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The role of the Significant Other in the construction of national identities"

Graciela-Spector Bitan

Jerusalem, 2011

Dan McAdams (1993) stated that from the initial bonding, which binds us forever to our parents, the experiences of the first year of life have such importance that they will determine the level of optimism or pessimism that will characterize the narrative tone that we will exhibit in adulthood. The themes of power and love, which for this author are the motivating currents of our adult life, also relate to the stories we have heard, learned and created during our childhood.

What happens then with a life story is embedded with voices of death, horror, loss, exile, fear?

This is the question that leads me to analyze the role of others in the history of life.

While the central voice of a story is that of the narrator, we also hear echoes of many other voices : close or distant, concordant or dissonant, warm or threatening. These Others populate stories, and we do not always know who is the owner of the clear voice we hear.

Thorne (2000) emphasizes the role of these 'Others' when he says that the construction of the defining memories of the self and life stories constitutes always a social enterprise, "the family and friends conspire in the construction of the self" (p.45). For Hermans (1996), the self is a

polyphonic novel, which contains a multitude of internalized voices that converse among themselves. McAdams (1998) considers that entire history of life is formulated bearing in mind an internal or external audience. Someone is always listening or watching: friends or acquaintances, parents or children, the Freudian superego, Mead's Generalized Other, internalized objects, or God.

There are many difficult questions that accompany our work as interviewer, and that will have to find plausible answers to carry out our interpretative task. "Who is speaking now? Who am I now? Who am I representing now in the eyes of the narrator? Whom is the narrator addressing now?"

I propose to analyze here an example of the construction of national identities, employing the narrative method following McAdams, who states that "identity is an internalized life story (2001, p. 100)

The process of construction of national identities has as its main objective to explain our social and geographic belonging. This is an instance of the "social construction of reality" (Berger and Luckman, 1967), or - in Winnicott's (1971) words, the permanent "task of accepting reality," an effort that in his opinion never reaches completion.

It means that the answer to the question "who am I?" needs a *fiction* to bridge the inner and the outer reality. This answer is at the same time based on elements from the external world and on others that belong to the inner reality, to the subjective world. In the case of

immigrants, we can count among the former the status granted by the new country (inhabitant, citizen), the relative status of the newcomer's ethnic group in relation to other groups in society, the social status of his native tongue in relation to the majority language, the attitudes society holds towards his ethnic group, etc. Nevertheless, together with these external factors, other *subjective* elements will also color the answer: those belong to the personal biography of the person: his childhood experiences, his own perception of his ethnic identity, his feelings of being accepted or rejected by "significant others" throughout his life, etc. This explains why the individual's relationship towards his national identity, the way in which he defines himself, the naturalness or lack of naturalness with which he accepts a certain national identity, cannot be predicted solely by demographic data. The nationality that appears on someone's identity card is important, but it does not suffice. The person fictionalizes these data on the basis of the need to provide himself with an answer he can live with.

National identities are constructed in different ways. While some are inherited, others are acquired. Among the inherited ones, which constitute a part of the basic elements of social identity, it is possible to distinguish families which are deeply rooted in a certain identity, who have possessed it for many generations, and families which change their original identity and whose children exhibit a different one as a consequence of immigration.

Sometimes, history pushes human beings towards other nation towards another narration, into another language through another culture. In these cases, the story is so violent that it requires that the subject moves, migrate, or which is referred to as citizen of a country that has not even elected, even through the painful Agency of the Migration Act (Zaccaria ,2006: 60)

The construction of identity is carried out by the individual, but is not however a solitary or independent task. Berger (1963: 98-99) reminds us that, on the contrary, "identity is socially bestowed, socially sustained and socially transformed ...taking the role of the other is decisive for the formation of the self" .

Coles (2008: 97) claims also that "one way or another, the other plays a fundamental role in how the self is formulated, enlivened and embodied in life and in the academic discourse" . Despite this, the investigation of the role of others in the construction of identities has not elicited great interest from the various social disciplines. In one of the few works that have been written on the topic, Coles (2008), claims that " the Self has received renewed attention across disciplines in recent years. There are dialogic selves (Bakhtin, 1981), redemptive selves (McAdams, 2006), muscled selves (Sparkes, 2005), mediated selves (Sawrey, 2005) .However, she adds, "the Other has been overlooked...which is ironic, because it is difficult, if not impossible, for a Self to exist without an Other".

