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Writing History/Writing about Yourself: What's the Difference?¹

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According to Philippe Lejeune, writers of autobiography implicitly sign a pact with the reader to tell the truth, or at least the truth as they know it, about themselves.² That is, primarily a subjective truth. As for facts, the expectation is presumably that autobiographers will convey the facts as they know or remember them, but without a necessary obligation to check their memory through documentary or other research. There is no autobiographer's commitment to objectivity, rather the contrary. The autobiographical truth is, by definition, a subjective one.

Historians do not have an explicit pact, and the theoretical assault of the past 20–30 years on objectivity as a historians' goal, as well as the rise of oral history and memory studies, have muddied the waters. However, I think most historians (at least outside the cultural field) would assume that their task is to 'get the story right', implying an obligation of factual accuracy based on careful research in archives and other primary sources, which are referenced in such a way as to allow others to check their accuracy. Cultural historians are partial exceptions, since they may be after somewhat

1 Part of this chapter draws on a short essay, 'Demoyte's Grey Suit: Writing Memoirs, Writing History', published in *Australian Book Review*, 362 (June–July 2014), 26–30, which was itself an abridged version of my Ward Lecture, 'Writing Memoirs, Writing History', delivered at the University of Sydney on 27 March 2014.

2 Philippe Lejeune, *Le pacte autobiographique* (Paris: Seuil, 1975).

different goals, such as recovering forgotten 'voices', or analysing how historical events have been remembered and mythologised, represented in different contexts and by different groups. The obligation of accuracy here must be accuracy of reproduction and representation. Historians who focus on memory are perhaps the least committed to the positivist goal of 'getting it right', since a certain relativism about the actual past is built in to the exploration of ways people remember it. This same relativism, however, tends to incline them towards a stance of detachment rather than advocacy.

This essay will offer an account of the problems and issues that arose when I, being a historian by trade, started writing autobiography but continued to write history. Whether I am writing as an autobiographer or as a historian is a moot point; I hope historians will not find it too self-indulgent. The main question to be pursued is how the experience changed my stance on and understanding of the objectivity/subjectivity discussion. I will conclude with an examination of territory that I find still trickier than writing about my own life, namely: writing, as a historian, about the life of someone close to me, to whom I feel a strong commitment of loyalty.

As I was taught in the history department of the University of Melbourne in the 1950s, the historian's task was to strive for objectivity. We were like scientific experimenters, not letting anything contaminate our experimental data. Full objectivity was, of course, not realisable, but it was a goal to which one needed to get as close as possible. The personal and the partisan were biases and distortions that would prevent you getting at 'truth'. If you wanted to offer a subjective view (so the conventional wisdom went), write literature or propaganda, not history. Nevertheless, the Melbourne approach to history, at least in my time, was not inimical to the idea of the writing of history as an art or craft rather than a science. I encountered social science imperatives for the first time on arriving in the United States in the 1970s, and for a while attempted to satisfy them and suppress the literary impulses that came more naturally to me.

For a long time, I was a true believer in the objective approach to writing history, primarily because I found myself working in America during the Cold War as a historian of the Soviet Union. With Soviet historians writing blatantly biased accounts of their own history (their work going through censorship to make sure they got the bias right), and American scholars writing pretty blatantly biased accounts of 'the empire of evil'

from their side, the only possible stance seemed defiant objectivity, or the refusal to take sides. Of course, it was a stance that got me into trouble with both sides. The attitude in US Sovietology in the 1970s was that if you were not unmistakably ‘anti-Soviet’, you must be pro. The Soviets were even more insistent on this dichotomy, and moreover added their own Marxist rider that the claim to be objective was in itself a political stance of non-sympathy with the Soviet Union. They called people like me ‘so-called objective bourgeois historians’. At least that was a better category than the other one available to non-communist foreigner historians of the Soviet Union: ‘bourgeois falsifiers’.

By the 1990s, the Cold War was over, more or less, and within the historical profession, objectivity was getting a bad name and subjectivity was getting interesting. The moment I remember becoming aware of this trend was when I moved to the University of Chicago in 1990 and gave a talk to the department on my work, giving my usual critique of politicised history in the Soviet context, and our black and feminist historians glared at me and said: *What’s wrong with politicised history?* I saw that the issue of advocacy history was a bit more complicated than I had thought, but I still did not want to write it myself. Objectivity and detachment might, I conceded, be considered an emotional (subjective) choice like any other for historians, but, if so, it was my choice.³ Feeling detached came naturally to me (and not just as a historian), so I was going to stick with it.

There were lots of problems of bias and selectivity surrounding the published and even the archival materials I worked with as a Soviet historian. Thus, I added a highly developed scepticism about the reliability of sources and alleged facts to my temperamental stance of detachment. My historical subjects, I found, often did their best to mislead and hide their real selves and purposes from me. That is particularly true of political history, which I tackled obliquely in my first book,⁴ and have recently returned to with *On Stalin’s Team: The Years of Living Dangerously in Soviet*

3 See the interesting discussion in Paul White, ‘The Emotional Economy of Science: Introduction’, *Isis*, 100:4 (2009), 792–7, doi.org/10.1086/652019, and the articles that follow.

4 Sheila Fitzpatrick, *The Commissariat of Enlightenment: Soviet Organization of Education and the Arts under Lunacharsky, October 1917–1921* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1970). One of the subthemes of this book was the post-revolutionary discovery by the new Bolshevik leaders of the importance of institutional interest in politics, once you are running the state and not just planning revolution.

