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Postmemories of Salonica

by Dominic Green

On the Cohen family of Salonica.

A historian is someone who reads other people's letters. There are names for this sort of behavior, most of them pejorative, but if the letters belong to the dead, then it is permitted and even praised. Yet it isn't always harmless. Anyone who has assembled a family history recalls the pained expressions from the elderly relative squirming under interrogation, the evasions and changes of subject over the teacups and fruitcake, the implicit request not to bring the dead back to life.¹

Historians dream of having Rony Alfandary's luck: boxes containing photographs, postcards, documents, and letters in Greek, French, Ladino (Judeo-Spanish), and Solitreo (a cursive form of Sephardi Hebrew) fall one by one into his lap from some dusty corner of a house in Provence. But to have Alfandary's luck, you must first have his misfortune: to be the heir of unspeakable sorrow. The Germans and their local collaborators murdered his grandmother Rita's family, the Cohens of Salonica in Greece. Rita Cohen survived because she and her husband had immigrated to the Land of Israel before the war. Another survivor, the sister-in-law of Rita's brother Leon, kept those boxes of material, but seemed unable to destroy or release them. Nothing is free when the psychological investigation is shadowed by lives foreshortened, when the human evidence has been hunted down and destroyed, when the archival tracings that each of us leaves in our wake turn out to have been written on water.

"The past is never dead. It's not even past," William Faulkner observed in *Requiem for a Nun*. Faulkner set that novel in 1938: the year of Munich; the year that Rita's mother, the matriarch Rachele Bourla Cohen, died in Salonica; the year that Stefan Zweig, the peerless evoker of the "world of yesterday," suggested that the historian, aspiring to create a narrative from the fragmentary and arbitrary survivals of the physical record, must resort to the "free art of psychological investigation."

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Among the peculiarities of the historian's craft, and the peculiar rewards of reading

Alfandary's *Postmemory, Psychoanalysis and Holocaust Ghosts*, are the pleasures of the detective story: puzzling out the relationships between the shards of information, discovering the motivations of the characters, exposing the enormity of the crime. I won't discuss the details of Rony Alfandary's story here: much of the pleasure, and much of the horror, too, lies in reading it for yourself. But I will note that he has accomplished something miraculous: he has turned names into characters, characters into stories. He has, as Isaiah's injunction and the name of Israel's Shoah archive say, supplied *yad v'shem*: "a sign and a name" to the unnamed and unburied dead.

No historical method gives greater weight to the past than the Austro-German fusion of the methods of Leopold von Ranke and Sigmund Freud. Ranke believed that meticulous narrative reconstruction of the archives could show us the past *wie es eigentlich gewesen*: "as it really was." Freud, no less optimistic in his way, believed in the meticulous narrative construction of the inner life. Both created templates for what are now called "microhistories," highly detailed reconstructions whose resonances elucidate the wider history of their age.

The derailing of modern history by other Austro-Germans meant that "psychohistory," as it became known, was developed in the universities of the United States, not Germany or Austria, just as the subsequent development of psychoanalysis occurred in Hampstead and on the Upper West Side. For fifteen years, I lived within walking distance of the Freud Museum in Hampstead. I read books by Freud; I read books about Freud; I took pride in living on the street where Anna Freud had lived; I knew where Melanie Klein had lived; I laughed knowingly at the oral implications when I walked past the statue of Freud outside the Tavistock Clinic and saw that the cigarette butt that some well-informed comedian had inserted into his lips was still there; I read scholarly articles on the restoration of Freud's couch—but I never visited his house museum.

Freud, who delayed visiting Rome, would have understood. When I was living within walking distance of the Freud Museum, which is a transplant symbolic of the wide history of his age, I was living on the same streets that my maternal grandparents had grown up on. One day, reading Stephen Spender's account of serving as a fireman during the Blitz, I realized that the explosions and fires Spender was describing were the ones that had destroyed the building in whose replacement I now lived. I was experiencing the difference between psychological reality and historical narrative that Freud had described in *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1930).

