

Laura Almagor

Story for J.

In late 2013, I was a visiting researcher at the University of California, Los Angeles. By pure chance, a local professor put me in touch with the granddaughter of a Dutch member of the Jewish Territorialist movement, which looked for places of settlement for Jews outside of Palestine until well into the 1950s. What was more, the woman's mother – the territorialist's daughter – was still alive, aged 96! What followed was a remarkable visit to the two women's Los Angeles home. Afterwards, I put some thoughts and reflections to paper, without academic intentions, but as part of a letter to a close friend.

The story recently resurfaced in my thoughts while I was working on an article about Jewish Territorialism's Dutch connection, and this regenerated some unresolved questions. I posed these questions to my colleagues at the Vienna Wiesenthal Institute during a recurring internal sources and methodology workshop. I was thrilled to find myself as part of a fruitful and thought-provoking exchange.

The main issue discussed was the question of how a scholar could or should deal with unexpected encounters with people related to his or her subject matter. More often than not, such meetings do not lead to archival findings of importance and their contribution is thus not directly measurable in the 'end product'. Still, thinking back to my LA experience and other such events during my research endeavours so far (yes, there were others!), I realise that these had a greater impact on the way I thought about the subject of my research than I initially expected. Should one, therefore, enter into such conversations with an open mind and few expectations, or should one try to get as much 'relevant' material out of it as possible? And lastly, what place does a more 'literary' account, such as the one given below, have within the larger scope of our academic work? How far can we go in blurring the lines between scholarly and literary approaches and writing styles? How do different national academic (cultural) contexts define the extent of such liberties?

Such a frail thing, as she is lying there in the bed, in the corner of the dimly lit living room. Next to her, on the grand piano, as a tribute to her former beauty, stands a wide collection of photographs taken in different eras. And stunning she was, in her evening dress, her hair tied up elegantly, while she smiled her broad smile into the camera. "The dress had a red ribbon on the back", her daughter tells me. "Scarlet", the old woman corrects her.

1917. That was when she was born, the eldest child to a well-to-do Dutch-Jewish business family, one of the old elite clans. I have read so many of her father's letters that I feel I have gotten to know him a bit, and I hope that she feels that, while I sit next to her and talk, not really knowing what to say. She wants to practice her Dutch (rusty and archaic, and after some sentences I see it wears her out, so we switch back to English). It has been so long since she spoke Dutch. It was, after all, her mother tongue, the language spoken at home, with her parents and her five siblings, the language in which she studied medicine in Leiden, until that fateful day in 1940 when

her father sent her off to join her mother and brothers and sisters in the United States. There was no future in Europe.

She was a daddy's girl, the daughter told me on the way here. Her mother was so excited by the prospect of talking to me about him. It was only many years after her departure from the Netherlands, the war, and his survival in Bergen-Belsen that she would see her father again in the New World, where she had started a new life, first as a student at Johns Hopkins and later as a psychotherapist in Los Angeles. It is the old life I am interested in, so I gently push this woman, this living history, to reminisce. Yes, she remembers them all, Nathan Birnbaum and his son Uriël (who had a crush on her), Frederik Weinreb, Daniël Wolf, all those names dancing through so many of the documents I have collected. They are just everyday memories to her. "Have you ever heard of Godfried Bomans?" the daughter asks me. Of course I have. He was one of the most famous Dutch writers of the twentieth century and a prominent Catholic figure during a time of imminent social change. "Well, he was my mother's boyfriend and he was the one who put her on the ship to America. They would've gotten married if she had not left." I wonder aloud if that would not have posed grave problems, considering that he was a staunch and public Catholic and she the daughter of an observant Jew. "I'd imagine it would have", the old lady replies, smilingly.

But the father, the silent absentee, that enigmatic figure, loved by many for his warm character, frowned upon by others for his political views and harsh criticism of the Zionist movement and the young State of Israel after its establishment in May 1948 – she does not really speak about him. The daughter, as it turns out a left-wing Jewish activist, does most of the talking and reveals how parts of the family have rejected her for her interpretation of "Opa's" attitude towards Zionism. But all of this is not important to the old lady. One of the pictures on the piano shows her as a young girl, entangled in a warm embrace with her father on the beach of Scheveningen, a place I have come to know so well myself.

And this is what I get from this visit. Surely, there are some letters, some newspaper articles, but mostly history has shown itself to me today as a trivial thing, almost banal, in the shape of this 96-year-old woman, sharing space and tea with me, calling for the Mexican help to use 'the pan', closing her eyes (but still hearing everything that is being said!) as a sign that it is possibly time for me to leave. History is life, and life goes on. 96 years and counting. It is more than I could have hoped for.

When I finally do pack up my things, the ladies have a present for me: an orange tin with the portraits of the former queen and the new king and queen. And as if that were not enough Dutchness: inside there is orange *hagelslag*. When I return home, I immediately look up a letter that I remember having seen during one of my archival trips. Its solemn sadness is burnt into my memory. In 1945, upon learning that he was still alive, Uriël Birnbaum, a surviving son of the nowadays almost forgotten Nathan Birnbaum, wrote to the father. After a lengthy description of sorrow upon sorrow, Uriël enquires about K. (I now see before me her smiling image and the dress with the invisible scarlet ribbon), who, he heard, made her way to far-away California. He hopes she is well.

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