Politics.⁵ Stalin was a great self-mystifier with a talent not only of fashioning himself for history but also of fashioning his archive for historians. But it's true of any kind of history about people who left records. They give you an account of what they did and why they did it, but that account is spun for the audience and the record; the trick is to find out what they actually did and why (to the extent this is knowable) they really did it. Perhaps I go too far in my suspicious approach to all statements of motive (one of my books is called *Tear off the Masks*);⁶ while I am not a Marxist historian, I think it is one of the things I picked up early on from Marx, the great unmasker. Stalin picked it up too, and he certainly took suspicion to an extreme. The objects of his suspicion included historians who insisted on scabbling in archives without a fixed conviction about what they were going to find there. He called them 'archive rats'.⁷

Stalin was proud of not letting people pull the wool over his eyes. He particularly prided himself on knowing that whenever a bureaucracy asks for money, its people are lying about their actual resources and exaggerating their needs. This is something historians should remember, too. Institutional archives – that is, the records of government bureaucracies – are basically telling the story *from the institution's point of view*. Their aim is self-justification, often in complex turf wars with other institutions, not the gathering of objective and reliable data for the use of future historians. The same applies, *a fortiori*, to personal archives, even if not everyone is so upfront about it as Manning Clark, who (as Mark McKenna has told us)⁸ left explanatory notes and cross-references for the biographers' guidance in his papers. As a historian, you should never have a happy relationship of trust with your sources and the data they offer you. Your sources and your data are all, in the nature of things, biased.

Given my favoured stance of detachment and my well-honed scepticism about source bias, I seemed the last person who ought to be writing memoir or autobiography. In fact, it did not occur to me to do so until in 2006 Louise Adler of Melbourne University Press heard me give a short talk on

5 Sheila Fitzpatrick, *On Stalin's Team: The Years of Living Dangerously in Soviet Politics* (Princeton and Melbourne: Princeton University Press and Melbourne University Press, 2015), doi.org/10.1515/9781400874217.

6 Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Tear off the Masks! Identity and Imposture in Twentieth-Century Russia* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).

7 I.V. Stalin, 'O nekotorykh voprosakh istorii bol'shevizma' (1931), in J.V. Stalin, *Sochineniia*, vol. 13 (Moscow: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo politicheskoi literatury, 1951), 96.

8 Mark McKenna, *An Eye for Eternity: The Life of Manning Clark* (Melbourne: Miegunyah Press, 2011), 28–34.

my father (the radical historian Brian Fitzpatrick), and suggested I write a memoir about him. I thought that might be not only an interesting but also a useful thing to do, given that I had not really managed to come to terms with him in the four decades since his death, just stopped thinking about him. So I did a trial run in a 'Diary' essay for the *London Review of Books*,⁹ and when people wrote in to say they recognised him, that he had become a living person to them, I was hooked. I thought of it initially purely as a memoir of my father.

When writing his autobiography, A.J.P. Taylor said nothing about his second marriage, in deference to the objections of his second wife, who had made it clear that any mention of her in the book would almost certainly result in legal proceedings. It did, as Taylor acknowledged, result in 'some odd gaps', which he might not have countenanced had he been writing a biography of, say, Lord Beaverbrook.¹⁰ In fact, it is tempting to do things like omitting a marriage you do not like to remember. But as I got deeper into the business of writing autobiography, I decided that would be cheating. I also decided that in some special circumstances, you are allowed to cheat, though preferably with some warning to the reader (which Taylor gives) that a personal censor has been at work. My methodology in writing *My Father's Daughter*¹¹ was more or less that of a historian, despite the fact that I was basically interested in conveying personality and relationships, which had not been a primary endeavour (or at least not recognised as such) in any of my historical works.

I started by writing down everything I could remember about my childhood under chapter headings, not looking anything up, treating my memory as a primary source that I was transcribing. Then I expanded my source base as in any other historical research project: reading the documents, doing oral history to check my memory against others', trying to square and check the various accounts. My approach was so much that of a historian that I even included a bibliography and list of archival sources at the end. Still, I was startled by the discrepancies of the various oral accounts and documents, and even more by the fact that things that I subjectively believed – *knew* – to be really important in my life had somehow not made it into the historical record. I saw that if I had

9 Sheila Fitzpatrick, 'Diary', *London Review of Books*, 8 February 2007.

10 A.J.P. Taylor, *A Personal History* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1983), x.

11 Sheila Fitzpatrick, *My Father's Daughter: Memories of an Australian Childhood* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2010).

been another historian working just with that record – that is, without my own memory and sense of the ‘truth’ about my life – that historian would have (from my point of view) got it wrong.¹² At that point, I had a sudden fear that perhaps I would never be able to write history again. If a historian who was not me could not get my life right without my help, how was I going to get Stalin right, even leaving aside the fact that he, the great mystifier, was consciously out to hinder me?

Then there was the awkward question of my memory, used by me as a primary source. If it is part of historians’ Hippocratic Oath not to trust their sources, why am I trusting this one? But then, as a memoirist, what choice do I have? What you remember and what you believe to be the truth about your life are impossible to separate. One can, of course, argue that the genre of memoir allows for more detachment than autobiography; perhaps here the implicit pact (à la Lejeune) is to tell a story about yourself and your times that is based on personal memories, but only those memories that are deemed relevant to the times experienced – in other words, something less than full disclosure as far as personal life is concerned. In any case, memory is the basic source in both genres. So how do we accommodate that basic scepticism about sources that, as a historian, I have been preaching?