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Freud enumerates the "fantastic supposition" that Rome is "not a human dwelling-place, but a mental entity with

just as long and varied a past history." Nothing is erased, and each stage of its development coexists in the same geography. Not only would the palaces of the Caesars be still standing on the Palatine, "beautiful statues were still standing in the colonnade of the Castle of St. Angelo, as they were up to its siege by the Goths." It would also imply the physically impossible but psychically common. Where the Palazzo Caffarelli stands, there would also be the Temple of Jupiter Capitolinus, "not merely in its latest form, moreover, as the Romans of the Caesars saw it, but also in its earliest shape, when it still wore an Etruscan design and was adorned with terra-cotta *antifixae*." When we see the Colosseum, we would at the same time see the Golden House. We would see the current Pantheon, built by Hadrian, but also the original edifice of Agrippa. In an overlay familiar from religious history, the "same ground would support the church of Santa Maria sopra Minerva and the old temple over which it was built."

Historians have a boundless appetite for the past, but that can be too much of a bad thing. This is the plight that history placed on Rony Alfandary as a young man. Like the mental overlay of the Palazzo Caffarelli and the Temple of Jupiter in Freud's mind, it is not possible to separate what was personal to Alfandary—his grandmother's need for her murdered family to remain "awake" in memory—from the "human dwelling-place" of collective memory, written history, and formal remembrance. For Alfandary, as for Joyce's Dedalus, history is a nightmare from which he is trying to awake. A psychoanalyst, Alfandary calls his condition "postmemory": a mind in the shadow of an overwhelming past and its foreshortened potentialities, and the obligation to live on behalf of the dead.

Freud opened *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1899) with a line from the *Aeneid*, spoken by Juno in her unbearable distress: "If I cannot move the gods, I will summon the underworld." It is impossible to bring the dead back to life by some "fantastic supposition," to vivify the names of the Cohen siblings to whom chance and murder denied an archival posterity, or to count the unborn children of the murdered. This army of ghosts travels with the reader through Alfandary's story as it has traveled with him throughout his life in the "human dwelling-place." But it is possible—necessary too, if we are to live fully and the future is to exist beyond the shadow of the past—to express the "mental entity," the private jumble of images and over-determination, within the public framework of shared languages and ideas.

The "free art of psychological investigation," Zweig wrote, "often produces almost certain truths, arrived at by logical reflection." This was optimistic. In 1934, when Leon Cohen was planning his wedding, Robert Graves published *I, Claudius*. Graves combined historical erudition with philological boldness, and called this the "analeptic method—the intuitive recovery of forgotten events by a deliberate suspension of time." He believed that if a mind could be "trained to think wholly" in the mental patterns of the past, the imagination would intuitively select and arrange material from its sources and recover the truth *wie es eigentlich gewesen*. Graves happened to be Leopold von Ranke's great-nephew.

Graves could close his eyes and reconstruct the ancient Roman Forum in his mind's eye. Joyce

joked that, if Dublin were destroyed, it could be reconstructed from *Ulysses*. He also called his novel a reconstruction of a “vanished world,” the world that vanished along with much else of the old world in 1916, the year of the Somme, the Easter Rising in Dublin, and the photograph in which the entire Cohen family sits together on the steps of what we must assume is their family home in Salonica—minus Isaac, Leon’s older brother, who may have been behind the camera, recording his family before the brothers’ wanderings began. These are almost certain truths, arrived at by logical reflection. But they cannot be certain.

Ulysses is the Latinized name of Odysseus.

The *Aeneid* records the later, Latinized adventures of Aeneas, the son of a prince and a goddess who fought the Greeks at Troy. The barrier between the present and the “vanished world” is that of war. The

reconstructions of myth and memory cannot revive the dead, but they can “summon the underworld” of the not-living. Postmemory and the stories that result are forms of memorial autobiography. Recent research into the descendants of Holocaust survivors suggests that the trauma is not only passed on through the usual means—the omissions of memory, the demands to remember—but also through epigenetic changes. The postmemory of war may be printed onto our dna as well as printed in books.

The disjuncture between the external, social world and the internal, irrational drama generates the *Unheimlich*, that half-translatable term whose original German carries not just the “uncanny” sense that the familiar is foreign and the foreign familiar, but also the recognition that while we may feel we are at home in the world, we are not as embedded as we might like to think. Europe’s Jews were disembedded from their nations and homes in a historical instant: almost overnight, Salonica went from being the “Jerusalem of the Balkans” to a city without Jews.

We can more easily imagine the past of Salonica’s Jews than the future that was denied to them by Nazi Germany and its armies of willing collaborators. Postmemory is perpetually accompanied by its double, the might-have-been and might-have-lived. In recent decades, new and disembodied technologies have turned hundreds of thousands of Jews into autobiographical historians: joining genealogical websites and sending off saliva swabs allows the discovery of new materials for the narratives of memory and new genealogies of postmemory. Perhaps this is a way of sharing the weight of history and making the unbearable more bearable. Perhaps the dilution of sorrow and the expansion of living contacts offers a way of attaining the “ordinary unhappiness” that Freud thought a good-enough outcome of a personal reckoning with the past.

