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I

Oral history, trauma, and September 11, comparative oral history

SELMA LEYDESDORFF

Approaching a disaster in a comparative way – using knowledge from other tragedies while working with data of those who have been recently traumatized themselves – is always hazardous. Nevertheless, such an approach is the focus of these pages.

Comparisons are necessary, even if only to ask the question of how much can be learned from other disasters. Answers may come from the experiences of those who have provided relief efforts, as well as from scholarly research that forces us to reconsider what we know at a theoretical level. This article is based on the stories of trauma that have been told through my various oral history projects over the years. Among these interviews, readers will note similarities and dissimilarities between the experiences of other traumatized people and the victims of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. Although it may be too soon to analyze, I believe we should not hesitate to try. Most interview projects on September 11 to date have been what is called “recovery history”, a process that explores the impact of September 11 on individual lives and invites people to testify to what they have seen, which is a normal academic and journalistic practice immediately following a traumatic event. In time, people can take a step beyond the telling, but first and foremost is the wound, a lack

of breath, fear, and the desire to repeat words that already have been spoken.

As the historian of Katrina Stephen Sloan wrote: “Drawing meaning from tragic events is an urgent need and an ongoing desire. Traumatic events play a profound role in shaping identity. Reflection is an essential part of creating personal understanding of such events and healing from disaster.¹” And he argued that an extraordinary event needs special reflection². He argued that the emerging histories are contested and quotes Mary Marshall Clarke, director of the Oral History Research Office at Columbia University, describing how oral history depends on memory “not as a source of details, but as a rich repository of thoughts, beliefs, and impressions of self-understandings and historical understandings that have evolved over time³”.

I want to make a plea to other oral historians of September 11 to take a next step and involve those who have worked on other traumas in a critical exchange. Such an exchange is crucial to understanding how people have situated the events they have witnessed. In the aftermath of the tsunami in the Indian Ocean, Canadian anthropologist Michael Lambek wrote in an essay, “We need to know the world, in order to change it⁴”. We have to understand reactions such as somatization, post-traumatic stress disorder, as well as the fact that some traumatic experiences need not be as shattering, as permanent, or as amplifying as those in which people have lost the capacity to feel and think. Lambek made a plea for more research on the subjectivities that trauma generates. Trauma also generates discourse, which can be appropriated in many instances by institutions such as the state⁵. Individual memory is a possible response.

1. Stephen Sloane K., “Oral History and Hurricane Katrina: Reflections on Shouts and Silences”, *The Oral History Review* 35, 2008, 178.

2. *Idem*, 179.

3. *Idem*, 182.

4. Lambek Michael, “Terror’s Wake, Trauma and Its Subjects”, in *The Trauma Controversy, Philosophical and Interdisciplinary Dialogues*, Brown Golden Kristien and Bergo Bettina G. (ed.), New York, State University of New York, 2009, 235-263.

5. *Ibid.*, 255.

Oral history is a way to archive suffering and to see how memory is shaped. In the first stage, interviewees collaborate to regain stability, to assign new meanings to places and for themselves in the world. Mary Marshall Clark wrote:

The purpose of the first wave of the effort is to document the early interpretations and experiences of the event through life story interviews before “official” versions of the story, defined by media, government, and private and public institutions take hold⁶.

She also stated that such stories provide “the most fundamental basis for self-understanding⁷”.

My plea for a comparative approach is based on years of experience listening to narratives from the Holocaust⁸, from interviews with survivors of the war in Bosnia⁹, especially the genocide in Srebrenica, and research on natural disasters¹⁰. Mary Marshall Clark kindly provided data concerning September 11, and allowed me to read some of the interviews preserved in the collection she directs.

I. I CAME TO TESTIFY

Women, War, and Peace, an organization to which I was an advisor, produced the documentary, “I Came to Testify”, broadcast on public television in New York City. The film

6. Marshall Clark Mary, “Herodotus Reconsidered, An Oral History of September 11, 2001, in New York City”, *Radical History Review* 111, 2011, 81. Here she quotes from the original proposal of the project.