There is only so much scepticism that memoirists can deploy about their own memory. To be sure, you can play around at the margins, as I did in *My Father’s Daughter*, telling readers where my memory of events was contested by other people’s memories (for example, the ‘hate Sheila’ campaign at school, vividly remembered by me, but denied by my schoolfriends),¹³ or had been found to be inaccurate (the song I remembered my friend Camilla Maxwell singing in 1958, which turned out not to have been written until two years later).¹⁴ But basically you have made a pact to tell the truth about yourself and your life, and your memory is the only access you have to that. So my memory misdated Camilla’s song, and on top of that I passed the false memory on to her, making two mistaken witnesses – but that does not mean the singing of the song and the emotions associated with it did not happen.

12 For more on this, see Sheila Fitzpatrick, ‘Can You Write a History of Yourself? Thoughts of a Historian Turned Memoirist’, *Griffith Review*, 33 (2011), 1–7. See also Sheila Fitzpatrick, ‘Getting Personal: On Subjectivity in Historical Practice’, in Alf Lüdtke and Sebastian Jobs, eds, *Unsettling History* (Frankfurt a/M: Campus Verlag, 2010), 85–99.

13 See *My Father’s Daughter*, 112.

14 See *My Father’s Daughter*, 188–9.

As a memoirist, in distinction to a historian, you are pledged to tell the emotional truth rather than the strictly factual one, a subjective rather than an objective truth.

When I started that first memoir, I envisaged it as a detached work written with a light touch – a good likeness of my father, warts and all, catching the essence of his quirky personality. It was not my plan to go deep in self-revelation; I initially saw myself as outside the painting, like the portraitist, or at least with my own individuality muted and camouflaged. It did not work out that way. I had not gone far before I realised that you do not make a portrait of your father without stirring up all sorts of emotions – love, pity, disappointment, resentment, regret – and without offering an involuntary self-portrait as well. The way I structured the memoir was a progression from the father as the small child's hero to the teenager's discovery that the hero had feet of clay. You would hope that after adolescence came some kind of reconciliation or happy medium, but, in my case, my father died suddenly with us unreconciled. So that had to be part of the story; the light, detached touch would not work. Writing this part of the book made me cry, and I realised with a certain alarm that I wanted to make the reader cry, too.

That is an aim that I would never have admitted as a historian. If I examine my work, however, especially the social history, I see that often I was indeed trying to move my readers, even to make them cry, but that I generally did this in a voice other than my own, via quotation. In another age, historians were bolder. The key quotation I used to convey my sense of the pathos of revolution in my first (dissertation-based) book, *The Commissariat of Enlightenment*, was from Thomas Carlyle's *French Revolution*, describing Robespierre going to his execution wearing the sky-blue coat he had had made for the Festival of the Supreme Being: 'O Reader, can thy hard heart hold out against that?' is how Carlyle ends.¹⁵ I do not think I could have got away with writing something like that in my own voice in an Oxford DPhil thesis in 1969.

My father, Brian Fitzpatrick, was a Carlyle man at heart; as a teenager, I came to dread his purple passages, usually written when drunk. He is known as a radical economic historian specialising in British imperialism in Australia and the Australian labour movement, but if you look at

15 Thomas Carlyle, *The French Revolution: A History* (2 vols; London: J.M. Dent & Sons, 1955; first published 1837), vol. 2, 359.

his later work – *The Australian People*¹⁶ and, particularly, *The Australian Commonwealth*¹⁷ – you can see that he was way ahead of his time in introducing not just his civil liberties/human rights concerns but also putting *himself* into his history. Before he wrote his histories, however, he wrote an autobiographical novel, *The Colonials*.¹⁸ It includes lots of great social history about the home front in the Melbourne suburb of Moonee Ponds during the First World War, but the key thing in it is the portrait of his father, written ostensibly from the standpoint of an omniscient narrator but actually from that of the 14-year-old son, the stand-in for the author's younger self. The son is infuriated by his father, critical of him, but he also feels a great, almost crippling, pity for him and his disappointments. The literary progenitor for that particular emotional combination is Edmund Gosse's *Father and Son* (1907), a favourite novel of my father's.¹⁹ As a 14-year-old, I shared his liking for it, which pleased him. Probably his identification with the son was so great that it did not strike him that I might see not only the son but also the father in him.

My father's intrusion of the personal in *The Australian Commonwealth* was a source of embarrassment to me as an adolescent, when it came out; now I tend to see that element as a virtue. But I myself have been fairly scrupulous in separating my personal writing from the historical. In the 1990s, when the Soviet Union collapsed and its archives opened, I did a lot of interesting archival work on questions of social and cultural history of the 1960s, but when it came to writing it up as academic history there were problems. I had a strong irrational feeling that once we got to the moment of my arrival in the Soviet Union – 'when I came in', in the autumn of 1966 – it stopped being history, and therefore could only be written (by me) as memoir. But at that point I was not interested in writing memoirs. 'Bring in the subjective element,' colleagues and publishers said, 'it's OK now, it's even fashionable'. I did not want to do it. Apart from perhaps reminding me of my youthful embarrassment at *The Australian Commonwealth*, it apparently violated my personal sense of genre. If I am in it, it is got to be a memoir. The sole exception to this is a curious little piece I wrote on the absoluteness of truth, once you were

16 Brian Fitzpatrick, *The Australian People, 1788–1945* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1946).

17 Brian Fitzpatrick, *The Australian Commonwealth: A Picture of the Community, 1901–1955* (Melbourne: F.W. Cheshire, 1956).