Who are these others? Among the long list of others that Coles cites and proposes in her article (the unconscious Other, the marginalized Other,

the non-human Other, etc.), I will only refer in this paper to two of them: the generalized Other and the significant Other.

I will analyze the life story of Raquel, an Argentinean psychologist who immigrated in Israel at the age of thirty, and who was 45 years old at the time of the interview. Throughout the interview, I was surprised by the frequency with which Raquel referred to "others" when she told her childhood experiences or referred to her feelings of belonging to Argentina and Israel.

More frequently than other interviewees, she compared herself to certain others, when she was telling me about her lack of belonging, her lack of pride about her father, her Argentinean and Jewish identities.

As Holdsworth and Morgan (2007: 401-2) point out, at times "these others were sometimes identifiable significant others but, on other occasions, the reference was to something more vague and generalized. These references "served as points of comparison", but beyond that, "they seemed to involve something more complex, a process of negotiation , partly with the interviewer but also, it would seem, internally within the interviewees themselves". Holdsworth and Morgan suggest that these references illustrate Mead's (1934) concept of the Generalized Other. Morris (1962:xxiv) , in the preface to Mead's book, describes it as "one of Mead's happiest terms and most fertile concepts". The Generalized Other appears to be a stage beyond the processes of "taking the role of the other", where the "other" is

another identifiable individual or set of individuals. In Mead's words: "finally crystallising all these particular attitudes into a single attitude or standpoint which may be called that of the 'generalized other'." (1962 [1934]: 90). In another reference to the term (p.154), Mead refers to "the attitudes of the whole community", and describes the process by which the community exercises control over its individual members through the generalized other, which "enters as a determining element into the individual's thinking " (p. 155). Coles (2008: 5) defines it as "the sociological counterpart to psychology's Unconscious Other". She adds that "an individual may have multiple Generalized Others, because the individual can hold membership in multiple "societies": such as an organization, a status group, family, tribe or nation, each having its own attitudes, values and expected behaviors. These Generalized Others may conflict with one another, and the Self must negotiate among them.

The Significant Other

Coles (2008: 5-6) considers that it is the simplest and most straightforward other that she deals with in her paper." The Significant Other is always a "real" person, possibly a family member, partner, friend, therapist, or any number of people with whom a Self comes into contact. Perinbanayagam (2000) defines the significant other as someone, "who may or may not be physically present in the interaction, but who nevertheless plays a significant role in a Self's life

and can influence the Self from afar”. Eakin (1990) calls it the “proximate other”, and argues that “the most common form of relational life is the self’s story viewed through the lens of its relation with some key other person, sometimes a sibling, friend, or lover, but most often a parent”. That is, the Significant Other “is often approached as one Self in a dyadic relationship with another Self, where one Self is the focus and the other is, at least temporarily, playing a supportive role” (Coles, 6). The symbolic interaction with multiple Significant Others, a community of Others that “Cooley (1962) called “primary group”, gives origin to the Generalized Other.

The Significant Other (Coles, p 211) plays “a strong and creative role” in the formation of the identity. Eakin (1990: 63) suggests that we learn how to become a certain type of person in conversation with others. Identity formation is then socially and discursively transacted. Coles adds that “in a person’s earliest developmental stage, the Significant Other plays a pivotal role, both in the formation of the Self and in the formation of the Self’s Others. Without the verbal and non-verbal interaction between Significant Other, particularly parents, and a child, the Generalized Other would not form”.

While the Significant Other “is usually viewed as a benevolent agent, it clearly has the potential to exercise varying degrees of control over the Self’s creation.”(Coles, p.211). Jenkins (2000) points out that we know who we are because Others *tell us*. Randall (1995) asserts that Others story us. Sometimes the Significant Other plays a much less benevolent role, since he carries a fateful message that originates in

a horrid trauma he experienced and then he is bound to transmit to the subsequent generations.