7. *Ibid.*

8. I can refer to several articles. This practice started with my dissertation: Leydesdorff Selma, *We Lived with Dignity, The Jewish Proletariat of Amsterdam 1900-1940*, Detroit, Wayne State University Press, 1998.

9. Leydesdorff Selma, *Surviving Genocide: The Women of Srebrenica Speak*, Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2011.

10. Leydesdorff Selma, “When the Water Comes, Memories of Survival after the 1953 Flood”, in *The Roots of Environmental Consciousness, Popular Tradition and Personal Experience*, Hussey S. and Thompson P. (ed.), London/New York, Routledge, 2000 and 2004, 76-91.

describes the effort to get women to stand witness at the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) and shows how their testimonies made rape into a war crime. In such cases of human-made disaster, people want to tell the world a crime has been committed, but there must be a purpose for people giving their account of an event. Although dredging up memories of certain events is painful, people want to warn the world and make a statement: "Never again." Their warning may help others to avoid suffering the same fate. That goal is why Primo Levi and so many others wrote about their ordeals in concentration camps and why people participate in the many oral history archives created over the last decade.

In the case of natural disasters, people want others to remember the suffering¹¹ and the dead. A survivor of the 1953 floods in the Netherlands said, "It is my hope that when all the memories of people are put together, a light will start to burn among the next generation. That they'll start wondering how it was possible to live through that [...] I sincerely hope people will learn from these stories". He had never spoken up before. Others' testimonies challenged the authority of God or insisted their faith was not shaken. Human-made disasters and natural disasters have tremendous differences, but every disaster brings up stories of human failure, and here the stories of the effects of disaster, whatever the cause, look very much the same¹². Hurricane Katrina was a natural disaster, but the aftermath and the rescue efforts in New Orleans included many instances of violence, repression, and racism¹³. Besides there are accusations that the levee system was neglected there – causing the collapse and flooding, which was also the case with the dikes in the Netherlands in 1953.

11. Erikson Kai T., *Everything in its Path. Destruction and Community in the Buffalo-Creek Flood*, New York, Simon & Schuster, 1976.

12. I am amazed by the similarities between the September 11 stories and those in Alexievich Svetlana, *Voices from Chernobyl*, New York, Picador, 1997.

13. Penner D'Ann R., "Assault Rifles, Separated Families, and Murder in Their Eyes: Unasked Questions after Hurricane Katrina", *Journal of American Studies* 44, n° 3, 2010, 573-599.

II. EXPERIENCE, AND OFFICIAL NARRATIVES

Narrating a life story in an oral history interview (the way I work with oral history) is considerably different from testifying in court, thus from testimony¹⁴. A judge structures court testimony within a juridical frame, serving the exploration of a legal truth. A life story interview inevitably allows the narrator to mull over trauma, to express bewilderment about not finding the language to express myriad images and feelings, making chronology impossible. In several publications, I have compared the court proceedings of the ICTY with the life stories I recorded from survivors of Srebrenica. The result was clear: Survivors want to talk about their ordeals and to convey their bewilderment; judges want something else, which is certainly not to listen to the chaos of a traumatized person's life story¹⁵.

An example of this difference comes from the testimony of Ćamila Osmanović¹⁶ at the ICTY (Yugoslavia, The Hague). (Osmanović, a well-known woman who has since died, was one of the representatives when the population of Srebrenica had to negotiate with Radko Mladić.) During the session, the judges wanted to know what had happened during the massacre and if she recognized some of the Serbs who had separated the men from the women. The judge said: "Before I ask you some questions, I should like to tell you that it is not our intention to take you back to that period of July 1995. We do not wish to revive all those memories [...] The principal objective of the defense is to establish the truth." The judge then asked Osmanović if she recognized any of the Serbs.

14. See also Felman Soshana, *The Juridical Unconscious: Trials and Traumas in the Twentieth Century*, Cambridge MA, Harvard University Press, 2002.

