Retrieving Memory – Representations of Past and Present in Ashes and Miracles and Honey and Ashes

For all immigrants to Canada, or children of immigrants, the past is ever present. It impossible to escape the knowledge that there was another place and that place is where one’s roots lie. The need for disclosure is often a powerful one for while the possession of another language, that of the dominant new culture, may, in most cases have supplanted the old language, the emotional force of that language remains (Cf. Itwaru, 13-14). The representation of reality can become blurred as the past is either idealized or damned by the immigrant and/or his or her family. There is a dichotomy – does one remember only the “honey” or only the “ashes” to draw from the title of Janice Kulyk Keefer’s text. “First wave immigrants are often notoriously unsentimental, leaving the search for roots to their children and grandchildren [...]” (Boym, xv).

It is interesting thus to examine two books published in Canada in the same year, 1998, by writers of Central Eastern European background, both of whom decide to go back to that section of the world and, in doing so, to confront their own memories and/or those of family. Simultaneously they will also encounter contemporary life in the old country. This is a present that has recently gone through dramatic changes and the writers in question record these changes as they sift though their personal connections to the past. The subheading for Ashes and Miracles, by Irena F. Karafilly, is A Polish Journey, while Janice Kulyk Keefer subtitles her book: A Story of Family. Thus the emphasis is on travel and exploration in the first text and the second focuses more on the discourse of memoir – the memories of the author’s family. Both, however, can be seen as examples of the genre that has been termed “creative journalism”, non-fiction that is both lyrical and personal. Both books blend documentary, history, travelogue and personal memoir into a seamless narrative with prose that, in each case, is rich in poetic resonance.

The memoir, according to Vivian Gornick, can be an instrument of illumination. Gornick goes on to state that “A memoir is a work of sustained
narrative prose controlled by an idea of the self under obligation to lift from
the raw material of life a tale that will shape experience, transforms, deliver
wisdom” (Gornick, 9). Both these texts might be said to fit that definition.

Irena Karafilly, the daughter of a Russian mother and a Polish Jewish father,
published her book *Ashes and Miracles: A Polish Journey* in 1998 following
a three month journey in 1996 back to the country where she, after being
born in Russia, had spent the early years of her life before immigrating with
her family first to Israel and then to Montreal. We learn that she was married
to a Greek and speaks several languages. She travels alone and, although
her Polish is rusty, she is able to converse with the people she meets and to
grasp the conversations of those around her. This gives her the advantage as
an observer in situations where she overhears people speaking and they are
not aware of the fact that she can understand them. The reader is struck
immediately by her impartiality in rendering these conversations. Obviously
Karafilly has had to be selective, yet the impression is that she scrupulously
presents the positive and the negative so that the picture she furnishes of
Poles and Polish attitudes is an objective one. This and the fact of her
parents’ mixed marriage (and here I am not only referring to Jew and non-
Jew but to Russian and Pole) seem to make her more objective, more
detached.

Her own memories of Poland are limited when she starts the journey and
there appears to be no pull of emotion. She states that her intention in
traveling had been to research a novel. She was neither “curious” about the
country nor “nostalgic” and the idea of even visiting Łódź, where she had
spent the early years of her life, was not considered (Karafilly, 1). As we
follow her on her journey, that which begins as one of external travel
gradually becomes one of internal travel as well – a journey into the self and
the discourse of memory takes over. This change starts when she first
discovers the hotel that she is booked into in Warsaw lies in the territory of
the old Jewish quarter. At once the memory of her father is evoked “I had
felt little connected with Poland until that moment, but by now am beginning
to suspect the existence of a wide network of memory and sentiment lurking
beyond that creaking door” (Karafilly, 9).

Memories of her Polish past are often stimulated in her travels by the senses
– by sights, scents, and tastes. The memories also show a connection to her
mother, confirming the thesis of the mother as the transmitter of culture. In
fact her lack of initial interest in Poland as part of her past may have been
due in part to her mother’s dislike of the place when she lived in post war Łódź.

Once in Poland, Karafilly has to come to terms with her own Jewish heritage, both in the observance of Poles’ reactions to Jews and in memories of her father. Thus, when, she finds herself (significant is her use of the words “I found myself”) in Łódź, she recalls Martin Buber’s statement to the effect that “all journeys have secret destinations of which the traveler is unaware”.

