

***JOURNAL OF
CONTEMPORARY ANTHROPOLOGY***

FIELD NOTES ARTICLE

VOLUME IV

2013

ISSUE 1

"Last Night all the Synagogues in Germany were Burned":
Intimacy and Ethnographic Practice in a Familial Life History

William Lempert

Ph.D. Candidate
Department of Anthropology
University of Colorado
Boulder, Colorado

"Last Night all the Synagogues in Germany were Burned": Intimacy and Ethnographic Practice in a Familial Life History

William Lempert*

Ph.D. Candidate
Department of Anthropology
University of Colorado
Boulder, Colorado

ABSTRACT

Through a series of life history interviews with my Grandmother in her Ft. Lauderdale apartment, I reflect on the underappreciated advantages of fostering intimate interpersonal relationships in ethnographic practice. Relating examples from my grandmother's description of her experiences in Nazi Germany, I argue that intimacy can in many cases serve as a powerful tool to make research more rigorous by helping to forestall temptations to over-generalize interview data to confirm preconceived expectations, while also promoting deeper insights into the diversity and subtlety of individual conceptions of self. I connect this argument to larger debates regarding the advantages and disadvantages of insider and outsider ethnographic practice.

* I am grateful for my Oma's continued support and interest in helping me to better understand her fascinating and difficult life experiences.

INTRODUCTION

*They all got a hidden meanin', just like de Bible.
Everybody can't understand what they mean... de inside meanin' of words.*

– Zora Neale Hurston (1935:125)

To refer to my grandmother as Annalisa Schupak is to make her a stranger to me. Throughout my life, she has been the sweet old lady known to me simply as Oma (a German term for grandmother). Growing up, I knew my Oma to be a great storyteller. While soft spoken, her social abilities seemed to know no bounds. However, it was only after several interviews on her life—conducted casually in her Ft. Lauderdale condo—that I came to understand just how different her experiences have been from my own. At the time, I did not know what I would do with those recordings. I certainly had no anthropological motives. I only knew that my Oma was getting old and that her stories were important to her and our family.

From the age of 12 to 20, my Oma fled Nazi Germany, experienced months of bombing in London, slept in Central Park, and held many exhausting nanny jobs simultaneously to sponsor her parents' freedom from Germany. This is the story I had never heard before. Of a young Jewish woman coming of age in dystopia. Of a stolen childhood and sudden motherhood. Of world war and close calls. Of overcoming and being defined by circumstance. It is a multiplicity of stories. However, in some ways it is not the story of *my* Oma, but of Annalisa, a woman I am just now getting to know.

The advantages and disadvantages of insider–outsider status and intimacy (in the literal meaning of close familiarity or friendship) with interviewees have been recurring topics of critical investigation in anthropology. Reflecting on interviews with my 92-year-old grandmother, Annalisa Schupak, I engage these scholarly conversations with an emphasis on the rich level of understanding that is afforded through intimate familial interviewing. In the context of spending time with my Oma, sitting on her king size bed, helping her with her medications, and watching her shift from moments of confusion to crystal clarity, I was acutely aware of the importance of her corporeal presence, as well as my own “body as fieldwork instrument” (McGranahan 2012). We recorded over two weeks in ten different sessions. Each day, I would ask if she wanted to record. Sometimes she said yes, while other times she was not feeling well and said we should wait. The recording environment was casual and she did not appear nervous or intimidated by the recording device. On the contrary, it seemed to bring out more enthusiasm in her story telling.

These interviews span my Oma's experiences as a Jewish teen in Hitler's early Nazi Germany through to the present. Her early trauma—in which she lost over 60 family members, her home, and any sense of a normal childhood—continue to define her life up to the present. Through a content analysis of these transcripts, I discuss how agency, victimhood, and humor emerge (sometimes paradoxically) as primary themes through which she constructs her life history. These interviews highlight ways in which personal histories are never simply relegated to the past nor to a single individual, but live powerfully in the present and reverberate throughout generations.

When ethnographers conduct life histories, they are often looking to find individuals whose in-depth stories will shed light on larger groups, contexts, or historical events. This has been especially true for life histories of Nazi Germany survivors (Flanzbaum 1999). While in other

ethnographic projects I have been positioned as a relative stranger, here I engage my Oma's life history as both an anthropologist in training, as well as a grandson. This essay speaks to the unexpected advantages I encountered as an intimate insider in the interviewing process.