15. Leydesdorff Selma, "How Shall We Remember Srebrenica? Will the Language of Law Structure Our Memory?", in *Memory and the Future, Transnational Politics, Ethics and Society*, Gutman Y., Brown A. D. and Sodaro A. (ed.), New York, Palgrave/MacMillan, 2009, 121-141. Also, Assmann A., "History, Memory and the Genre of Testimony", *Poetics Today* 27, n° 2, 2006, 263.

16. Krstić Icty, 2000: 1119-1120, 1127-1128.

She answered: “Believe me that at that moment, whether I simply did not want to or whether I did not dare to look at any man, but I can not bring to my mind a single face. I merely held my children next to me.”

When I interviewed her for hours in her cold house in Srebrenica in 2004, all she wanted to convey was her concern for her children and her love for her husband. At the time of the massacre, she had been wondering if they would survive; she had been worried. She had been terrified to lose all that made the world beautiful, and she had lost in the end. That was her master narrative. Life had been good, and she had never expected some of her neighbors to become killers. These are broad stories that cannot be told in a courtroom.

I have found the same phenomenon in stories about the Shoah/Holocaust. The narrator’s wider context frames the account of a past event¹⁷, but after many years every memory is changed, and the changes are also part of a new context. Certain moments stand out, but all others are fluid. The events that are remembered are overshadowed by immense trauma. For the narrator, the trauma has made it impossible to tell a coherent story, except to describe sharply defined fragments. The creation of a longer story implies the construction of context that seems to have been lost¹⁸.

III. CHANGING CONTEXTS OF TRAUMA, CHANGING STORIES

Interviewing about trauma is more difficult than in other cases. Even a short fact-finding interview is never only about

17. Andrews M., “Beyond Narrative: The Shape of Traumatic Testimony”, in *Beyond Narrative Coherence*, Hyvärren M. et al. (ed.), Amsterdam, John Benjamins, 2010; Laub D., “Truth and Testimony: The Process and the Struggle”, in *Trauma, Explorations in Memory*, Caruth C. (ed.), Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995, 61-76.

18. Apfelbaum Erika, “Halbwachs and the Social Properties of Memory”, in *Memories, Theories, Debates*, Radstone Susannah and Schwarz Bill (ed.), Bronx, NY, Fordham University Press, 2010, 77-93.

the traumatizing moment itself. The worse the trauma, the more difficult it is to discuss and the more difficult context becomes.

People who experienced September 11 are traumatized because they were in the fires or perhaps they were terrified. But every interview, even if it is short, also contains other moments and life experiences after the events. Any suggestion that interviews conducted shortly after the events create a “true” picture ignores the fact that memories are changing, adapting to master narratives. The reality of the past is always presented under layers of new context. Immediately, there is a shared story, or better: People can never avoid the stories that rise immediately after an event, and the stories of other people become their own memories. As Mary Marshall Clark said, “One of the most striking findings of our work, based on careful reading of all the interviews conducted in 2001 and 2002, was that the majority of those we interviewed across political, national, cultural, and ethnic lines of difference did not agree with the official description of their experiences, namely, that was used to rationalize the war on terror¹⁹”. Deliberately, the project had chosen also to interview people from the large Muslim community of New York.

IV. RECOVERY INTERVIEWS WITH TRAUMATIZED PEOPLE: LONELINESS

From the interviews of September 11 from the Columbia University collection, there emerges the feeling of being left alone. That feeling is also traceable in more journalistic books like “Tower Stories²⁰”. Not surprisingly, loneliness is a characteristic of trauma, and we should not be amazed by how lonely

19. Mary Marshall Clarke, note 6: 83.

20. di Marro Damon (ed.), *Tower Stories, An Oral History of 9/11*, Santa Monica, CA, Santa Monica Press, 2007; Mueller Lavonne, *Voices from September 11th*, New York, Applause Books, 2002; Murphy Dean, *September 11: An Oral History*, New York, Doubleday, 2002.