It was only after I realized the central role played by Raquel's father, the Significant Other of her Jewish identity, that I could begin to unravel her history.

RAQUEL: THREE SCENES, THREE MEN AND THREE LANGUAGES IN A WOMAN'S LIFE

FIRST SCENE: Yiddish, the language of the father

The scene: a six-year old girl is sitting with her father, speaking Yiddish. The girl looks deeply into her father's eyes. She loves him so much! She is expecting her father's look of approval. She wants him to see her. He looks absently into the past. His eyes are dead. He will never really see her. The little girl starts to sing a Yiddish song.

Raquel was born in Buenos Aires. His father was a Polish Jew who had arrived in Argentina after the war. His first wife and two daughters perished in a concentration camp, and he barely escaped death thanks to his strong health. He remarried Raquel's mother, and they had a daughter and a son. Raquel's mother had arrived in Argentina before the war, following the death of her own father.

While both of Raquel's parents came from Poland, they belonged to different social circles. Her father was poor, and

his family lived in the Jewish neighborhood and spoke Yiddish. Raquel's mother belonged to the Jewish aristocracy, assimilated to the Polish culture and language, and had a deep distaste for Yiddish, a language she considered as "dirty" and non-prestigious. The couple spoke Polish among themselves when they did not want to be understood by the children. Raquel felt that Polish was a "secret language" and she learned to decipher certain codes: for example, words related to money - always a problematic issue at home, since they were rather poor.

I ask her if she understands Polish today. She answers in the negative, but as a child, she thought she was able to understand what her parents said to one another. She really does not know if she did, or if she imagined she did. When she tried to check with her parents if she understood correctly what they had said, they refused to answer. She had to guess, and she felt she was able to do so. Polish constitutes a mysterious language to this day.

Raquel knew she was a Jew when she was six. She says: "I understood I was different: while Argentinean children went to school only in the mornings, I also had to attend the Jewish school in the afternoons".

To be a Jew, for her, meant that "Spanish was not enough: I had to learn Yiddish and then Hebrew". To be a Jew was not a simple issue. Everyone was Argentinean: she was also an

Argentinean, but she possessed an added identity: that of a Jew. During many years this added identity constituted a kind of mystery. Her parents did not provide her with explications. She knew that it had something to do with ceremonies and Festivals, since her grandmother celebrated Pessach, Rosh Hashanah[New Year] and Yom Kippur[the Day of Attonement]. Her father also fasted on Yom Kippur, and he took her to the synagogue. It was a special day: they took a bus to the distant synagogue, where they heard the beautiful sounds of *Kol Nidre* [the prayer that opens the religious ceremony of Yom Kippur]. She did not attend the morning school, since Jewish children were exempted from attendance on the Jewish Festivals. She felt something heavy and strange during those days.

Raquel felt a special love for her father, an extremely silent and reserved person. She quickly discovered that Yiddish constituted the path towards his heart. He offered her fifty cents a day in order to speak with her only in Yiddish. While her mother was totally uninterested in that language, Raquel spoke it with her father, and she also recited poems and sang songs in that language. But the truth is that Raquel did not like Yiddish. She agreed with her mother: it was a dirty language. Spanish, on the contrary, was clean and beautiful, much more aesthetically pleasing than Yiddish. Nevertheless,

since Yiddish constituted the only channel of communication with her father, out of love for him she spoke it.

This effort was not successful, though: she thinks her father was totally uninterested in her. He was not even interested in her progress at the Jewish school, and Raquel thinks that the only reason he sent her there was so that she would learn Yiddish.

In fact, it was the only thing Raquel did well at the time: she had much more difficulty in learning Bible and Hebrew. But she read with great interest the books her father bought her in Yiddish, and she enjoyed the stories, although she did not like to speak that language. When they spoke Yiddish in the street, she felt ashamed, as if she wore the yellow star on her chest. While Yiddish was charged with love for her father, Hebrew was totally strange to her. Her parents did not speak that language, and she found no reason to be interested in learning it, other than its being a subject at the Jewish school.

