



FROM PERSONAL LIVES TO COLLECTIVE HISTORY

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For several years, I have tried to reconstruct the story of two strangers, two Polish communist Jews, a husband and a wife, who immigrated to France in the late 1930s, were arrested in Paris in 1943, deported, and murdered in Auschwitz. Apart from a handful of letters, these two people have not written or published anything. But they have left behind some traces, many of which are related to the multifaceted repression that they were subjected to in Poland and in France under the Third Republic and during the Second World War. These two people are my paternal grandparents, Matès and Idesa Jablonka.

The idea of making my grandparents into an object of study dates back to 2007. My project took shape quite quickly: I was going to write a book about their story, or rather a history book about them, based on archives, interviews, readings, a contextualization, and sociological reasoning, which would help me to get to know them. As a story of their life and the result of my investigation, this book would make people understand, not just relive. More than their tragic end, it is their journey I was interested in, and our inconsolable grief would have no other expression than the desire to know. I started to delve frantically into archives in France, Poland and elsewhere, forcing myself to cast a wide net, for a biography is only worthwhile if it leads to a comparison between individuals: the study of human snow must reveal both the powerful force of the avalanche and the irreducible delicacy of the flake. Almost all the direct witnesses were dead, but not the next generation. Had the memory of my grandparents been carried by their brothers and sisters' children, by the children of their cousins, friends or neighbors?

So it is as a historian, as a grandson, and as a Jew, that I retraced the life of my grandparents. This type of biography, based on a comparative study, connects with social history. Because – and this is an essential given – my grandparents were just anybody. They are not famous; they haven't changed the course of history; they haven't published anything; they haven't said or done anything memorable. They were just a link in the great chain of life and their memory has already been erased. Although it was shattered by the tragedies of the 20th century, their life was the opposite of eventful, of what counts in world history – kings, wars, empires, revolutions, movements of ideas, large collective entities. Their biography is the opposite of Plutarch's *Parallel Lives*, the *Golden Legend*, or Vasari's *Lives*.

But why should we be interested in the lives of ordinary people, in their actions, their banality, and their insignificance, in «all the trappings of vanity», as Bossuet once called them in his *Treatise of Concupiscence* (1731)? I will answer that, for me, this encounter is both instructive and moving. The object of history is men, and nothing else. As men and historians, historians because we are men, we are not to rest until we have met «another from the past» (*un autrui de jadis*), as the philosopher Paul Ricœur once put it so beautifully.

There is added emotion in finding once again those who have been forgotten and of whom nothing is left, because the encounter seems to be truly our own doing, while Shakespeare's works or the legacy of Napoleon seem to have just «come» to us. I do not believe in the fantasies of the resurrection of the dead or in the second life granted by the grace of a God-Historian, but, like others, I have been enthralled by this feeling of a face-to-face meeting across the years, by the magic of an encounter beyond the grave – a one-sided encounter, sadly, and an impossible dialogue. The journey into the past, the disorientation and the escape from oneself that it implies, becomes enriched by a kind of wonder due to the mix of the very near and the very far, by which otherness is resolved into resemblance. These human beings who lived so long ago, who are not even bone dust anymore, barely a line on a register, these men were like us. Their enthusiasm, their disappointments, their anger, their hopes, their nightmares were made of the same stuff as ours. My grandparents, this saddler and this seamstress who were murdered in the prime of life

and whose ashes were thrown into the river, lived, laughed and ate, sung and slept, conceived and cried. I am, we are, the product of this sample of humanity.

These voices have gone dead, smothered in the anonymity of the city of the 18th century or the gas chamber of the 20th century; but even before we talk about the Holocaust, the oblivion in which these forgotten people find themselves today comes from the fact that they lived in darkness, that they did not master the art of writing, and that even if they were the spokesmen for a cause, they did not speak loud enough. This is why historical humanism, which consists in reaching out to «another from the past», is, in a way, a militant activity. In his own way, each historian struggles against the marginalization of working-class discourse and tries to hear the voices of those who have not had a chance to speak. Historians strive to find a place for those that history has engulfed, those who did not have a place while they were living in the society of their time, and do not have one in the history of their country, now that they are dead.

As an example, the biography of my grandparents allows a better understanding of the trajectory of the Jews during the 20th century, the failure of the communist ideal, and the destruction of European Jewry during the war. The distinction between our family stories and what we like to call History – with its pompous upper case – does not make any sense: they are exactly the same thing. There is not, on the one hand, the great men of this world, with their scepters or television appearances, and, on the other hand, the ebb and flow of daily life, the angers and short-lived hopes, the anonymous tears, the unknown men whose names rust at the bottom of a war memorial or in some country graveyard. There is only one freedom, one finitude, one tragedy, which means that the past is our greatest asset and the bowl of poison in which our heart bathes. To study history is to listen to the throbbing silence and to attempt to replace anxiety, so intense that it may seem self-sufficient, with the sad and gentle respect that the human condition inspires in us.