narrators of survival are²¹. It is not only true for the narrators of the events of September 11, but survivors of all places of massive trauma. People I have interviewed about the Holocaust have been terribly alone, not only because they had to rebuild their lives, but also because loneliness is a feature of traumatization. People were waiting for their beloved to come back, just as people always wait for news after a disaster. In Bosnia, there were frequently stories about saying goodbye – to a husband, a son, a sweetheart, a father, or another family member. A man and a woman embrace for the last time, their faces strained and wet with tears. A father hugs his daughter hastily, both knowing they will never see each other again. A child cries and calls to her father who is being taken away, “Come back, come back!”. A mother grips her young son tightly and begs the soldiers, “Don’t take him, he hasn’t done anything, he’s so young!” She pulls, trying to free him from the soldiers’ grasp, but without success. Women wait, first for their husbands to return, then for news that their husbands’ bodies have been found²². There has not been such a last moment on September 1; there rarely is in case of unexpected disaster.

In an interview regarding September 11, a woman survivor of the attacks who lost her son, and feared he might be imprisoned for a long time, since he was active in the Muslim student’s movement, said:

I’m still here. I’m speaking my mind. There’s the paradox. Things will be okay. They have improved in the last three years, four years. But when you go through such major losses, lose a child. Maybe I’m in denial. I don’t think about it. I don’t visit his grave anymore. I used to go there, until Saleem passed away, and I used to go there as, “Okay, these are the remains of 9/11,” just to pay respect to 9/11. But since my husband

21. van der Hart Onno., Nijenhuis Ellen R. S. and Steele Kathy, *The Haunted Self: Structural Dissociation and the Treatment of Chronic Traumatization*, (passim) New York, Norton, 2006.

22. Leydesdorff Selma, *Surviving Genocide: The Women of Srebrenica Speak*, Bloomington, IN, Indiana University Press, 2011, 7-8.

passed away, I don't want to acknowledge that he's not there, anymore. I have my space next to Saleem, my husband. I reserved it. So I feel very comfortable going down there [...] I think my boy's, also – everyone believes he's dead. I guess I can't believe it, you know, Gerry? It's difficult for a mom to believe her son is not there. It's difficult. I guess it's impossible. I never saw his face. I don't know what they gave me in the bag. It was just dirt. I can survive with the hope that maybe he'll walk in someday. And people do come back from the war, after years. And if he's been detained, I think, sometimes, what state of mind will he be in when he comes back? But I believe that, like God is taking care of us now, wherever he is, God will take care of him also. And I don't think, if he's detained, the American government would mistreat him. They're not inhumane. They're not inhumane, you know. But things are happening. There are so many detention centers around the world²³.

Speaking to me in a Bosnian refugee camp, Sefika related how much of her life was structured around waiting and not knowing. She waited nine years after her sons' disappearance for news:

I waited for so long, until I got a death certificate for the son who was found and dug up. I waited for the younger son until last year, hoping that one way or another I would learn that he was still alive. We felt like he might have been taken to another country and hadn't been able to contact us. There are cases of people who were taken elsewhere, and then after a certain time they send a message. But when my oldest son was found, I lost my hope. I knew. I went to the funeral, and I know where his body rests. I still pray to God that I will hear that my other son is somewhere. There is a saying that you can't give up hope until you've seen it with your own eyes. May God hear my wish that he is alive somewhere, that he is somewhere²⁴.

And Šuhreta still waits, even though she knows exactly how her husband was killed:

23. Interviewee: Talat G. Hamdani Date: April 29, 2005

24. *Surviving*, 8.