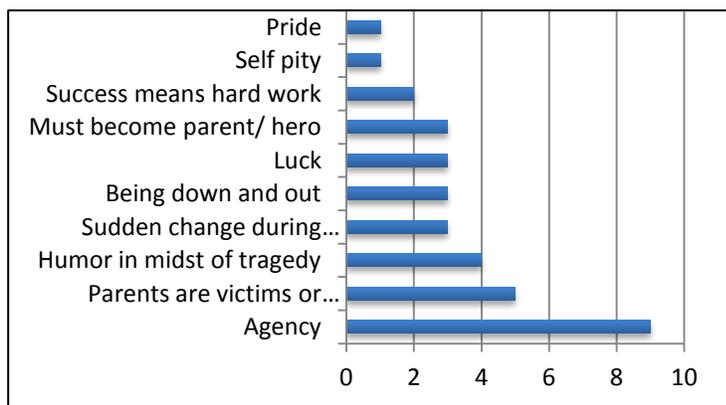
I attempt to address two interrelated points: (1) that ethnographers conducting life histories should be careful about overgeneralizing their interviews, in the process missing valuable opportunities to understand the diversity of individual experiences as well as particular conceptions of self, and (2) that in life history interviewing, there are distinct *advantages* to having close, even intimate familial relationships with the interviewee.

To the first point I draw on Ochs and Capps' (1996) notions of theorizing the self through narrative practices. They argue that stories reveal not only what has happened to an individual, but also the ways in which she understands *herself*. The Holocaust in particular—through many organizations such as the Shoah Foundation—has been a locus of life history interviewing. While this work is indeed important, the focus on unimaginable tragedy has also led to many stories (including Anne Frank's classic) to be edited so that they become, as Flanzbaum (1999:93) argues, not about the individual or even "Jewishness, but about universality, about unflinching optimism and the strength of the human spirit as manifested in the face of terrible deprivations."

Flanzbaum refers to this narrative process as the "Americanization of the Holocaust" (93); however, other life history projects run the risk of over-generalization as well. Since Annalisa's story is intended for our family, I felt no motivation to downplay the individual elements or to attempt to universalize her experience in the editing process. Throughout her stories, there is no sense of anything remotely redeeming or spiritually enriching, no "life is beautiful" moments. In fact, while Annalisa overcomes many challenges during World War II, I am left with the impression that going through these times was primarily a tragic waste to her. My familial positionality to my Oma and her memories is particularly suited to this engagement with theories of self, memory, and early Nazi Germany, defined by precarity, which is simultaneously "compositional and decompositional...hanging together or falling apart or wearing out in time that compresses or stretches out into an endurance" (Stewart 2012:524).

METHODS AND ANALYSIS

In order to distill the meaning of Annalisa's text, I conducted a content analysis by identifying



the general and specific thematic elements, noting patterns in frequency and location. This methodology was useful as a basic framework for discussing my Oma's perception of herself. Figure 1 displays the themes I identified from least common to most common. For the purposes of this paper, this includes only her discussions of World War II related experiences.

Figure 1: Bar Chart of of Thematic Elements Frequency

Three themes emerge most prominently from Annalisa's story: agency, victimhood, and humor. While agency and victimhood can be problematic analytical categories (often imposing Western notions of free will and assuming real choice), these are the terms that Annalisa agreed are most appropriate during our discussion about my paper. The following short passage provides an example of these themes and a sense of her narrative voice:

In 1938 came Krystalnacht. At that time I was going to school in Cologne to learn how to prepare for a foreign country. I learned *sofenslache*, which is the taking care of new born and kindergarten, including ironing, washing, and cooking. On a day like any other day, I came to school and our principal called us to her office and said, "Children, I have a really bad thing to tell you. Last night all the synagogues in Germany were burned and people were beaten in the street, so I want you all to go home." But she said to me, "You can't go home because you live too far and you look Jewish." So I said to myself, *I can't listen to her I have to go home. My mother, my father may be beaten up. My mother's alone.* So I called up my mother and asked her, "Where's daddy?" and she sounded like she was crying. She said, "He is home, no he is not home," She was completely mixed up. I said, "I'll come home." She said, "Please don't come. Stay where you are." I said, "Okay," but I went to the train and came home anyways. I tried to hide my face behind a magazine, because I really was a little afraid.

When I got home, my mother was in tears. She said, "I don't know where your father is. He has disappeared." It was only an hour later when we heard people stomping up in their high boots. They came in and said very little or nothing. One had a hammer in his hand, looked at the grate front, turned it over, and smashed everything we had, including the tables and chairs. They turned everything over and left. About five minutes later we heard stamping up the stairs again, and two other SS men came in and demanded, "Give me your jewelry. Give me everything you have." We were afraid. We had coins in a special safe, and my mother opened it and gave them *everything*.