Raquel thinks that she attended the Jewish school because she was a Jew, but her parents never showed any special interest in her progress at school. Apart from the need to attend the Jewish school, to be a Jew meant also to be different from her friends in the neighborhood, who received beautiful presents for Christmas. There was nothing good in being a Jew!

A negative side of Judaism was related to the Shoah. At the Jewish school there was this day of speeches, fire and tears. When Raquel asked her parents about the photographs of naked people, the tears and the ceremonies, they told her not to worry. She would know about it when she grew older. Despite her many questions, the Shoah remained as a mystery for many years.

Raquel thinks the attitude of her parents towards Judaism was a bit incoherent. They wanted to keep her apart from any sadness in association with Jewish history, while they wanted her to be knowledgeable of Jewish culture.

Raquel speaks Yiddish today, but she does so only occasionally. Yiddish is the language of Jews. And she does not feel comfortable being a Jew. This is a negative identity. It is related to suffering, humiliation, persecution, death. It is related to a weak father, who was never able to protect her or to make her feel proud of him. "I think my father was a survivor. He did not bring me security. He tried to rebuild his life in Argentina, but he could not manage in this world."

She loved him deeply, and she learned his language in order to communicate with him, but to no avail. She feels she was never able to really communicate with him, since his eyes remained forever in the past. The Yiddish language is dirty in Raquel's eyes. It is the language of the weak.

For Raquel, as well as his relationship with his problematic Jewish identity, Yiddish represents a self *that was not answered or confirmed*. Perinbanayagam (2000) says that we are, inevitably, discursive creatures. Since human action is marked by language, the Self does not have a continuous existence, but it is a mechanism that allows the existence of a conversation, either between two people or between two instances of the same person. The Self functions linguistically, and the conversational nature of the Self “implies that people employ rhetorical devices in order to be seen and noted, to feel present, recognized and even indisputable to others. Thus the mere physical presence does not suffice for a Self to be present. It only *exists* when it engaged in *a dialogical act* . It is easy to understand that this puts the Self in a dangerous situation: that when we present a certain Self to others, they can respond or not to it .Turner, e.g. (1988), argues that the central motivation of all interaction “is the need to sustain a self-concept (p.61) . Therefore, the fundamental reason why we maintain a conversation is the need to present a Self that is answered and confirmed by Others.

The Self, in short, is only present in a conversation (internal or external), emerges from the interaction process and depends on the reaction of Others in order to exist. Turner’s comment allows us to understand that the emerging and incidental qualities of the Self create high levels of anxiety in the individual, to the extent that

sustaining the story of the self becomes the main motivation in interaction.

The Yiddish language, then, apart from being an ugly language, symbolizes to Raquel her failure before his father, the Significant Other of her Jewish identity. His father, a survivor of the Shoah, also symbolized failure in her eyes. When Raquel says: "*This world was too big for him. I thought that every Jew felt like him in this world*" we see the relationship between the way she perceives her father and also her own Jewish identity".

The nature of the trans-generational effects of the Shoah among children of survivors arises great controversy. Some researchers think that the concept of "second generation" is an illusion and the process of transmission a fallacy, but therapists usually consider that it is not possible to grow up in a family of survivors of the Shoah without absorbing some of the emotional scars of the parents. The mechanism of transmission of trauma is a complex process, related to various types of parental behaviour, both overt and covert, which seems to occur indirectly through the implicit influences of early childhood and, more directly, through communicative styles, educational practices and the interaction between the parents at later stages of life. The transmission of trauma can be seen as a subtle mediation process whereby the psychological burden of the survivor is transferred to the children from early childhood onwards, and continues to reverberate during childhood, adolescence, adulthood and even beyond it. In this way, "the massive psychic trauma shapes the internal representations

of reality, becoming the organizing principle transmitted by fathers and internalized by the children" (P22)

It seems that many of the implicit influences are apparently not what the survivor *did* to their children in terms of *specific parenting behaviors* ,but rather what parents *were*: unsuitable role models. Since children learn not only on the basis of the actions of their parents but also from their *attitudes*, to grow near a *tormented* parent constitutes a cumulative trauma for the child who, tacitly, absorbs the parental distress. Similarly, the vague feeling of imminent danger may have been expressed through an exaggerated concern of the eager father. Thus, much of the indirect influence of the intergenerational transmission of trauma occurs through an ambiguous communication, nonverbal and generator of guilt, especially through the "conspiracy of silence" (Danieli, 1998). I started this paper bringing McAdams' assertion that the experiences of the first year of life mark the level of optimism or pessimism that will characterize the narrative tone we would possess in adulthood.