My husband went to Skelani. Kravivoda, Skelani, Bajina Bašta. He went with a horse to try and get some food – corn – so he took a horse, not to carry things by himself. People had to go. He went without any weapons. He did not have weapons. The Serbs captured him on 16th January. It was on television. But I never got to know anything [...] They do not want to say. I have a newspaper I found in Sarajevo, a description of his apprehension. For 10 years I have been looking for him, the Red Cross, everywhere. No trace of him. He was in hospital in Bajina Bašta. We saw him on television. Yes, he was wounded. But if I had known then, if I had been as wise as I am now, I would have talked differently with the Red Cross. The Red Cross did not do their job adequately. They always returned us to a standstill. They used to say that the information we had was false, that it was just a story [...] I had the newspaper, I showed it to them, but nothing. Now, when I returned to my house, a man, a Serb, told me about my husband. He was alive when Srebrenica fell. He was in Bratunac in a detention camp. He must have heard that Srebrenica had fallen and tried to escape. But he was captured again. One of my neighbors, who had lived here for 30 years, found a Serb from Vukovar and ordered him to take my husband to Skelani to the bridge and to put a pole here and a pole there. Then they put my husband over the poles, and my neighbor told the man from Vukovar: “Stab him first in the lower part and then in the upper part, first in the lower part to make him suffer.” So it means that they maltreated him and tortured him terribly. I asked the man to tell me where he had been buried. I would like to transfer him, so that I could be buried next to him one day. But the man told me that he had not been buried anywhere. He had been thrown into the river, into the Drina. I would like to go to Skelani, to the bridge, to get some flowers and a loaf of bread and to offer a prayer for my husband at the place where he had lost his life. I can't. I don't know how to do it. It is not too far, but I cannot. People go there, but it is always full. Some people go with cars, some by buses. I have nowhere to stay over the night. I know I will get upset because it is hard for me²⁵.

25. *Ibid.*, 15.

Ramiza spoke about her feelings of hopelessness:

What am I supposed to do? I don't have any hope left [...] I feel hollow in my soul. In every respect, I have no one [...] no future, no prospects, nothing. I only have my child. She is my only hope and comfort. I fight for her [...] [but] I have no plans, no ideas.

When asked if she was interested in taking an educational course, she answered,

Nothing in particular, I don't want anything. There is a garden behind the house. If I'm not in the garden, then I'm doing handwork. I make lunch for my girl. I wait until she comes home [...] I dream of my mother a great deal, and of Hamed [her husband, SL]. I dream of them both²⁶.

V. HISTORIOGRAPHY OF PERSONAL EXPERIENCE

One might ask if looking at the despair and loneliness in these stories is a proper way to write history, if including such images will give us a historical narrative with a new perspective. I argue that history is also made by the totality of such small, sad moments; although seemingly insignificant, they are of great importance to the people who lived them. The real problem is how one can bring order into the myriad of such "facts" and from little incidents. I have discovered that the totality of these images and stories creates a history of how people survive and continue their lives. Time passes, but for many of the survivors, the reality is infinitely sadder: For them, time has stopped.

Some historians believe such eyewitness accounts are untrustworthy and biased. I disagree, although both eyewitness accounts and historiography are never neutral, as American historian Hayden White noted in 1978. He called the denial of the value of such personally colored documentation "the fictions of factual

26. *Ibid.*, 13.

representation²⁷". The representation of extreme situations poses myriad problems for the historian because the survivor's response is inevitably interwoven with emotional impressions and grief that are difficult to comprehend²⁸. To understand traumatic memories, one must *listen* to traumatic stories. Recovering and recounting such difficult memories also are crucial for a healthy relationship with the past; they contribute to a more critical and accurate way of remembering, which in turn leads to a more mindful, ethical, and charitable attitude in the public sphere. I favor an approach in which every answer to questions brings about new explorations for truth²⁹.

Most historians do not see value in interviewing survivors. Their reluctance seems to stem from the discomfort of facing overwhelming grief. Survivors do not tell us hard facts, but instead, provide impressions, pieces of the traumatic past, and stories of grief that come together in a historical picture. This is a picture that the survivors can relate to, and even empowers them to have a history.

According to American cultural historian Dominique LaCapra, valuing the memories of others is important for developing a discerning memory. By accepting others' memories, even if we find them strange and unpleasant, we lay the foundation for a legitimate and democratic approach in the future³⁰. Listening is never easy, and stories of trauma are always difficult; we have a natural resistance to them. Survivors who do not talk about what happened have increasing difficulty doing so over time. When obstacles cannot be overcome, the emotional difficulty is so great that memories are forgotten or repressed.