My father was still missing. We didn't know where he was at the time, but he ended up in the concentration camp Dachau. Those days were horrible because my father was a diabetic and we thought we could get him out of the camp if we told them he was sick. Then we heard that everybody who was sick with diabetes got an injection to kill them. This made us even more worried. My mother blamed herself, but there was nothing we could do.

The way in which Annalisa's parents are framed is indicative of her perception of them as a young woman. In the narrative, her mother is characterized as lacking power or agency, such as when she gives the SS men all of the family's valuables. When Annalisa spoke about this in the interview, she shifted her head from side to one side and closed her eyes briefly as though she was disappointed in her mother for giving in to such bullies. Her father is not presented in a much better light. For example, after he gets out of the camp, Annalisa says, "For some stupid reason my father decided to open up a department store."

My interpretation is supported by the two most frequently occurring themes in the content analysis, both of which relate to agency. The most common is the perception of self-agency by Annalisa; the second most common theme is her parents' lack of competent agency. This juxtaposition suggests that she views herself as able to exert control over her circumstances, though she has had to develop this skill by herself. This is also suggested by the recurring theme

of Annalisa having to become a parent or hero. It would be easy for an unfamiliar interviewer to miss Annalisa's disappointment in her parents' inability to cope with the situation, especially because such a narrative does not fit well within Holocaust tropes of family unity and Jewish solidarity. Furthermore, while her words only hint at this, her "angry" voice is subtle, and it has taken me years of careful listening to discern. A powerful expression of frustration by my Oma would be difficult for a stranger to detect.

Humor is another prominent element of her life history, one a Holocaust scholar might be surprised to see. While Annalisa's story is, generally speaking, a series of horrific events, humor is an essential recurring theme. One might guess that this humor would manifest as a transitional catharsis between tragic events. Rather, humor is embedded *within* the most tragic events. Again, in the case of Annalisa, I doubt that anyone other than someone who knew her well could discern this subtle jocular sensibility. The following example between Annalisa and her mom is illustrative: "She [her mom] said, 'Please don't come. Stay where you are.' I said, 'Okay,' but I went to the train and came home anyways. I tried to hide my face behind a magazine, because I really was a little afraid." Without knowing Annalisa, it would be easy to miss the humor in this segment, especially with her soft voice and understated (but expressive) body language: subtly miming a giant newspaper with her weathered hands and a twinkle in her eyes. Furthermore, if one were conducting life histories with the explicit goal of learning about Holocaust tragedy, it would be *even* easier to miss these humorous moments. As in Goldstein's (2003) ethnography of a Brazilian shantytown, humor serves simultaneously as a survival strategy as well as an aesthetic of expressing tragedy, all the while seeming, according to Western conventions, out of place.

There is a great deal to learn about someone beyond the facts of "what happened" in their life history. By attending to the recurring thematic elements throughout a narrative, one may discern another sort of story, about how an individual sees herself. While this is her perspective, her perspective is essential for understanding her point of view, relation to life, and vision of the world (Malinowski 1922:25), as well as broader engagements with memory, trauma, and survivor qualities. This is not to say that self-theorizations are stable over time. Seudfeld et al. (2005) document this instability through a longitudinal research project in which they interviewed Holocaust survivors immediately after they immigrated to America, and then again forty years later. They found that early stories exhibited signs of posttraumatic stress, while many of the same stories told forty years later demonstrated healthy personalities, or at least an internalization of the narrative structure of American happy endings.

Annalisa's life history appears to fit this model well and speaks to my own wonderment at why she does not seem particularly damaged or haunted by her firsthand account of World War II. It would be invaluable to have heard the same story from the recently immigrated 20-year-old sleeping in Central Park, wondering where her next meal would come from, and whether her parents were alive. Would this narrative have been one of agency, parental criticism, and humor? Certainly, this irretrievable story would have provided insight into who Annalisa was, not just who she has become.

DISCUSSION

While I have described the advantages of intimate familial relationships with life history interviewees, there are of course disadvantages as well. However, the longheld tradition of maintaining objectivity with "informants" has lacked a nuanced acknowledgement of the affordances of intimacy and the drawbacks of objective distance. Many native scholars have

opened up such discussions, challenging the traditions of methodological objectivity and arguing that while outsider status confers a useful perspective, so does insider status, particularly when engaging epistemology, ontology, and neocolonialism (Simpson 2007; Smith 1999). Importantly, they point out that the advantages of having deep relationships and stakes in a community is an altogether different discussion than ungrounded postmodern critiques of the very possibility of objectivity itself. Like many debates, this one predates its most recent incarnation, with ethnographers as far back as Hurston (1935) and Myerhoff (1980) working in their own communities, not to mention the oft-silenced primary role of native informants in the majority of ethnographic research (Lassiter 2005). Furthermore, frank accounts by Powdermaker (1966), Barley (1983), and Rabinow (1977) reveal significant challenges and limitations of outsidership that are often glossed over in carefully edited and polished ethnographies.