18 Brian Fitzpatrick, *The Colonials*, with introduction by David Fitzpatrick (Melbourne: Miegunyah Press, 2013).

19 Edmund Gosse, *Father and Son: A Study of Two Temperaments* (London: Heinemann, 1907).

looking from the old Soviet Union, based on my interactions with the ‘truth-telling’ journal of the 1960s, *Novy mir* – territory I returned to later in my *Spy in the Archives* memoir.²⁰

My dislike of putting myself in, however, did not mean that my scholarly historical books had no personal subtext. It is not true of all my books, but it is true of some, and I gather from my fellow historian Jonathan Steinberg that this is not unusual.²¹ It does not necessarily imply a prejudgement of the meaning of the events, so much as a kind of emotional disposition with regard to them. These particular topics of historical enquiry connected in some way to personal concerns of mine, and that was part of the reason I was interested in them. In *The Commissariat of Enlightenment*, for example, the subtext was whether it was morally acceptable for intellectuals to work with power, which meant making compromises but also getting things done (as the Commissar, Lunacharsky, did in the Soviet Union), or rather to maintain the stance of perpetual opposition and, by implication, moral superiority favoured in the Soviet Union by many members of the intelligentsia and, in Australia, by my father.

By the time I was born, my father had put away his autobiographical novel and his original family along with it; apart from one brother, he seemed to have ditched Moonee Ponds, claiming – to my shock as a child – that he could not remember all his sisters’ names. I did not see how anyone could forget something like that, and I still cannot. In the novel, he treats the sisters with sympathy, but he compacts the five of them into two. That seems to me almost as incomprehensible as forgetting their names. This reaction suggests that autobiographical fiction is not a possible genre for me. However tenuous the notion of a fact may be, I am apparently hardwired with the idea you have to stick with them. For me, the fun of telling the story, whether history or memoir, is partly finding a story that make sense within the constraints of the known ‘facts’, which so often and annoyingly get in the way of our best interpretations.

20 Sheila Fitzpatrick, ‘A Short History of Truth and Lies in the Soviet Union from Stalin to Khrushchev’, in Belinda Davies, Thomas Lindenberger and Michael Wildt, eds, *Alltag, Erfahrung, Eigensinn. Historische-Antropologische Erkundungen* (Frankfurt a/M: Campus Verlag, 2008), 91–104. See also Fitzpatrick, *A Spy in the Archives* (subtitle for British edition *A Memoir of Cold War Russia*) (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2013; London: I.B. Tauris, 2014), 220, 245–6.

21 When he was at Cambridge, Steinberg (now at the University of Pennsylvania) ran a seminar in which historians were invited to talk about the personal subtext of well-known works – and many knew exactly what was meant, and were willing to reveal it. Personal communication from Steinberg.

Having written one memoir that veered off into autobiography, I sat down to write another, *A Spy in the Archives*,²² telling myself that this time it would stay as a memoir, with a light, detached tone, and also with lots of local colour. The subject was Moscow in the late 1960s. This was a subject that I apparently could not write about as a historian, but which had provided me with the subtext of at least one book, *Everyday Stalinism*, which, although its subject was the 1930s, was in conception strongly informed by my firsthand astonishment in the late 1960s at the manifold discomforts and inconveniences of everyday post-Stalinism.²³ This time I had more fully shed my historian persona than with *My Father's Daughter* (no bibliography or list of sources here). There is one chapter in *A Spy in the Archives* – the *Novy mir* one – that could be read more or less as it stands as cultural history (or at least the kind of cultural history, common in scholarship on the Soviet Union, that also has an element of personal testimony).²⁴ Otherwise, I have attempted to recreate the times only from the very specific point of view of a resident foreigner. In the Soviet Union, the marking and special status of foreigners was extraordinarily strong, meaning that it was difficult, even in regard to people one knew intimately, to be sure how the world looked to them when you, the foreigner, were not present to skew the data.

In the event, *A Spy in the Archives* did not veer as much into autobiography as *My Father's Daughter*, but it veered a bit. For one thing, Igor Sats, my Soviet adoptive father, became a central character; it became a book bringing Igor back to life. Igor was an old spy, as he liked to boast – meaning a field reconnaissance person in the Second World War, not a KGB man – and the KGB gave both of us a certain amount of trouble about our friendship. But that is not the main reason *A Spy in the Archives* has that title. In the Cold War 1960s, the Soviets thought all foreigners who did research on their history, politics, society and culture were likely to be spies; among historians, the most suspect were the very small group, including me, working on post-1917 topics. I, in addition, came directly

22 Fitzpatrick, *A Spy in the Archives*.

23 Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism. Ordinary Life in Extraordinary Times: Soviet Russia in the 1930s* (London/New York: Oxford University Press, 2000). If I moved my 1960s observations back into the past, several novelists have used this book as a basis for their fictions about the 1950s – they include Francis Spufford, *Red Plenty* (London: Faber & Faber, 2010), who acknowledges the debt on p. 363 – or, in even more recent times, Tom Rob Smith, author of *Child 44* (London: Simon & Schuster, 2015), as stated in interview with Kate Evans on 'Books & The Arts', Radio National, 16 March 2015.

