

# Introduction

## On Memory

*I have never attached so much importance to my own person that I would have been tempted to tell others the story of my life. Much had to occur, infinitely more events, catastrophes, and trials than are usually allotted to a single generation had to come to pass, before I found the courage to begin a book in which I was the principle person or, better still the pivotal point. Actually, it is not so much the course of my own destiny that I relate, but that of an entire generation.*  
—Stefan Zweig, *The World of Yesterday*

The following narrative intends to present a past social reality engaging the personal experiences of the author as member of AD KAN (NO MORE), a group of Israeli academics at Tel Aviv University (TAU) representing various disciplines, who came together to protest against their government's uncompromising positions in a long-standing binational conflict. It is part of the story of the first (1987) Palestinian intifada (uprising), the emergence of the Palestinians' effective public response after twenty years of subjugation to Israeli control of the West Bank and Gaza, since the aftermath of the 1967 war. And last, it is an account inquiring into the role and consequences of academics, or in broader terms "intellectuals," their active engagement in issues affecting the common good of their respective society. That discourse will naturally connect our case with past and present representations of academics' involvement with social-political conflict situations in Israel and other countries.

However, the return story of my engagement with the intifada, twenty-five years after I was first caught in its rolling events, cannot be compared with my other ethnographic accounts. It was not a planned professional fieldwork assignment that occupied me for many years of investigation and writing, a method one can identify in the long-term studies among the first generations of anthropologists. As later indicated, I rely on many documents at my disposal comparable with the ethnographer's "fieldnotes" as well as on present-day interviews with past participants. Nevertheless, the impact of memories on all involved, the author included, must be reckoned with more than ever before as an active element in the following exposition.

The spectrum of the studies inquiring the origin, contents, meaning, presentations, and consequences of memory in human life is wide and complex, including the biological, psychological, sociological, and other research dimensions (e.g., Mendels 2007). The founders of the modern ethnographic tradition claimed to offer descriptions of human behavior based on direct observations. They made great efforts to separate their personal narratives and their interpretations from the scientific domain of their colleagues the psychologists. Citing a known witness's account, "Received anthropological wisdom warns against using statements that people make about their past lives in constructing their histories" (Rosaldo 1980: 31). The long absence of "memory" from the anthropological dictionary is clearly visible in the *Anthropology of Experience* (Turner and Bruner 1986), a collection of essays that included a list of vanguard anthropologists who contributed to new genres, concepts, and metaphors in ethnographic writing. Mainstream anthropologists were also no less careful to restrain a hidden temptation for a literary career reflecting on their memories from the field, even though they all had the stuff for many exciting novels.

I experienced that "taboo" early in my career, as a student returning from the field participating at the Manchester staff seminars and in later writings; I felt inhibited, compelled to report directly on the continuing references of my subjects—immigrants from the Atlas Mountains in an Israeli village—to the stratification ladder that had existed in their past community in Morocco and that seemed to influence their present-day relationships. Instead, I referred to these "memories" as a myth of some sort (Shokeid 2007a). The method of life history, a literary model and style presenting the ethnographer's chosen subject's life, partly based on memories, also remained suspect. It was employed by a few "deviants," such as Lewis's *La Vida* (1967) describing the life of a Puerto Rican prostitute. However,

from the late 1970s, anthropologists started publishing ethnographies based on memories and making no effort to disguise the use of the term. Myerhoff's acclaimed *Number Our Days* (1978), about a group of aging Jews who made their home in Los Angeles after retirement, concentrated on the memories that took them back to their earlier days of work, and also prior to their immigration to America.

It seems that memory's recognition as a promising vehicle for ethnographic work was encouraged by the growing impact of reflexivity in anthropology. The genre demanded the researcher's increased presence in the ethnographic text to allow for better information about his/her relationships with the people studied, as well as about his/her feelings and role in the field. In that new construction and style of ethnographic text, the authors transformed the memories that nourished their personal stories assembled in their fieldnotes into a coherent document that produced a collective memory representing the ethos of a particular group. This method had actually borrowed a sociological strategy when the writers chose the framework for a paradigmatic narrative that suited their leading thesis.