Life history is a natural topic with family and friends, but not with strangers and acquaintances. Anthropologists often spend several months or years getting to know individuals just to gain a fraction of the level of trust common in familial relationships. Thus, the important and challenging task of interpreting subtle gestures and intonation is most accessible to those with close relationships with the interviewee. Geertz (1972:6) rightly explicates the complexities involved in interpreting the difference between a wink or a twitch, yet we are confident that we understand when our family and friends are winking, due to our long-term experience with them. Indeed, intimate connections foster rich thick description in life history projects.

While discussions of insider and outsider status in anthropology have been, and continue to be, heavily disputed, it is important to note that different research questions and methods alter the calculus of these debates. For example, in comparison to structured and semi-structured interviews, life histories contain more sustained layers of meaning; since many events have long since transpired and are deeply affective, they may or may not be wholly accurate. Regardless of such inconsistencies, such stories have the powerful potential to provide insight into the interviewee's perception of who they are through what Hurston (1935:125) described as the "inside meanin' of words." We should care about the subjective information embedded within life histories, not only for adding context to individual experiences, but also as a guard against the temptation to *overgeneralize* and universalize such narratives to fit our preconceived arguments; thus, it promotes a productive "multidirectional memory" that welcomes a diversity of perspectives within and between historical tragedies, rather than fostering "competitive memory" (Rothberg 2009:3). Obviously, ethnographers cannot attain a high level of intimacy with everyone with whom they conduct a life history. However, what I am suggesting is that there are many cases when increasing intimacy (within the context of abiding by cultural norms and ethical standards) will enrich the interview as well as the analysis.

Ultimately, life histories should be read not only as history, but also as creative works by and about their authors for specific audiences. They are powerful tools through which to deeply engage individuals' conceptions of self. Perhaps after repeating these stories over decades, my Oma has rewritten the past. However, when Hurston (1935:55) was asked by her informant if they lied well enough, she responded, "you lied good, but not enough." She said this not because she wanted lies *instead* of the truth, but because she realized that there are often more important insights than accurate recollections in the ever-shifting landscape of personal and community narratives, that the past is a potent mix of imperfect memory, selective editing, and a longing for what might have been.

REFERENCES

- Barley, Nigel
1983 *The Innocent Anthropologist: Notes from a Mud Hut*. London: British Museum Publications.
- Flanzbaum, Hilene
1999 The Americanization of the Holocaust. *Journal of Genocide Research* 1(1):91-104.
- Geertz, Clifford
1972 *Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight*. *Daedalus* 101(1):1-37.
- Goldstein, Donna
2003 *Laughter out of Place: Race, Class, Violence, and Sexuality in a Rio Shantytown*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Hurston, Zora Neale
1935 *Mules and Men*. New York: Harper Perennial Modern Classics.
- Lassiter, Luke
2005 *The Chicago Guide to Collaborative Ethnography*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Malinowski, Bronislaw
1922 *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*. New York: Dutton.
- McGranahan, Carole
2012 Teaching Tibet in a Time of Precarious Emotion. *Cultural Anthropology Special Online Issue: Self-Immolation as Protest in Tibet*.
- Myerhoff, Barbara
1980 *Number Our Days*. New York: Simon and Schuster.
- Ochs, Elinor, and Lisa Capps
1996 Narrating the Self. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 25(1):19-43.
- Powdermaker, Hortense
1966 *Stranger and Friend: The Way of an Anthropologist*. New York: WW Norton & Company.
- Rabinow, Paul
1977 *Reflections on Fieldwork in Morocco*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Rothberg, Michael
2009 *Multidirectional Memory*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Simpson, Audra

2007 On Ethnographic Refusal: Indigeneity, 'Voice' and Colonial Citizenship Junctures: *The Journal for Thematic Dialogue* (9):67-80.

Smith, Linda Tuhiwai

1999 *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*. London: Zed Books.

Stewart, Kathleen

2012 Precarity's Forms. *Cultural Anthropology* 27(3):518-525.

Suedfeld, Peter, E. Soriano, D. McMurtry, H. Paterson, T. Weiszbeck, and R. Krell

2005 Erikson's "components of a healthy personality" among Holocaust survivors immediately and 40 years after the war. *The International Journal of Aging and Human Development* 60(3):229-248.