27. Hayden White, *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978.

28. See also Felman S. and Laub D., *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History*, London, Routledge, 1992.

29. See also Natalie Wood, *Vectors of Memory: Legacies of Trauma in Postwar Europe*, Oxford, Berg, 1999, especially Chapter 3.

30. LaCapra Dominick, *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001, 91.

The value of survivors' testimony as an essential dimension to the history of human-made disasters and genocide took a long time to win acceptance³¹. Of course such testimony must be critically studied, and there has been important research in this area. Survivors' stories are open to multiple interpretations. They are not stable, they are dominated by a grief that has taken on a life of its own, and they are marked by some moments of blind panic that are nearly impossible to describe. Despite these difficulties, it is now accepted that writing the history of such events requires listening to survivors.

To interview traumatized people, means listening to stories that lack chronology, obvious consistency, and logic³².

VI. DREAMS THAT HAUNT

An interview with a traumatized person inevitably deals with dreams in which people revive what happened. Stories of what has happened are interwoven with those changing dreams. When I interviewed Toivi, a survivor from Sobibor³³ he told me the pervasiveness of dreams:

Eh, analyzing the past life, I, I'm still in [Sobibor]. And the dreams [...] and the dreams [...] I [...] they were logical, in the pain, and I become scared and very real. No wonder when I wake up [...] finally [...] eh, and I go eat breakfast I want to go back to bed. Because the dreams, although I sleep good, but they, eh [...] finishing me. And when I get up, eat a little, want to go back to bed.

[...] Yeah and I could sleep till three o'clock. And later, but after, afternoon late I get, I feel good, feel strength. Otherwise, eh, I still now,

31. See also for the debate, Adler Nanci, Leydesdorff Selma. *et al.*, "Introduction", in Adler Nanci, Leydesdorff Selma *et al.*, *Memories of Mass Repression, Narrating Life Stories in the Aftermath of Atrocity*, New Brunswick and London, Transaction Publishers, 2009, vii-xxi.

32. Gready Paul, *Writing as Resistance: Life Stories of Imprisonment, Exile, and Homecoming from Apartheid South Africa*, Lanham, Boulder, New York, Oxford, Lexington Books, 2003.

33. [www.longshadowofsobibor.com] 2008.

I'm tired, and the dreams always. Eh, one thing, that I had the chance to survive, I had a chance to escape from [Sobibor], once the guards they look some place else and I could run in the forest because I walk in the forest and I don't do it and later the Germans come to kill me and this is the end and I'm sorry I didn't escape, and another dream is that they send me out to the city of [Lublin] to buy something and I figure out, oh, now it's time to escape, but they expect me back in an hour, eh, eh, while the eh, eh, role-call will take place [at] 12 o'clock. So I figure out now is 11, till I go to the train station will take 15 minutes and I need that train who will, eh, leave immediately, and I figure out I will not manage to leave 50 kilometers past, eh, [Lublin] because they will notice in a, in about an hour I'm not there and they will probably notify all the police. Anyway, everything is logical I think. And I decide to go back to [Sobibor]. And again they come to kill us all, and again I'm sorry I didn't take the chance.

Such an account can easily be compared to the following narrative of a survivor of September 11, who was a member of the fire brigade:

Then on the depressing side is I'd hear a song and I'd just break down crying. I would think a lot about my parents, who passed away. I'd think a lot about death. Okay? I have – I do have, and I always did as a child – I don't like the dark. And when I was down there and I was getting buried, and I thought I was getting buried alive. I said the three things when I was trying to keep the concrete from coming in the ambulance, was I was closing the windows and the stuff kept coming down.

It sounded like someone taking a shovel and, "Sssh, sssh", but it was coming down hard, and you heard things blowing up and fireballs going around, and I got hit with the heat, and it was like I got sunburn in the middle of September. I'm closing the window in the ambulance and I'm leaning through this little hole and I've got people screaming in the back, and I'm saying to myself, "Jimmy, this is not good. You're getting buried alive. Bad way to end a career", That was my three things. I didn't say I was going to die, but I thought I really was going to be buried alive, and I always don't like – I didn't like the darkness when

I was a kid. I used to tell Linda, “Oh, when I pass away, cremate me. I don’t want to be in a coffin”.