24 Fitzpatrick, *A Spy in the Archives*, ch. 6.

from St Antony's in Oxford, which was constantly attacked in the Soviet press as a 'spy college'; its fellows, including my DPhil supervisor, did in fact have close connections with British intelligence. We – the 20 British exchange postgraduate students in Moscow in my year – were all obsessed by spying (it was the age of Philby and the Cambridge Four);²⁵ however, given my topic and my St Antony's affiliation, I was probably more worried than most about being 'unmasked' as a spy and expelled. They did unmask me in the end, as I relate in the book,²⁶ but fortunately did not realise that the author of the article they regarded as the 'next thing to spying' was me, actually in the Soviet Union at the time, because the article was written under my maiden name with initials and they thought the author was a man. But apart from the adventure aspect, this spy business left a mark on me. From the Soviet point of view, any foreigner who burrowed away trying to find out their secrets (as I was doing in their archives), was 'objectively' – that is, in the overall scheme of things – a capitalist spy, regardless of whether they were on any intelligence service's payroll. I knew I was not on anyone's payroll and I did not feel like a capitalist. But I am not sure that under interrogation I could have denied with any conviction that I was essentially a spy.

Stalin would have had no doubts about the matter. All historians who put data above ideology were 'archive rats' and, if they were foreign, they were spies, it was absolutely clear. Stalin and his team was my next project, a historical one again, archive-based though written for a popular audience. I approached it with my normal sense of detachment (which can also be read as a God's-eye view implying moral superiority)²⁷ and a specific determination to avoid pushing any political agenda (not that I was conscious of having one). But I did bring one personal conceit to the work, undoubtedly inspired by my Moscow memoir and the Moscow memories they had revived. This was to imagine myself as a spy in Stalin's camp, using the intelligence tactic he most feared – planting a spy among his closest associates to get the inside story.

25 The two defectors of the early 1950s, diplomats Donald Maclean and Guy Burgess; Kim Philby, who defected in 1963; and the art historian Anthony Blunt.

26 Fitzpatrick, *A Spy in the Archives*, 281–2.

27 When I read Sarkar's (approving) reference to 'the passionless voice of superiority' of the impartial historian in Dipesh Chakrabarty's recent *The Calling of History: Sir Jadunath Sarkar and his Empire of Truth* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 96, doi.org/10.7208/chicago/9780226240244.001.0001, I had an uncomfortable sense of hearing myself when young. Admittedly Sarkar glossed this as superiority to the biases of temporal and spatial location.

My book, *On Stalin's Team*, is not a Stalin biography, but rather a collective biography of Stalin and his team – the dozen or so men who over a period of 30 years were closest to him (Molotov, Kaganovich, Khrushchev, Beria among them).²⁸ It is not conventional political history, more like an ethnography of a ruling group, focusing on strategies for coping, surviving and advancing in the world of what Montefiore called Stalin's 'court'. The team's wives and children are in there too, and I use memoirs quite heavily as well as political archives. I am essentially applying to the top political elite the techniques I used to describe the everyday practices of ordinary people in my earlier social history books.²⁹ This is the first big historical work I had written since finishing the *Spy in the Archives* memoir in 2013. The question as I started writing was whether, and how, the experience of writing memoirs was going to change things. I read around in the theoretical literature on objectivity, and the point that impressed me most was Thomas Nagel's:³⁰ to the extent that objectivity is a 'view from nowhere', it is a contradiction in terms. If one thinks in terms of portrait painting, the painter might think she was approaching her subject with an open mind (without a 'point of view'), but he was undoubtedly proposing to paint him not only at a particular point in space and time but *from* one. In other words, he was somewhere in physical relation to his subject as he painted, not nowhere. That brings me back to Stalin. If my view of Stalin cannot be from nowhere, where is it from?

I puzzled about that for a long time. The way the point-of-view question was always posed in Soviet history during the Cold War was 'for' or 'against': are you writing a pro-Stalin book or an anti-Stalin one? Undoubtedly, my private feelings about Stalin are more anti than pro, but it goes against all my instincts to take either of those two positions. There are people who think that if you are writing about one of the twentieth century's great 'evil-doers', showing up the depth and breadth of his evil is the sum of what you should do. That is a great task for a prosecutor but not, to my mind for a historian – or at least not for me as a historian. I want to understand the people I write about, how their minds work, why they think they do the things that they do, what they see as their

28 Fitzpatrick, *On Stalin's Team*.

29 Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Stalin's Peasants: Resistance and Survival in the Russian Village after Collectivization* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994); Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism: Ordinary Life in Extraordinary Times*.

30 Thomas Nagel, *The View from Nowhere* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986).

options. That is not what a prosecutor does, or, for that matter, a counsel for the defence. So I cannot make either of the basic Cold War positions my starting point.

Leon Trotsky and Isaac Deutscher wrote their Stalin biographies from Trotsky's standpoint, that of a political opponent defeated by someone he saw as a mediocrity.³¹ The Russian Dmitri Volkogonov, formed in Soviet times as a military historian with a deep respect for Stalin, wrote his biography in the spirit of disillusionment generated by the collapse of the Soviet Union and discrediting of its value system.³² The Russian writer Alexander Solzhenitsyn (in his novel *First Circle*) and the American political scientist Robert Tucker in his Stalin biography were both trying to understand the man who had made them personally suffer – in Solzhenitsyn's case by sending him to Gulag, in Tucker's by preventing him from marrying his Russian fiancée at the end of the 1940s.³³ But, unlike some of my other books, *Stalin's Team* has no personal subtext – unless I deceive myself, which of course is always possible. Stalin and I do not have a personal connection. Even my conceit of being a spy in his Kremlin does not extend to a fantasy of personal contact. If I try, in imagination, to put us in the same time and space, all that happens is that I melt away as fast as I can before he notices me, which is what I used to do back in the old days in the Soviet Union if there was a KGB man around. If they do not know you, my thinking was, you are in less danger of being pulled into one of their tricky schemes.

