given and chosen, names that tie them to a past heavy with the "mysterious difference of beings issuing from one and the same family." In the space between the "I" and the "we" is that self entangled with others through which autobiographers, finally, invent themselves.

NOTES

AUTHOR'S NOTE: I'm grateful to Gina Herrmann and Massimo Lollini (and their students) for the invitation to speak at their seminar on autobiography (University of Oregon, Eugene, May 2006), which inspired me to compose this essay.

1. In his essay "Old Ghosts: Pogroms in the Jewish Mind," historian Stephen Zipperstein challenges the explanatory power of what he calls "the metaphor of the pogrom" (49). Acknowledging the real violence of pogroms in Russia—notably the 1903 massacre in Kishinev and the subsequent ones in 1905–1906—Zipperstein takes a skeptical view of the metaphor's ability to account for all aspects of the mass migration of Eastern European Jewry (50). Arguing that the pogrom metaphor occludes other reasons for migration in the region, he suggests that the immigrants were often motivated "by rather mundane considerations" (51). Doubtless those, like my ancestors, as far as I can tell, belonging to "a lower-middle class—among Eastern European Jewry an artisanry and petty merchantry" (50) left *also* because they hoped for better economic conditions elsewhere. But if those "who fled did so less out of fear than out of despair" (50), the fact remains that "pogrom" was their chosen term of self-justification. Perhaps the "success" of this blanket term is due precisely to its ability to generate the sense of a narrative that seems to require no further explanation. As a literary critic involved in an act of genealogical retrieval, I'm fascinated precisely by what else pogrom might have meant, either as a legacy of trauma (hence silence), or in the nature of the mundane, the vernacular—too trivial to transmit?
2. A recent collection of essay-length memoirs translated from Yiddish, *My Future Is in America*, helps illuminate the mass migration with detailed stories of ordinary lives, but as is so often the case with immigration, the template of success in America overshadows that of failure in the old country. "It was shame," Ruth Gay writes in *Unfinished People*, "about their poor, primitive origins that affected the way newcomers accepted America, just as it prevented them from telling their children very much about their own lives in the old country" (45).
3. Howe argues that before 1905 "Jews who held strong religious or political convictions were less likely to emigrate than those who did not" (61). So does that mean that my grandparents were Bundists? Or Zionists (or both)? In either case, this delay—post 1905—would indicate a "somewhat higher cultural level" than those who had come

earlier—the pioneers of the 1880s, whose exodus Howe describes more as “mass flight” than “ordered migration” (61). But perhaps the distinction produced by a small number of years—1906 vs. 1889 (great-grandfather)—is not one that provides much to go on. Still, I hang on to this as a question: why did my grandparents not leave sooner? What were they waiting for? What were they hoping for? The Revolution or the Messiah? Did my grandfather, whose profession in Russia was, according to the ship’s manifest, that of bookkeeper, have a higher level of education than his father, a carpenter? Did that have something to do with the discrepancy in immigration?