Karafilly, by her own admission, has never been an observing Jew and one has the feeling that she has rarely felt Jewish. As the text unfolds, she comes more and more to a realization and acceptance of that part of her heritage. Polish – Jewish relations appear almost as a leitmotif throughout the text, especially as she records conversations shared or overheard.

Nearing the end of her journey, she visits the hometown of her father – Kazimierz Dolny where his entire family perished in the Holocaust. Here her objective reporting changes in tone and becomes more personal, as she accepts the Jewish part of herself. First, at dinner with a stranger, she has a conversation about the fate of the Jews and, when she tells the woman where her family originated, the woman looks at her intently “I never thought you might be Jewish,” she says in a lowered voice. Karafilly describes this woman as “another crypto-Jew” and “one understandably haunted by the past” (Karafilly, 276). At the end of their meal, the woman holds out her hand and says “Happy New Year” in commemoration of the Jewish New Year about to take place. It is here that the author enters the realm of the past, which had remained submerged in her consciousness. Her lost family comes alive in her imagination, although so much of the Jewish life of Kazimierz has been obliterated. On her first night, she wanders around the Market Square in darkness and states that, although the walk barely takes five minutes, “it is long enough to transport me backward, to a shadowy world I know only from photographs, films, fiction” (Karafilly, 271). Then she experiences what she describes as a “moment of desolation so acute that it is a physical ache deep within my chest” when she thinks of her “faceless grandparents” (271). It is here that she truly enters the door of the past.

Finally, when she comes across a woman who had seen the deportation of the Kazimierz Jews and who has an attitude of sympathy and sorrow, Karafilly apparently reveals her emotions. We are only told that, at the end

1 Qtd. in Karafilly, 1.
of this woman’s description of the rabbi and the others being taken away, she looks into Irena Karafilly’s face and remarks, “Madame is of Jewish origin, I suppose?” (Karafilly, 283).

This is one of the key episodes in the text insofar as the inward journey is concerned in that it represents the acceptance of this part of the self. It was not that Karafilly had denied her Jewish ancestry, but one has the impression that she had never thought much about it before being confronted with the trauma of the past.

This is not a political narrative, but rather a candid discourse, as well as one that is written with great lyricism. History, personal memoir and appraisals of the present blend together smoothly within the text. As mentioned earlier, the memories of Irena Karafilly’s own Polish past, are summoned up by the senses – the taste of ice cream, the scent of flowers or fields. It is this kind of evocation of memory that stimulates an urge at last to revisit the Łódź of her childhood. Here the discourse becomes more personal; she tells us that most of her memories of Łódź “got buried by the dust of time” (Karafilly, 220). Now as she recalls the city, she remembers the tensions of postwar life there and the luxury of the life her own family had with their large flat and Polish maid. Here we see a similarity to Eva Hoffman’s narrative in Lost in Translation. While Hoffman’s family lived in postwar Cracow, they too had a large flat, luxury items and a Polish maid. Hoffman never comments on or seems to consider the significance of such a life at that time, but Karafilly discusses it openly in a later conversation with her equally half-Jewish childhood friend, when they speak of many reasons for Polish-Jewish tensions. She writes, “I think about this for a while: the Jewish families we knew in Łódź, all of them with Polish maids; of the cumulative resentment this social divide apparently generated” (Karafilly, 182).

It appears that there may be another reason on Karafilly’s part for the original apparent disinterest in excavating the past. At one point during the journey a memory surfaces when the author sees a lost blond boy and remembers her own experience, one of her “first Polish memories”, when she too was lost in Łódź and her father, who found her, was beaten and told he could not be her father because of the very fact that she was blond and he, obviously dark and Jewish. “This is not a Jewish child”, the crowd claimed. The policeman called is about to arrest him, when her father administers a bribe to get away. Karafilly recalls being confused by the incident and inquiring why the police would arrest her father. She is told in
explanation by him that “He didn’t need a reason. I was Jewish. That was quite enough” (Karafilly, 65). Now in the city of her childhood, it seems that the memories return with great poignancy and clarity. One senses that pain has been buried with these recollections and perhaps has contributed to their being kept beneath the surface.