Raquel is a survivor. She carries a horrific past on her shoulders: her dead sisters, whom she could not meet. The shadow of cruelty, indifference, desperation. She is strong: history won't repeat itself with her or her family. In order to be able to escape destiny, the Jewish identity has to be put aside. We see that Raquel's Jewish identity constitutes a *negative identity*, rejected by her. Raquel claimed that, from the moment Israel was founded, providing the possibility to hold

an Israeli identity, there is no need for a Jewish identity. She would like to leave aside this identity. It is a ballast from the past .

Scene two: Spanish, the language of the others

The scene: the little girl's aunt , a Christian, spends a month in summer with her, and they visit an "estancia". There was a cook who made marmalade and brought them breakfast in bed. The girl opens her eyes in admiration: these are the "real" Argentines !

The two schools Raquel attended were different. The Jewish school's population was upper middle class. The pupils wore nice clothes, which their parents brought them from their frequent trips abroad. Since Raquel's family was much poorer, she always felt envious of those children and their beautiful clothes, and she cried bitterly because her parents sent her to that "school for the rich".

The morning school, on the contrary, made her feel at home. Children belonged to her social class, no one spent the three-month vacation at the seaside and everyone wore the same uniform. It was easier for Raquel.

At the Jewish school she was conscious of belonging to a different social class, and she had to make an effort to imitate the other children's behavior. She tells me that children behaved in different ways at the two schools: the Jewish kids started dancing and dating earlier than the others. Already at 12, Raquel had her first boyfriend.

Although she felt more comfortable with the kids at the morning school, she felt she *had* to belong to the Jewish school. At a certain point, Israel appeared as a topic in her Jewish studies. Israel was the place in which Jews lived, and people wore shorts there, danced the hora and went to the army. Raquel did not like the idea of the shorts. They did not seem beautiful to her! She wanted elegant clothes and high heels, and these seemed to be out of reach in Israel.

She started attending the social activities of Hebraica, the middle-class Jewish club, because her mother wanted her to socialize with Jewish children. She was not a member of any youth movement. She went to Hebraica's swimming pool and also to the neighborhood's swimming pool. She felt at ease in the one at the neighborhood, an open and sunny one, while that of Hebraica was closed and had an ugly smell. The children were different, too. In the neighborhood, she liked her school-mates, her friends. In Hebraica she always felt as a stranger.

"I never felt really as an Argentinean. It never caused me any pride to belong to that country". Surprised by the association between pride and belonging, I ask her if she did not feel any kind of belonging, even if it did not make her feel proud of it. NO!, she almost shouts at me.

"For me, Argentina was the country of the others. Of those who had been there for generations, those who owned the

“estancias”. Argentines speak Spanish with their children, and they did not come from abroad, like my parents.

“I was totally different. My parents had come from a distant place. Of course, I had no relationship whatsoever with their native country. It was a forbidden topic at home. It was not a place they missed or wanted to return to. My mother had a pale nostalgia for some childhood remembrances, but my father hated it.”

Her parents didn't belong to the Polish Generalized Other. Her mother thought she belonged, till the Polish attitude toward Jews shattered her assimilatory fantasies. Her father had never felt belonging to Poland: he was a Jew in Poland. Raquel inherited from him the lack of belonging, the pessimism as to being accepted in equal terms. His marginality.

“Where are you from, then?” - I ask after a long silence.

Raquel lights another cigarette. She looks a bit angry. At last, she says: “I'm from Israel now. I have a territory, a home, friends. I can identify with Israelis. In Argentina I did not like Jews. Here I like Israelis. Nothing to do with their Jewishness. I have things in common with them”. I point out to her that most of her friends are Argentines. She does not answer.