I end as Rony Alfandary begins, with a personal story. I was booked to speak at a literary conference taking place on Corfu. One name jumped out from the list of speakers.

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From childhood, I had heard that my mother's family, the Franco then Franken then Franklin family of Spanish then Dutch then German then English then American Jews, were related by marriage to a Sephardic family from somewhere in southeastern Europe via someone called Millie Alfandary. The details of this exotic association were vague, but it was asserted that one of Millie's descendants had joined the Royal Air Force. My maternal grandfather, Jimmy Franklin, had volunteered as an raf pilot "before the balloon went up" in 1939 and been killed on active service in 1943. I was close to my grandmother Betty as a child and would stay with her for long periods. In her guest room, Jimmy's photograph was the last thing I saw each night before falling asleep. I was, she said, just like him.

The image of the grandfather I had never known merged with the idea of the person I might become, and in the organized way of association, the notion of an airborne Alfandary attached itself to these thoughts as a kind of supplementary confirmation. I was like Jimmy, we were like them, and the flying Alfandary's voluntary service seemed to vindicate my grandfather's self-sacrifice. When I discovered that I was not pilot material—it was all physics and math—I felt like I had failed my grandparents and their memory. Rony Alfandary describes a similar pile-up of loss and compensatory images and fantasies in linking his middle name, Leon, with his murdered great-uncle Leon Cohen, and then "finding" the lost Leon in the form of the poet and songwriter Leonard Cohen.

Before our appointment on Corfu, Rony and I had each conducted the now-customary internet investigation into the other speakers—Google has turned us all into microhistorians of a sort. During the small talk at the conference's first session, I opened with a gambit typical between Jews, a people whose sacred texts include extensive and, if you're a historian or a new parent in search of unusual names, invaluable genealogies: "My mother's family was related to an Alfandary."

It turned out that one day in the 1980s, while Rony was working on his master's degree at the University of Nottingham, he had received a phone call from a member of this Anglo-Alfandary family. They had not been able to establish a genealogical link, but neither had they concluded that they were completely unrelated. The caller had, though, mentioned serving in the raf.

Those members of the Franken family who did not immigrate to Britain or America were deported and murdered. As with the Cohens of Salonica, a single member escaped to British-controlled Palestine in the Thirties; unlike the Cohens of Salonica, the dead left no letters to read. The same applies to my mother's maternal family, the Lincenbergs of Tarnow, Poland. The descendants of that fugitive run a guest house in the Negev desert in Israel. Sitting in the broiling shade with my eldest daughter and our distant but uncannily close cousin Tomer, I recalled that his brother had been a pilot, killed on active service in the Yom Kippur War. I filed his image with that of my grandfather and the mystery Alfandary.

Who were all these people, those names on the registries of small-town births, deaths, and

marriages that the Mormons have scanned and distributed as part of their mad campaign to retroactively save lost souls, the permanently young faces on photographs of the kind that the Cohens posed for when Leon's brother Isaac was leaving for Paris? They were the cousins of my grandparents, and their children would, as second and third cousins do, have looked like my parents and my siblings and me. There are lives un-lived that we cannot imagine—the lives of the kind that Rony Alfandary's grandmother charged him to remember and somehow enact—and there are the lives lived that we do not know about.

The day after visiting Tomer Lincenberg in the Negev, I took my daughter swimming on the beach at Tel Aviv. The man next to me had a son of about the same age. We looked like each other, and our children both noticed. I gather that it's a common experience, especially among people whose present lives are imprinted by uncommon historical forces.

In 1913, when Freud finally did visit Rome, he visited the Forum, map in hand, overlaid images in mind. Afterwards, he sent a postcard to Karl Abraham of the Arch of Titus, which celebrates the desecration of the Temple at Jerusalem—and preserves the image of its menorah, a symbol of freedom. “Der Jude überlebt's,” Freud wrote. “The Jew survives it.”

¹ This essay is drawn from the introduction to *Postmemory, Psychoanalysis and Holocaust Ghosts: The Salonica Cohen Family and Trauma Across Generations*, by Rony Alfandary, published by Routledge.

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