Still, that does not get me off the hook about having if not a point of view in the metaphorical sense, at least a vantage point for observation of Stalin. Am I defying Thomas Nagel and trying to capture a view from nowhere? I was afraid I might be, with *Stalin's Team*, but after a while I decided I was off the hook. I *have* chosen an angle of vision in the book. It is from within the team – setting up my easel among his close associates, mixing with them all at the office and the dacha. I found this a very interesting perspective, and quite different from any of the usual ones. It is

31 Leon Trotsky, *Stalin: An Appraisal of the Man and his Influence*, trans. Charles Malamuth (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1941); Isaac Deutscher, *Stalin: A Political Biography* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1949).

32 Dmitri Volkogonov, *Stalin: Triumph and Tragedy*, trans. Harold Shukman (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1991; first published in Russian in 1989).

33 Alexander Solzhenitsyn, *The First Circle* (New York: Harper & Row, 1968); Robert C. Tucker, *Stalin as Revolutionary, 1879–1929: A Study in History and Personality* (New York: Norton, 1973); Tucker, *Stalin in Power: The Revolutionary from Above, 1928–1941* (New York: Norton, 1990).

not Stalin's own point of view on himself, because the team, viewing him with a mixture of fear and admiration, could never fully rid themselves of the sense that they were his potential victims. But it is not the familiar *victims'* point of view either, because the members of the team, along with Stalin, were big-time perpetrators, more or less convinced that the various types of repression they executed were justified and necessary, even if, being less bold than Stalin, they might not have thought them up themselves. The team has double vision, as perpetrators and victims simultaneously, which makes a nice vantage point for the historian.

For all that, I have to admit that Stalin has left his mark on me, as perhaps the subjects of portraits often do on their painters. In the past, when I analysed political processes (not my main activity, but it occasionally happened), I tended to do so very much in my father's voice – not necessarily his opinions but his tone, which was the slightly ironic one of someone who loves the political game but is only in a marginal way a player, with no party loyalties. My father was my real-life reference point for political process, and he revelled in the political fight (nothing pleased him more than being heckled at public meetings and prevailing over the heckler), but bore little malice towards his opponents and, in any case, was rarely in a position to take revenge on them. Not so Stalin, though he, too, loved the political fight, and missed it once he had effectively closed down all possibilities of open opposition. Stalin was an arch-Machiavellian, a pastmaster at intrigue who was also ruthless (a quality completely alien to my father who, like me, tended to see the pathos of things). Stalin could, at times, view his own activities with detachment, even amusement, but he also had a naturally suspicious nature and a serious interest in vengeance. He almost invariably attributed the basest motives to those around him, especially his opponents.

It was just recently, three or four months after finishing the book, that I noticed something that might be called Stalin's revenge on me, namely that I had begun to analyse political situations in Stalin's super-tough-minded way, like a chess-player with a relentless interest in maximising outcomes and no concern about casualties. Fortunately, this remained a private and abstract activity. Occasionally, however, it has proved useful. The case came up recently of a displaced person from the Soviet Union with a shady past who reached Australia after the war and immediately, bafflingly, retracted his earlier statements that he had not fought for the

Soviet Army or been a Communist Party member.³⁴ Channelling my father, I had no idea why he did this, unless it was an unlikely attack of conscience, but channelling Stalin (as I involuntarily did), I knew exactly what the man was after: as an ex-Soviet citizen used to dealing with security agencies and looking for a protector in his new environment, he was putting up his hand to attract the attention of the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO) so that he could be taken under their protection as an expert informant on communism. The only problem was that ASIO did not understand the signal, so he was deported.

This story comes out of my current historical project (jointly undertaken with Mark Edele) on displaced persons (DPs) after the Second World War. Apart from the matter of occasional prompts from Stalin's ghosts, this has no evident personal or memoir dimension, being absolutely straightforward transnational social history. The project, funded by the Australian Research Council (ARC), charts the experiences of refugees displaced from the Soviet Union during or at the end of the war, with particular attention to the redefinition of 'displaced persons' as victims of communism rather than victims of war and fascism (the Allies' and international organisations' initial conception), the importance for success as a DP of clearly articulated anti-communism (in gaining selection by a host country for resettlement), and the impact on the burgeoning Cold War discourse on communism of their arrival in the late 1940s and early 1950s.³⁵ This was the largest lot of non-British immigrants of alien cultural heritage and irretrievably foreign languages Australia had ever absorbed. The study is based on multiarchival, multilingual research. The questions and approach are those of a social historian, in this case with a sociopolitical slant from the Cold War material. I am nowhere in this picture, not even as a spy in someone's camp (as with the Stalin book), no axe to grind, no roots aspect (no ancestors from this group, or indeed anything but boring Anglo-Celtic stock).

But wait: is it really so straightforward? Actually, I do have an interest, although it is a hidden one. My late husband, the physicist Michael (Misha) Danos, was a DP from Riga (which had recently and unwillingly been incorporated into the Soviet Union, along with the rest of the

34 The case is in Ruth Balint's unpublished paper, 'Story-telling in Occupied Europe: Displaced Persons and the International Refugee Organisation, 1947–1952', and the discussion occurred at a conference on 'The Holocaust and the Soviet Union', organised by John Goldlust in Melbourne on 27–28 May 2015.

