

MEMORY

As I write my story, it is clear that I am dependent on memory. I am not writing fiction. I am writing about my life, and trying to bring back the people and events that shaped my life. I used to think that the way my mind worked was to blot out of my mind the people and events that made me unhappy. It was only when I read old journals that they came back to me. And I then relive the pain. But I tended not to write about them.

Writing as I do, I am reliving a part of my life. Most of what I have written is descriptive, and drawn from memory. I try to transport myself back in time. From time to time, I have been able to draw upon material that has been filed away, mostly by me, but also papers that my mother kept.

Why am I doing this? Because I want my family to know about my life, about the world in which I lived, but to a large part, about my mother and her life, what little I know of it. Doing that, she remains alive. And after I am gone, and my children and grandchildren will have my story, I too will remain alive.

My mother was obsessed with books and authors. She used to say that writers are immortal. It was her belief that if you write a book, you will live forever. She even dreamed of me becoming a published author. Even suggested a pen name: Tsirelson. The immortality designation is certainly true for writers like Chaucer, Shakespeare, Dickens, and their equivalents in other cultures. Great writers tell great stories which appeal to a universal audience. Their works are translated in many languages and have the ability to move diverse readers. They have universal appeal, despite describing a single culture. What they do is preserve the life they describe. Their writings are the memory of their times. And their time lives on.

Jews are big on memory. Religious or secular, Jews are obsessed with their history. And the earliest part of that history is in the Bible. We are the descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Our story moves on through Moses and the Exodus, David and Solomon, the destruction of the Temples, the Diaspora, the early Rabbis, the Talmud, the Inquisition, the move eastward, persecution, the shtetlach, Hasidism, the enlightenment, Yiddish literature, Zionism, the Holocaust. The recent Pew study, when it asked what being a Jew means in the U.S. today, 73% answered: remembering the Holocaust. Zachar, Gedenk. Remember.

There is a great deal of difference between a single memory and collective memory. Between the story of one person, or one family, and the story of a people. Oral histories have become very popular. Put them all together, they may spell collective memory. Grist for an historian's mill. Just as my mother wanted to give her body to medical science, I want to give my story to my family and friends, and perhaps to a wider audience. I have been struggling with the contradiction in the concept that we are each unique, yet the story of tens of thousands of people like me are so similar. Still, it is not going to deter me from writing my story.

I started by writing about memory as the indispensable ingredient in writing one's story, one's memoirs. If you can't remember, you can't tell your story. The more you remember, the more you can pick and choose what you want to write about. And if you can remember those marvelous details—the colors and smells and tastes, what people and neighborhoods and houses and rooms looked like—how much more exciting your story will be. Feelings and thoughts are also a part of the story. Conversations. How can you recall them from years and years ago?