So all them phobias came up, and then I was having nightmares and she would wake me up at night, my Linda, and she’d [say], “Jimmy, Jimmy”, and then she would hold me. She would hold me like I was an infant. She’d hold me at night and, “You’re going to be all right”, and she’d stroke my hair or something, and she was very good to me. She’s been a wonderful woman.

He recalled other nightmares:

[...] I remember having nightmares where – and I talked to the psychiatrist about [it] – I had a nightmare while buildings [were] collapsing, falling, people screaming. I had that. That’s almost reliving it. But then I had dreams of mass destruction, and the strange thing I found that I was having in dreams was dreams of giving up, where I remember one dream I had where everything was going bad. Everything was go – and then all of a sudden you felt the heat. It was like a nuclear bomb went off. And I’m laying, in my dream, laying there and dreaming, but I’m not waking up. It’s like, “It’s okay. It’s okay”. Like I was dying in my dream, but it was okay and I didn’t have to wake up. I wasn’t frightened. And that’s strange, because it’s a nightmare.

You know, these are things you’ll have, and sometimes you’re just like – “it’s calm.” I guess it’s like, I don’t know why, it was the strangest feeling I ever had. I knew it was a nightmare, but I wasn’t afraid, and it wasn’t like – I knew I would be dying, but it didn’t bother me. I thought that was strange. That was the strangest one I had, and it was almost like I could feel the heat and see the – “Oh, okay. Just lie there. It’s going to be all right”. But then I had the other ones where I yell at night, and I don’t remember, but I’m yelling, and she wakes me up. The World Trade Center? Yes. I had one dream that I used to dream about, that I dreamt about for a long time, and it finally went away, more or less, which was when we came down the steps of the World Trade Center and we came out onto the mezzanine, and there were all the windows looking out onto the plaza. I mean, it was clear that it was a war zone. I mean, there was debris everywhere and things on fire; plane.

And Eileen, who was with me, said, “Come on. Let’s go. Let’s go. Let’s go. Don’t look. Don’t look. Don’t look”. And I realized that it was a severed head. And my dream is that I can’t move. I can’t move from it. I’m staring and staring and staring and I can’t move. I’m stuck there, staring at this. And she’s saying, “Come on, come on, come on”, and I can’t move³⁴.

VI. TRAUMA

What have been called “deep memories” – those which cannot be easily told – must be integrated into the historiography of an event, and not simply out of respect for the victims. For instance, the historiographies of the Holocaust and Rwanda have demonstrated that writing history without deep memories is impossible. The debate over the meaning of memories is mainly waged among historians of Nazism, but I believe it applies to the historiography of all mass traumas. For psychological integration to take place, the historian must use what we know about feelings of empathy, imagination, and connection – feelings that are not usually encountered in “factual” historical accounts. Using such an approach means accepting the survivors’ non-neutrality in their testimony. The survivors’ stories are no less true because they are subjective. They are telling a story that is in fact largely incomprehensible.

The story is even more difficult to understand since the dominant narrative about September 11 became so much part of the “War on Terror”. [...] one survivor of September 11 told the interviewer show she went on haj to pray for her son who had disappeared. But she became as much suspect as the many Muslims who were arrested those days. She always had considered herself to be an American citizen, but since her son was suspected to have the wrong contacts, getting that nationality did no longer count:’