35 Edele and I are the editors of a special issue of *History Australia* on this topic: 12:2 (2015).

Baltic region) in Germany after the Second World War. He did not come to Australia, like the cohort I am studying, but one of his closest friends (one of my interviewees) did, and lived there the rest of his life, irritating me on my occasional visits with Misha in the 1990s by purporting to be an expert on all things Australian, and vehement critic of all things pertaining to the Australian left. I did not acknowledge his expertise, even though I had lived abroad for most of the half century he had lived here, and resented being told what to think about my own country by a foreigner who spoke with an accent (a truly Australian attitude surfacing). I also resented his criticisms of my father as a quintessential Australian leftist deluded about the communist world outside, and particularly his demand that I endorse these criticisms, by way of what the Soviets used to call self-criticism on my own and my father's behalf. Regardless of whether or not I agreed with them (which up to a point I did), I was not about to admit it to him: it was a question of loyalty.

You may say I set aside the demands of loyalty when I wrote the 'warts and all' memoir, *My Father's Daughter*. Yes, but only up to a point. I was prepared to put in the warts in my own terms, in order to convey the man in all his complexity and contradictions, but I probably would not have written, or at least published, the book if, in the end, I had not reached a kind of reconciliation with my father that enabled me to celebrate him. But, of course, it was a worry for me: there is a long discussion in the book of loyalty and whether the particular notions of loyalty my father instilled in me justified my approach.³⁶ The same went for my mother, against whom I had quite strong grievances from the past: I managed to work my way through them well enough to make several reviewers of the book more sympathetic to her than they thought I was, which I count as a success.

I had already discovered with *My Father's Daughter* that when you write memoirs, you can make the dead alive for readers who did not know them, as well as those who did. That was an important discovery for me; I remember the keen sense of having acquired a new power, to raise people from the dead. The concept came from the carol 'The Seven Joys of Mary',³⁷ and I recognise a certain hubris in appropriating it. But it was with that in mind that I took the first step towards writing *A Spy in*

36 Fitzpatrick, *My Father's Daughter*, 85–6, 253.

37 'The very next blessing that Mary had / It was the blessing of five / To think her little Jesus / Could make the dead alive.'

the Archives, which was to write another ‘Diary’ piece on my late Soviet friend Igor Sats for the *London Review of Books*.³⁸ Just as they were going to press, one of the editors emailed that he was fascinated by Igor, and did I not have a photo from the 1960s I could scan so that he could see what he looked like. They published that photo, which the *London Review of Books* rarely does, and I was tremendously pleased: another of the people I loved raised from the dead. So if I could do this for my father and Igor, how much more reason to do it for Misha, I thought. Moreover, I knew, as a historian, that I had the raw material for a wonderful book on his life as a DP in the box of family correspondence, diaries and photographs left to me when he died.

That book on Misha as a DP was a parallel project to the ARC-funded scholarly study of DPs who came to Australia.³⁹ It was a labour of love, involving hard practical work deciphering handwriting in German (and whatever other language he and his polyglot mother felt like writing to each other in), which was something new for me. German was Misha’s best language, but not mine. When I wrote my two memoirs, I hoped that readers would appreciate my father and Igor (as well as my mother and Muscovite Irina, who are also major characters), and I think that in general they did. I would have been disconcerted to provoke a strongly negative reaction to any of them. As for my self-portrayal, I did not set out to make myself unlikeable, but I did not feel outraged when a few reviewers thought I was: I felt they had a right, and that it was not incompatible with my purposes. I had meant to give the readers the information to form their own judgement.

But the Misha book was another story. If I wrote about him, I wanted readers to like him. I may even have wanted them to love him, or at least to see why I did. That presented me with the subjectivity/objectivity problem in the sharpest form. On the face of it, the objectivity problem might seem less, in that I was not a participant in the events I describe in the book, since I did not even meet Misha until 40 years later. In fact, however, it was more acute because I felt the demands of loyalty more strongly. I am not sure that, in writing this book, I would have been prepared to go wherever my data took me, if it seemed to diminish Misha. I certainly would not have been prepared to change my opinion of my subject in the process of writing.

38 Fitzpatrick, ‘A Spy in the Archives’, *London Review of Books*, 2 December 2010, 3–8.

39 *Mischka’s War: A European Odyssey of the 1940s* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2017).

Mischka's War, the title of the book, in itself is a demonstration of the fine line I am walking. Mischka is not what I called my husband; to me, he was Misha. But to his family, even in my time, he was either Mike or Mischka, the last being what he was usually called in Germany after the war. There is a whole saga to be written about his names (Misha, Mikelis, and other variants) and which was the 'real' one; a question he would never answer. He introduced himself to me (in America) as Mike, then he told me he was often called Mischka, and I then renamed him Misha, which turned out to be what his family called him in his childhood in Riga. Using 'Mischka' in the title is a way of distancing myself. But at the same time, I decided, after some internal argument, to use the more personal of the two introductions to the book, which I drafted some years ago, and to allow myself to enter the story as the researcher (whose relationship to the subject is, of course, known) in quest of information and answers to questions.⁴⁰

Writing about the life of someone close to you raises all sorts of difficult questions. I will finish this essay by drawing attention to one of them: whether it is legitimate to use your subject as case study when making a broader historical argument or scholarly intervention. I did something like this once, about my father, when I wrote an (archive-based!) article on what he knew and could know of the world outside Australia in that era (the 1930s to 1950s) when Australia really was cut off and access to information, apart from that obtained firsthand by travel, was seriously constrained.⁴¹ Reading his papers, as well as the published work, I realised very vividly the constraints on him from lack of access to reliable information about the outside world and his attempts to remedy and compensate. I saw that only some parts of the outside world were real or relevant to him, like a globe with only some regions lighted up, constituting a kind of personal epistemological geography, and, moreover, that these lighted-up regions were known to him primarily through a finite list of favoured interpreters or authorities. This interested me initially as an insight into my father, but I also thought it an interesting way to think about Australians in the whole period before the 'tyranny of distance' was mitigated by plane

40 Something similar is done by Mark Roseman in *The Past in Hiding* (London: Allen Lane, 2000), although he was not related to his subject, a Holocaust survivor.

