



Debts

By Marianne Hirsch

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INTER-LIVES

Debts

By Marianne Hirsch

It was possible that I did owe something to my own family and the families of my friends. That is, to tell their stories as simply as possible, in order, you might say, to save a few lives.

—Grace Paley, “Debts”

Every day my inbox bursts with messages from the Czernowitz listserv. Mostly, I send them off to the trash bin over my first coffee. I thought I was done with Czernowitz. I’ve spent nearly two decades researching, writing, speaking, and publishing about my strong personal connection to a place that can no longer be found in any contemporary atlas. I’ve written about the rich Habsburg and interwar Jewish life there and about the persecution, deportation, and survival of the city’s Jews during the Second World War (Hirsch and Spitzer). I was able to visit my parents’ childhood homes in what is now Chernivtsi in Ukraine and to retrace their ghetto experiences in their company. I even traveled to Transnistria, a region now in Ukraine and Moldova to which tens of thousands of Jews from Czernowitz and Greater Romania were deported and where they suffered starvation, disease, and mass murder at the hands of Nazi and Romanian perpetrators. I went there twice, even though my parents had been among the fortunate third of the city’s Jews who were able to evade deportation. I had to see and touch not just what they suffered but also what they feared. These experiences have fueled my scholarship and lent personal and political urgency to my writing. And now, seventy years later, my parents, my aunts and uncles, along with nearly all their contemporaries, have died. I would have liked to think that I’ve paid my debts to this past by listening to them and by retelling their stories “as simply as possible.” By trying to ensure that this particular Jewish history will not sink into oblivion, I had hoped, in Grace Paley’s words, “to save a few lives.”

The legacies of genocidal violence, however, are not so neatly put aside. They leave their traces and shadows for decades and generations to come. That’s what hit me when, one morning this spring, I was about to delete yet

another message from the Czernowitz listserv. This one was from Stephen Winter of New York:

My mother, Blanka, turned 93 today. Once in a while her memory gets confused

Her only wish to me today was to go back to Transnistria and die to be with her brother Leopold

This made me think ... no one has ever apologized to her for their cruelty!

What a load Transnistria has been on my 62 years of life.

I think she deserves at least one apology!

This was quickly followed by a response from Miriam Süß from Melbourne:

Stephen, as I read your post and tears run down my cheeks, I hear the voice of my 97-year-old mother, who at least once a week cries over her losses and the terrible suffering in Bershad Transnistria.

A shadow over all our childhoods and indeed our adult lives.

And then a message by Sally Bendersky from Santiago:

I connect with you, Miriam... My mother passed away several years ago, but the memory of her suffering and the impossibility of enjoying her life is still here.

Who is there who might apologize to 93-year-old Blanka Winter and to her son? Hers is a history that has never been properly acknowledged. In a context in which historical transmission is short-circuited by shifts in national borders, the realignment of political orientations, and the contestation, erasure, and forgetting of histories even as devastating as the Romanian Holocaust in Czernowitz and Transnistria, survivors transmit more than memories of wartime suffering to their descendants. Their anxieties and needs, their trauma and mourning, are compounded by the limited possibilities of recognition that exist after decades of denial and neglect. It's these incommensurate effects I hear in the brief outcries from around the globe, written in shorthand and, for most, in a foreign language, forging a digital community of what Eva Hoffman has termed the "postgenerations." That community shares the many dimensions of postmemory I've myself experienced and analyzed in the art and writing of those who came "after": mourning for a lost world, the impulse to repair the loss and to heal those who have suffered it, anger about the absence of public recognition, frustration in the face of our own ignorance and impotence. In short, the inheritance of a trauma that survives the survivors, overwhelming the present and hijacking the future.

As familial and affiliative descendants of survivors, we continue to feel the need to research and to tell their stories of injustice and persecution as well as

to reclaim moments of courage and resistance on their part. But as the survivors have now mostly left our midst, shouldn't we also ask ourselves what we can *do* with this persisting legacy? How can we move forward toward a future that recalls past crimes without being paralyzed by them and without perpetuating a culture of fear and denial, of nationalism and ethnocentrism? Might our own subject position as descendants of the Holocaust, in particular, move us to be responsive to the violent histories of others, whether past or present? Could we mobilize the vulnerability we have inherited as a postgeneration to serve as a platform of attunement and connectivity that reaches beyond identity and ethnicity in favor of solidarity and what Irene Kacandes has termed "co-witnessing"? I believe that the structure of postmemory applies to the co-witness not only of past trauma but also of contemporary catastrophic events occurring in distant parts of the world. For retrospective or distant co-witnesses, the challenge now is to allow ourselves to be vulnerable to what Susan Sontag has called "the pain of others," to recognize the entanglements of our connective histories (Hirsch 21) while at the same time resisting an appropriative form of identification and empathy between self and other, past and present.

The afterlives of violent histories are anything but simple. I would like to envision a day when we could emerge from our traumatic legacies feeling lighter because we have paid our debts—not by ceasing to revisit the ghosts of our own past but by mobilizing them in our writing and our work for a more progressive and connective future.

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Disclosure Statement

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