Raquel displays contradictory attitudes towards her Argentinean identity. She claims she felt more at ease with the children of the

morning school than with those of the Jewish school. She nevertheless says that Argentina belonged to others, not to her. She claims to be Israeli. On the other hand, as it is very frequent among immigrants, she mainly socializes with fellow Argentines, including other psychologists.

Coming back to her story, the Argentinean generalized Other is constituted in her eyes by aristocrats of Barrio Norte, the owners of the estancias that inhabit the wealthy neighborhood. She feels excluded from the imagined community of these idealized Argentines, and also from the community of the wealthy Jews, the parents of her schoolmates at the Jewish school. The children of her neighborhood, with whom she feels at ease, seem to lack any importance in her mental map of Argentina.

It seems as if Raquel refers to Argentina in terms of ethnicity and social stratification when she is analyzing her feelings of belonging. She seems to perceive both the Argentinean and Jewish identities in terms of the social position of the three reference groups. The Argentinean Generalized Other is composed of rich Argentines who live in Barrio Norte, own estancias, possess political power. In relation to them, her family is poor and foreign.

“Since I was a little child, my family spent the summer vacation in Cordoba, in the hills. We traveled by train for many hours, and in the hills we drove motorcycles. Sometimes we spent a whole month in Mendoza, at the mountain hotels.

“My schoolmates from the Jewish school went to the sea, to Mar del Plata, and there they spent two or three months. They were at the beach during the whole day, and the rest of the time they bought clothes.

“When I grew up, I started demanding from my parents that we go to the sea. I realize now that it must have been very painful for my mother to renounce her beloved vacations in the mountains. She never liked the sea. It took me a long time to understand that the mountains were more aristocratic, more special than the sea. I understood only as an adult that our summer vacations in Cordoba were something different altogether from the seaside Jewish gatherings.

This is one of the scarce references to her mother, with whom she identified when she was a child in her attitude towards Yiddish, an attitude that her mother had held in her past as a Jewish aristocrat, assimilated to the Polish society. Now, her mother appears again as more aristocratic than these rich Jews that spend summer near the sea.

“Something changed when we started to travel to the sea. We were like everyone else(this Generalized Other “everyone else” is composed by the rich Jews). At 13 I met Roberto, my future husband, at the beach. This was my third identity”- she says. “My third world.

“ I have a boyfriend, and Roberto is my new belonging. I do not belong to the morning school or to the Jewish school. I spend long hours with Roberto every day. He walks me home from school, we eat ice cream, we create our small bubble, and we go together to parties and social gatherings. I belong to Roberto. His grandparents had come from Russia, and his parents were born in Argentina. They spoke only Spanish at home. I felt they belonged more to Argentina, much more than my family.

“Roberto brought me into a different social class: the one of the rich Jews. I decided I wanted to belong to that bourgeoisie. We went to fancy restaurants and I started buying expensive clothes. But I nevertheless perceived a false note in Roberto. I did not consider him a true Jew. It was I who attended the Jewish school, who spoke Yiddish and Hebrew, who celebrated the Jewish Festivals. Nevertheless, Roberto felt very Jewish and he showed it by fighting against the Tacuaras, [the right-wing nationalistic and deeply anti-Semitic political organization]. I felt repugnance. It was a game. I did not feel Roberto and his friends were brave or strong. Although Roberto carried a gun in Buenos Aires, he belonged to a ghetto.

“His attitude contrasted with the one my father had held throughout his life. He had always told me not to become involved in any political activity. Whenever there were threats of a bomb at the Jewish school, I simply was told to remain at

home. I had been able to detect my father's permanent fear. This world was too big for him. I thought that this was the way every Jew felt in this world. Therefore, when I saw Roberto playing the macho-Jew against the Tacuara, in a country run by the military elite, where Jews could not belong to the Army higher ranks, I felt a discordant note. It was another kind of weakness.

This new Significant Other of her Jewish identity cannot provide her with the security she needs. Thus, she feels even more helpless.

“The others held the power in Argentina. Not the Jews. A Jew could not be elected as the president of the country. I felt excluded. I felt as a second-class citizen. It was the country of the others. Not mine.