4. The significance of the new name is not commented on in the autobiography directly. Presumably Israeli readers would not need an explanation; but it’s a curious silence in a book where the father’s obsession with the etymology of words functions like a leit motif. Perhaps what makes Oz’s tale a “national autobiography” is embedded in this change of name. The boy the writer was at fourteen turned his back on a culture of failure and frustration, ambitions designed for Europe and unfulfilled—unfulfillable—in “the promised land” of Jerusalem. It’s not that the names don’t continue at all: Oz gives his son Daniel his father’s names—Yehuda Arieh—as his middle names. But the passing on of names as well as the rupture between generations are symptoms of the larger problem of the specific historical continuity of a collective experience within which the family story is located.
5. The notes in the back of the current Penguin edition provide the translation: “slovenly,” “softhearted plum,” or “plum gone to pieces” (300).
6. Verner Sollors writes in a parenthesis, commenting on Antin’s story “Malinke’s Atonement,” and following Antin’s own account in the autobiography: “Formally named ‘Maryashe’ after an aunt, Antin was called ‘Mashinke’ or ‘Mashke’ before becoming ‘Mary’ in the United States” (xvii). In *Call it English*, Hana Wirth-Nesher shows how complicated the naming process was for Antin, how embedded in anxieties about assimilation in the eyes of the Gentile readership she was courting. Looking at the manuscript version, Wirth-Nesher points out a crucial change to the published version: “My *Russianized* [my emphasis] Hebrew name being Maryashe,’ and then she drew a line across the word ‘Russianized.’ Antin assumed that the Gentile reader would not be interested in degrees of assimilation within the Jewish world” (70). Arguing that *The Promised Land* is “a complex network of concealing and exposing identities” (72), Wirth-Nesher points out that as a symptom of her conflicted attitude toward Gentile readers, particularly in matters of language mastery, Antin on the whole emphasizes her Russianness as distinct from her Jewishness.
7. Antin’s relation to her own Jewishness and to the group of Jewish immigrants to which she belongs fluctuates throughout the narrative. She both identifies with her cohort and wants to separate from other immigrants. In the naming chapter, which also recounts the first day at school, Antin reflects on her beginnings in America. “In after years, when I passed as an American among Americans, if I was suddenly made aware of the past that lay forgotten— . . . I thought it miracle enough that I, Mashke, the granddaughter of Raphael the Russian, born to a humble destiny, should be at home in an American metropolis, be free to fashion my own life, and should dream my dreams in English phrases” (156). In this passage about passing, “I, Mashke” serves as the marker of the immigrant within: the name of the girl who is no longer. In the course of an email

exchange, I asked Wirth-Nesher to comment on my name theory, expanding on the argument in her book:

Antin's name is probably more complex when it comes to identifying what is a 'Jewish' name. It is unlikely that she was always called by her Hebrew name. Jewish children received Hebrew names, of course, but the name they were called by was usually a Yiddish name, which sometimes meant an endearing form of their Slavic name. It is likely that she was called "Mashinke", and that Malka was used for only very formal occasions. This doesn't contradict what you are arguing," Wirth-Nesher wrote, "but it does make the line between what's Jewish and not-Jewish more porous, because a name can be Jewish by etymology, but it can also be Jewish by suffix and everyday practice.

8. Quoted and translated from the Hebrew in Tamar Hess's "The Confessions of a Bad Reader" in her analysis of the reception of *A Tale of Love and Darkness* as part of the classic Modern Hebrew canon. I am grateful to Hess for her discussion of Oz's autobiography here and throughout.
9. I want to raise the possibility of a certain kind of collective trauma tied to specific historical circumstances—such as, for instance, the Kishinev pogroms. I have found Kai Erikson's definition of collective trauma, in the context of an American environmental disaster, helpful to this case. "By *collective trauma*," he writes, "I mean a blow to the basic tissues of social life that damages the bonds attaching people together and impairs the prevailing sense of communality. The collective trauma works its way slowly and even insidiously into the awareness of those who suffer from it, so it does not have the quality of suddenness normally associated with 'trauma'" (187). Is it possible to determine whether the community that lived through the threat of pogroms—some with direct witness, some indirect—responded to that trauma by mass migration? In his notes to *The Promised Land*, Sollors, like Zipperstein cited above, takes a skeptical view of the causal relationship, citing scholarship that has "questioned the view that the pogroms were the central cause for Jewish mass emigration, pointing to the fact that probably the highest rate of emigration was seen in Galicia, a province that had no pogroms." He goes on to adduce other possible explanations, including economic hardship and repressive Russian laws described by Antin that "created a feeling of hopelessness" (300). Alan Mintz looks back to the "paradigm-shattering power" of the 1881 pogroms, after which belief "in the very tenability of Jewish life in Russia suddenly and irreversibly had to be given up" ("Russian Pogroms," 114–15). Maybe this question will take on new meaning as we try to understand the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. It's notable that the displaced inhabitants of New Orleans bitterly resented being called "refugees," since to them the term meant: not American. Ultimately, the term "evacuee" prevailed. Spike Lee's documentary *Requiem* provides ample evidence of this phenomenon, largely achieved through survivor testimony.
10. As Susan Suleiman puts it, reflecting on her passion for "reading the war memories of Jews who were young children in Europe during the war," these stories "could have been my own" (207).
11. For a brief historical account of how people like my grandparents probably came to purchase their dunams, as well as a map of the area, see Kark and Oren-Nordheim's *Jerusalem and its Environs: Quarters, Neighborhoods, Villages, 1800–1948* (336–39).