34. Interviewee: James E. Dobson, 2001.

But we were in Mecca at that time, so we couldn't defend ourselves. My sister told me that [Rep. Gary L.] Ackerman's office called and she said, "They have some news about your son". I said, "When I get back, I'll call you". We came back after, I think, twelve days or something. I called their office and Congressman Ackerman spoke with me. He investigated, "How did he look? What did he do?". So many things were against him, poor kid. He was a Muslim, number one. He had a light beard. Because he was lazy in shaving, you know. He had kinky hair, and they were growing, because he thought he was a chemistry major, he was an Einstein, so he took pride in that. He had a Koran on him. We all read the Koran in English; had a Koran in English. He had a NYPD ID, what do you call it? EMT [Emergency Medical Technician]. He was a certified EMT. So everything went against him, you know. And anthrax came out that time of the year. Remember, anthrax? If you had asked him what is anthrax, he would tell you. He was an excellent student. Because Dr. Hersh said, "I haven't seen a student with his potential, in the Chemistry Department. I want to establish a scholarship in his name". His papers came out, two papers came out, this spring, last spring or this spring, somehow. He wrote two papers in chemistry.

So he investigated everything, Ackerman, and he said, "He could be with the INS [Immigration and Naturalization Services]". I said, "Well, he's a citizen". He said, "Well, the dividing line is whether you're born here, on U.S. soil or not, and that's what this idea's all about. The dividing line still is whether you're a born citizen or not"³⁵.

She gives us a glimpse of what happened in the aftermath. Her interview is a complaint about the dominant story. It helps to give the story a meaning, while many survivors suffer from the inability to give meaning to what has happened, which is characteristic of all who have suffered trauma. To get a grip on their lives again, victims need to attach meaning in various ways to what happened and to find a tentative explanation of why it happened. The events that led to the trauma must become a reality, specifically a reality in the past and not one in which

35. Interviewee: Talat G. Hamdani Date: April 29, 2005.

the events happened to another self, or were dreamlike, or far removed. What happened must be given a place in one's life story where it is available for conscious reflection. But it is extremely difficult to accept something as a part of you if it is draped over your consciousness like an inexplicable, black layer of fear. This process requires that the survivor forge new psychological bonds with the surrounding world, which is precisely what most survivors cannot do. It is not their fault. How can they understand what happened when so many enigmas still surrounding the events and when – as is clear from the interviews I read – they do not believe anyone cares or that their suffering is recognized?

Lawrence Langer described “deep memory” as memories that constantly interfere with everyday memory³⁶. He and other oral historians have pointed out how difficult it is for the survivors to confront so much cruelty and humiliation. Acknowledging the trauma's significance requires listening to the traumatized. Consequently, confused emotions become part of the historical picture, inseparable from accounts of the events. Anyone who conducts interviews on trauma is confronted with the survivors' rage toward everything and everybody. In particular, one encounters grieving in what threatens to become a cluttered labyrinth of memory. This memory has become a series of rapidly flashing images that will not stop.

Stories are always enveloped in other messages. I read an interview with a woman who was tortured in Chile under Pinochet and who later survived September 11. I was told she did not want to compare that period with the fear she felt at September 11. Anyone would assume that exactly at that moment of recalling September 11, her mind would flash to her previous ordeal – the darkness of her cell, the uncertainty, the rapes, and the violence. Instead, she talked about the fall of Allende. Her context now is apparently a fighting spirit. She compares and envelops her anxiety in stories about imperialism,

36. Lawrence L. Langer, *Holocaust Testimonies: The Ruins of Memory*, New Haven, CT, Yale University Press, 1993.

capitalism, and the state of the world. Maybe to do otherwise was not possible so soon after September 11 (the interview was made in October). Some of these early interviews seem to indicate an avoidance of confrontation with death.

VII. FURTHER ANALYSIS IS NEEDED

No oral history interview about trauma can produce a clear historical presentation; after the interview, the historian's complex work begins. There is no single form of not telling or not being able to tell, nor is there any "just telling". Oral history is an interaction, and many layers are heard in the story depending on the listener's sensitivity. Listening enriches our historical knowledge and historical imagination because fragments of memory increase our ability to find new ways to tell and to listen. Listening opens the inevitable dialogue with the survivor about why these things happened and brings about a necessary confrontation with myths that are created, with official memories that silence others. Listening enables the historian to bond with the victim and to abandon indifference.

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