“I also felt excluded among the Jews. At least, I was not interested in their permanent search for money and prestige. Nevertheless, I played the game because I was Roberto's girlfriend. It was very superficial. A lot of money. At 20, I knew perfectly well where to buy fashionable shoes, where the best restaurants were. I felt a bit trapped.

“Throughout my adolescence, the message I had received at home was ‘Do not get involved’. I dreaded political demonstrations, I did not understand who the enemy was, why they were struggling. I studied psychology at the University of

Buenos Aires, and I was unable to understand why students defended the rights of the poor. I felt it was a kind of fashion, something one had to do in order to belong, as the books one had to read, or the political opinions one had to hold.

“Roberto was politically active, and he participated in demonstrations and strikes. I was angry at him, because he was a political activist instead of a good student, while his parents supported him economically.

“For me, Argentina was divided into three groups: at one extreme, the poor Argentinians in the slums. At the other extreme, the Argentinian aristocrats, delicate and full of savoir faire. In the middle, the Jews that wanted to imitate the aristocracy. I had to belong to this “false” aristocracy, not to the real one: the people with two family names who were born in Barrio Norte[a prestigious neighborhood]. The social class I belonged to *aimed* at Barrio Norte. They were not *born* there.

“I felt that this was not genuine, but nevertheless I wanted to get it. Jewish men in the circle I frequented had to buy a certain kind of car, buy their clothes at certain shops, spend the summer in certain places. These Jews, the rich ones, were “piolas” (cute). They wanted power, money. They could manage. Nevertheless, they aroused in me a feeling of anxiety. Since they constituted my social model, in order to belong to them, I also had to learn how to manage.”

She could not feel proud of her father (in front of whom? The Argentinean aristocrats?) Roberto provides her with a passport to the world of the rich Jews, but she cannot feel proud of him: his is only an apparent power, that depends on a gun and his parent's money..

I will now describe Raquel's Spanish. When she was a child, she thought that it was 'clean' and aesthetic. This is exactly the way her Spanish sounds to me. She speaks beautifully. Her descriptions are exact. She sounds sophisticated and knowledgeable in Spanish. She does not hesitate. Her Spanish is fluid, delicate and clean. It is the *imagined language of the Argentinean aristocrats of Barrio Norte*.

Raquel speaks the Spanish of the Argentinean intellectuals. This is the only way in which she could manage in Argentina. Although belonging to the Jewish middle-class, she studied at the university, acquired the language of the intellectuals surrounding her. She worked as a psychologist, participated in professional gatherings, and therefore her Spanish is the one of the Argentinean 'intelligentsia' more than the one of the Jewish middle class.

Raquel wanders between different social groups without belonging to them. She does not want to belong to these groups, since she cannot value them or feel proud to belong to them. The only valuable group is, in her eyes, that of the Argentinean aristocrats of Barrio Norte, holders

of the *savoir faire*, the power and the money, the influence, and the *authenticity* of which Jews are totally devoid.

Are these the eyes representing the Shoah? German Jews, and her own mother constituted instances of Jews who wanted to belong to their societies, and thought that they succeeded in doing so, until the Nazis shattered their loves and their dreams, excluded them from all their rights, which only belonged to *authentic* German or Austrian Aryan race?

What is this authenticity that Raquel is looking for? Will she be able to find it in Israel?

Scene three: Hebrew, the language of real men

The scene: In Israel, after her divorce, she wants a real man. Not someone who needs a particular suit or car in order to be a man. A macho is in her opinion someone who is naked and wins a fight with another man. He does not live in fear. At last, a man she can admire. And he speaks Hebrew.

“After my divorce”- she continues- “I fell in love only with native Israelis. I feel attracted to Israeli men. They are totally different from Jewish men in Argentina. Therefore, after my divorce, already in Israel, it was clear to me that I wanted a real man: an Israeli. I wanted someone who has served in the Army, who

has never felt ashamed for being a second-class citizen. Someone who grew up feeling that he belonged to their country, someone arrogant and self-confident. Someone who fought the wars, who needed to carry a gun to defend his country and his life, not to play games against other youngsters.”