The sociological approach, geared mostly to the conception of collective memory, considered the past a social construction that shapes the various views of the past as they are manifested respectively in every historical epoch, though it treated the significance of autobiographical memory with suspicion. Halbwachs (1992), the first sociologist who stressed that our conceptions of the past are affected by the mental images we employ to solve present problems, argued that collective memory is essentially a reconstruction of the past in the light of the present. But anthropologists, whose research deeply engaged the company of the studied society, had inevitably relied and constructed autobiographical reports on past experiences—though sensitive to the observed participants' acceptance or refutation of their fellow community members' records.

Committed to a rigorous tradition of fieldwork, I have tried to maintain the role of a neutral and uninvolved observer, the recorder of memories, throughout my engagements. Naturally, I was unaware I might have harbored some social or ideological biases. In the ethnographic projects of later years, I limited the impact of informants' references to personal memories and maintained a low profile in the observed scene. However, more recently, I could not hide a feeling of nostalgia for a lost world shared with my veteran informants at the gay synagogue (CBST) in New York. On return to the "field" ten years later, I discovered the dramatic changes that took place with the transformation of a lay-led synagogue into an organization run by

salaried professionals (Shokeid 2007b). I missed an important cohort among my friends who had died of AIDS or left for other places in the United States. Not a few reduced their participation in the congregation's affairs because they could not adapt to the changing social atmosphere and religious style. I could not help comparing and judging the present social ambience with my memories of life at CBST a decade earlier, in the late 1980s and early 1990s. I "went native" to an extent, sharing memories with veteran congregants and envisaging the present congregational reality, screened through the same mental apparatus as my subjects.

No doubt, under the growing impact of reflexivity in recent decades, ethnographic writing has withdrawn the old taboos regarding the role of memories and of the ethnographer. The genre demanded the researcher's increased presence in the text to allow for better information about his/her relationships with the studied people, as well as about the reporter's own mindset and performance in the field (e.g., Rabinow 1977, Behar 2003). I experienced that notion of emotional engagement and professional responsibility of informing on the ethnographer's "true" feelings during fieldwork already in the stage of the first ethnographic account, though published in an article not included in the PhD dissertation: "Fieldwork as Predicament rather than Spectacle" (1971).

However, the most "notorious" deviation from the old tradition of excluding the researcher's presence from the ethnographic text was exposed in an impromptu piece of writing: "Exceptional Experiences in Everyday Life" (1992). Not only was the material for that article based entirely on memories, it was also based upon my own self, recording personal uncanny events from young age to later years conceived as sort of an invisible rite of passage. Again, a Hebrew book, *An Israeli's Voyage: Tel Aviv, New York and Between* (2002), portrayed the social ambience of the Tel Aviv downtown neighborhood I was raised in during the 1940s/1950s. However, I never considered my writings as representing a literary narrative compared with Stefan Zweig's celebrated memoir and other known "pure" novelists and biographers. It was always the anthropologist's perspective, the tools and terms of reference when recording the present-day or past life experiences of the author and the "others" in his research.

As later clarified, the following record of the protest activities on TAU campus during the first intifada is mostly based on a large pile of documents that amount to ethnographic "fieldnotes," as well as on recent interviews with other participants. Nevertheless, one cannot erase the notion of personal memories affecting the perceptions of all

involved, inevitably influenced by present-day experiences. Here we turn to Aristotle's distinction between memory and recollection, as introduced by Bloch (2007: 72): "Unlike the passive state of memory, recollection is a kind of active search, or, even more revealing, a kind of deduction."

The following text offers a tapestry composed of threads of "facts" of the day (based on documents related to AD KAN's activities as well as on reports by other observers in "real time"), memories of the narrator and a few close colleagues, as well as the views of other unrelated commentators. Moreover, I use that opportunity as vehicle to express a veteran observer's perspective and feelings about current developments in Israeli society. Thus, contrary to an earlier claim, I apparently concur with certified literary biographers, but in the role, or the pretension, of a "professional observer." Although the reporter's lifetime experiences are far remote from the dramatic and tragic transformations narrated by Zweig and others (e.g., Haffner's *Geschichte Eines Deutschen*, 2000), the story of the founding of the state of Israel in 1948 and the later transformations of its social, territorial, and political construction, all within a short epoch, seems deserving of Zweig's epitaph at our opening page: I bear witness to that extraordinary national saga unique in world history.

Finally, one cannot escape narrating the personal circumstances that have preceded and might have been instrumental in the development of an anthropologist as "activist." I hope the following presentation does not appear intended to glorify the narrator's persona.