41 'Brian Fitzpatrick and the World Outside Australia', in Stuart Macintyre and Sheila Fitzpatrick, eds, *Against the Grain: Brian Fitzpatrick and Manning Clark in Australian History and Politics* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2007), 37–69.

travel and the internet.⁴² You could see my essay as a kind of tentative intervention in scholarly debate on Australian intellectual history, with my father as case study; although if this had been its primary purpose I would no doubt have published it elsewhere.

A few years later, in a similar vein, I wrote an article on Misha for a transnational memory volume emphasising his dislike of being classified by ethnicity or nationality, or indeed in terms of any broader category other than theoretical physicist.⁴³ This involved both an assertion of individuality and a reaction against the categories imposed on DPs by occupation authorities and international organisations, which could determine their fate but were also simplifications of a complex situation (as in the case of Misha's nationality/ethnicity) or straight-out misrepresentations. This set me thinking about the ambiguities of national/ethnic identity in Eastern/Central Europe in the mid-twentieth century, and could have been the basis of a scholarly intervention in debate on the topic. But again, I would have published it elsewhere and written it up somewhat differently if this had been the primary purpose. I did not feel any real uneasiness about either of these two publications.

But, recently, I did something dodgier. I had to write an article for a special issue of a scholarly journal on DPs, and the due date was too early for me to finish the Paris and Moscow components of my archival work on that topic. So I thought, what source base can I use that I have basically mastered? The answer was the Danos papers,⁴⁴ supplemented by archival resources of the International Refugee Organization and the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration, as well as the National Archives of Australia. But in this essay I did not use the Danos materials primarily to illuminate the lives and individual personalities of Misha and his mother, whose correspondence in the DP period was my backbone source. While acknowledging my personal connection to the subject, I used these materials to make an intervention in the historians' debates about DPs. My argument was that, contrary to much of the

42 Geoffrey Blainey's phrase in *The Tyranny of Distance: How Distance Shaped Australia's History* (Melbourne: Sun Books, 1966).

43 Sheila Fitzpatrick, 'A World War II Odyssey: Michael Danos, en route from Riga to New York', in Desley Deacon, Penny Russell and Angela Woollacott, eds, *Transnational Lives: Biographies of Global Modernity, 1700–Present* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 252–62.

44 These include the personal papers still in my possession, plus the Musings from the 1990s, which I have already deposited along with his physics papers with the Michael Danos Papers in the archives of the University of Chicago.

literature and memoirs that present DPs purely as pawns of fate, DPs actually exercised agency in many ways, a range of which I illustrated on the basis of case studies of Misha, his mother, and a Latvian friend of his who ended up in Australia.⁴⁵ In short, this was an instrumental use of Misha, and I am not sure whether I should have done it. These are not doubts about the essay's professional legitimacy but about something more like moral appropriateness. There was nothing substantive in the article that would have disturbed Misha, and he would almost certainly have agreed with the argument and thought it worth making. I am fairly sure that he would not have objected to my writing the book about his DP experiences, would even have welcomed it. But, given his resistance to categorisation, he might have felt differently about a case study in which he was firmly put in the category of DP. Did I cross a line? Does it make it any better that the peer reviewer for the journal not only liked the argument but also took a great fancy to Misha *as an individual personality*, and sent a message wanting to know more about him? That reaction came as a relief to me, and almost felt like a justification. But an uneasiness remains.

I have outlined the various twists and turns of my parallel but sometimes intersecting lives as a historian and a memoirist. Along the way, my sense of the distance between these two endeavours has narrowed. I see them in some ways as contradictory, but that does not particularly bother me: life is full of contradictions. The process has made me more self-aware than I was earlier about what I am doing when I write, which is probably a good thing, and certainly intellectually interesting, at least to me. Above all, it has made me see myself as first and foremost a writer whose writing happens to be based on historical research, rather than as a researcher for whom writing is just the medium for presenting historical findings. But a historian-writer is probably what I always wanted to be; I did not particularly enjoy the effort in my early years in America to remake myself as a social scientist. I do not really believe in history as a science, even allowing for the fact that, in the light of chaos theory, real-life natural science is a lot less law-bound and predictive than social scientists and humanists tend to think.⁴⁶ In my judgement, historical knowledge is not in any important sense cumulative. Historians can make no predictions,

45 Sheila Fitzpatrick, "Determined to Get On": Some Displaced Persons on the Way to a Future', *History Australia*, 12:2 (2015), 102–23.

46 See Michael Danos, 'Chaostheorie und Geschichte', *Geschichte und Gesellschaft*, 30:2 (2004), 325–38 (posthumous publication prepared by SF).

except about probabilities, and history has no laws. It makes sense to me to see historians as practising a craft, using a particular kind of raw material, and governed, like all crafts, by various conventions about their preparation and use. The writing of history can also be seen as an art, in which our storytelling is shaped (within the conventions of our craft) by aesthetic considerations. It is in that capacity, I think, that it comes closest to the writing of autobiography, which can scarcely be regarded as a distinct craft and is certainly not a science. Clio, the historian's patron saint, was a muse in Greek mythology, and seven of the other eight muses personified various arts. Her emblem was an open scroll of parchment. Back in the days before objectivity and subjectivity became concepts, she probably would have been as happy writing her own history on the scroll as that of the Greeks.

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