12. Like Antin, I am the granddaughter of “Raphael the Russian” (156).
13. For an analysis of the phenomenon of serial autobiography, a term she coins, see Leigh Gilmore’s *The Limits of Autobiography*. She writes of Jamaica Kincaid: “In her absorption with the deathliness of self-representation, Kincaid reveals that a serial autobiographer returns to the scene because she has left a body there which requires further attention” (97).
14. To the extent that my return to the narrative attached to the family name and history is an act of identification (they are me, mine), it might also be understood as a form of mourning. “All identification,” Diana Fuss writes in “Identification Papers,” “begins in an experience of traumatic loss and the subject’s tentative attempts to manage this loss” (10).
15. See the website established by Jack Saul, www.kishinevpogrom.com, for the complete letter and other Kishinev related documents, including Bialik’s poem.
16. Clearly, families differed in how much they told or withheld. In a recent review of two books on human rights and immigration, Corey Robin opens with the invocation of the (nearby) Odessa pogroms of 1905. He was lucky enough to have had a grandfather who told him stories he remembered: “When he spied his wife and three sons inside the immigration center, Joseph [his great-grandfather] rolled them oranges under the railing—the sweetest of signs that they had permanently left Odessa and its pogroms behind” (28). Since his grandfather emigrated at age three, it’s not obvious whose memory this actually is. Robin, in correspondence, said this was the only story he remembered hearing.
17. The history of the pogrom and its legacy are summarized effectively in Monty Noam Penkower’s “The Kishinev Pogrom of 1903: A Turning Point in Jewish History.”
18. See *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative and Postmemory*.
19. In addition to Eastern European memoirs, mostly in Yiddish, there are literary traces, a famous play—*The Melting Pot*, whose characters hail from Kishinev—and above all, the epic poem by the Hebrew poet Bialik, “On the Slaughter.” A fascinating issue of the journal *Prooftexts* edited by Alan Mintz and devoted to the 100th anniversary of the 1903 pogrom and Bialik’s poem has opened new pathways into retrieving the story of the pogrom through literary interpretation.
20. In “History, Memory, and the Genre of Testimony,” Aleida Assman describes the transition from intergeneration memory to what she calls “remote history” in the case of Holocaust survivor testimony this way: “Intergenerational memory normally fades away after the span of three generations, a period of about eighty to one hundred years at most” (271). After that point, we are dealing with history. Assman is making an argument about the effects of changing technology on the temporality of memory, claiming that because of video testimonies, the “stored interviews with survivors have the potential to prolong an intergenerational memory into an indefinite future. . . . There is . . . a ‘transgenerational contract’ inscribed into the very setting of video testimony. . . . It is through the genre of video testimonies that the rights of memory can be restored in a future era of history” (271).
21. “Discovering our past helps us understand how we came to be who we are today.” That was the slogan advertising the program on DNA and African Americans sponsored by

Coca Cola on PBS. We are plagued by the uncertainty of identity: who we are, who we are not, what makes us different from each other. This question was key to Virginia Woolf's meditation on life writing: "I do not know how far I differ from other people" (65).

22. Several months after completing this essay, I happened to read, in the collection *8 Great Hebrew Short Novels*, Oz's novella *The Hill of Evil Counsel*. "Set in the Jerusalem of the British Mandate," the editor of the collection, Alan Lelchuk, suggests, the story "allows the author to recall his own childhood in Jerusalem and weave autobiography with fiction" (xx). Uncannily, for this reader's autobiographical narrative, the child's father is named Hans Kipnis. Once again, I was struck by the unintended and unexpected consequences of giving up a name with a traceable history.

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