The Israeli identity allows Raquel to feel proud, as opposed to the Argentinian identity or even the Jewish identity, which always made her feel a stranger.

“For me, a Jew is someone who has inherited a tradition. An Israeli is someone who belongs to this country, who is not afraid, who does not feel ashamed. Someone totally different from my father.

“In Argentina, with each new government, the Jewish question was raised again: what will happen to the Jews? In Israel, if a man is insulted, he fights. In Argentina, if the man is a Jew, he lowers his head.

“In my opinion, since we have the State of Israel, there is no need for Jews to be second-class citizens. In Israel we have a territory, and the enemy is outside its borders. I do not feel afraid to be insulted in the street for being a Jew. I feel a certain fear, of course, because Israel is a dangerous country. Nevertheless, it is a different kind of fear. I am afraid because my country is at war, not

because of my being a Jew. I do not have to hide myself. Therefore, and perhaps paradoxically, I feel more confident.”

“Are you an Israeli?”

“No. To be an Israeli is not an identity: it is a circumstance. The world is divided into different ethnic groups and languages, and human beings feel the need to establish differences among them. This is why I cannot be a cosmopolitan. I have to choose one group.” When I ask her if her belonging to Israel arouses her loyalty, or is related to the fulfillment of certain duties and rights, she answers both questions in the affirmative.

“I want to belong to Israel. I can contribute to Israeli society and Israel can contribute to my well-being. Nevertheless, I have a history, not an identity”.

I am inclined to believe you, Raquel.

The soldier is the Significant Other of her Israeli identity. Idealized, strong, independent, proud, belonging to his society, and capable of progressing in the social ladder. The opposite of her father.

Raquel tells me that her way of being a woman has changed in Israel. In Argentina she dressed carefully and spent a great deal of money on clothes. In Israel, she dresses very simply and she does not wear any make-up. She looks very ‘Israeli’. When compared with most women I interviewed, she seems to be one of the least interested in her personal appearance. She is beautiful, but she does not invest any effort in her appearance.

She looks at me and sighs: “I used to be like you”- she laughs. “Everything matched everything: shoes, handbag, gloves. Now, I am not interested in clothes. It is as if I feel more related to reality, to the more basic things. I feel there is no time to waste. I have become more generous in Israel, less egocentric. I am interested in politics here, my children went to the army, a couple of my patients have been hurt in the wars, I feel I belong. To be a woman in Israel is perhaps to be less delicate and feminine. To be more direct. Sometimes, though, I feel I have lost something of my previous femininity, and it causes me a momentary pain.”

And I return to her Hebrew. I will never forget my surprise when I heard her speaking Hebrew for the first time. I had already known her for many years when I interviewed her, and I knew she had attended a Jewish school in Argentina. Therefore, I expected a much more sophisticated Hebrew than the one I heard. Only when I chose her as one of the cases, and I analyzed her life history again and again was I able to find a plausible explanation.

Raquel described her Hebrew when she referred to the changes she experienced in being a woman in Israel. She speaks Spanish like an Argentinian and Hebrew like an Israeli. To be more exact, she speaks the kind of Hebrew that corresponds to her definition of an Israeli. Her Hebrew is direct, non- sophisticated, simple. For example, she laughs at me because I pronounce the initial “h”, which is really disappearing

from colloquial Hebrew. Nevertheless, in my opinion she over-generalizes: she does not pronounce the “h” in contexts native Israelis do. I checked my observations about this with native Israelis who know her, and they agreed with me. Sapir (1958) wrote about the “psychological existence of the phoneme”. Here we see the psychological disappearance of the phoneme!

She speaks like “the man in the street”. Hebrew seems to be related to strength, to self-confidence, to arrogance. Thus, it must be direct . Nothing to do with aesthetics or beauty. No time to waste. She sounds a different person in Hebrew and in Spanish.

The truth? I prefer to speak Spanish with Raquel!
Three scenes, three men and three languages. Trauma-survival - overcoming-security. Incomplete belongings. Stories that intertwine: losses, disappointments, findings, transformations.
In Eli Wiesel’s words, “ God created the man because he likes stories”...

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