However, on another level, Ashes and Miracles is a travel narrative and one in which the author takes us to the “new Poland” – a post communist land with all its promise, and disillusion. Along the way we meet a variety of Poles in the present-day world with a melange of views – views one hears daily expressed in the street, on TV or in the newspapers. The conversations that Karafilly has with Poles throughout her visit there make up one of the most striking aspects of the text. They give a cross section of opinion, so that the reader is left with a composite of contemporary Polish life, interspersed with the author’s own comments on Polish history and the reader is able thus to draw his or her own conclusions. It provides an excellent background for those who know little about this part of the world.

Yet this text is more than reportage, travel commentary, history or even personal memoir. It is a discourse of reaction. This is especially compelling during Karafilly’s visit to the former concentration camp at Auschwitz. Her description of that part of her journey recalls the words of Nechama Tec that “Poland was a Jewish graveyard” (Tec, viii). Karafilly tries to absorb what she sees; she looks at the faces in the photographs of prisoners, wondering if her grandparents are among them. Mixed with the reactions she experiences is the contrasting behavior of some tourists there with their video cameras, people who are laughing and, probably most appalling, a group of young English tourists who ask Karafilly to take their photograph as they pretend to be shot by a firing squad. She refuses. We have juxtaposed here a woman whose family perished in the Holocaust and people who seem to be totally insensitive to what happened, those for whom a concentration camp and the death of millions has little meaning. In the scene described, without excessive commentary, Irena Karafilly makes a statement about today’s world and the scene speaks for itself.

Janice Kulyk Keefer’s book also features a journey back to the old country and into the past and thus the discourse of memory features clearly. This is coincidentally a travel narrative as well. But a simple comparison ends there. Janice Kulyk Keefer was born in Canada, the daughter of first and second-generation immigrants, and it is the former, her mother’s family
roots, that she is returning to discover. The memories here are those of others, which she seeks to incorporate as her own. Perhaps it is for this reason that much of the text is made up of the family history she learns before her journey and of questions to be answered – many of which never are. As it turns out, a great deal of attention comes to rest on the figure of the great-aunt who, when Kulyk Keefer finally meets her at the end of the text, divulges little.

The authorial perspective differs as well, it is paradoxically less detached though based on the memories of others, perhaps because it is more of an imagined world that the writer is going to, one which finally will clash with the world she encounters. Ironically the past that Kulyk Keefer has envisioned is only to be found in an outdoor museum in Ukraine with its old houses and farming implements. This “past of memory” with the charming thatched roof houses that her mother had described to her now exists only in the confines of artificial construction. In contrast, the present day Ukrainian villages are made up of barren concrete dwellings, built after the war. This is what she discovers in the actual rather than the virtual Ukraine. One of the most compelling moments in her journey takes place in an outdoor museum, when she discovers a small house that fits the image she has had in her mind – “Out of time, out of place, I’ve found my grandmother’s house, the very room where my mother was born” (Kulyk Keefer, 255). The guard then allows her to enter the room. “This pressure of lives lived through, and lost, makes me do something that feels both natural and strange slipping off my shoes, I walk barefoot over the pressed clay floor” (256). It is this moment when Kulyk Keefer connects to the past in a way that is both physical and emotional. It is then that she steps into memory and makes it hers. But then too “seeing has the effect of putting a distance between the self and the object. What we see is always ‘out there’” (Tuan, 146). Svetlana Boym has described nostalgia as “[…] the longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed. Nostalgia is a sentiment of loss and displacement, but it is also a romance with one’s own fantasy” (Boym, xiii). One can see a parallel here although this is a reflective nostalgia since it is from the memories of others.

At the beginning of the narrative, Kulyk Keefer establishes the discourse as an identification with her mother, who was the child who left “the Old Place” in Ukraine many years before. Her text as “a story of family” becomes multi-layered in a different sense than the book by Karafilly. Kulyk Keefer inhabits her mother’s memories and those of her aunt. The
ashes here are more personal, those having to do with bitter family experience, and the honey – the contrasting sweetness. While Karafilly’s “ashes” are those of the literal wartime destruction and the miracles refer to the rebuilding.

Janice Kulyk Keefer’s text is also more a story of the immigrant experience in Canada. We move in and out of past and present, so that, at times, the journey process becomes secondary to the memories of life as it was in the Ukraine of her mother’s family and then of their subsequent removal to Ontario. There is often an apprehension in regard to replacing the imagined space of the other’s memories with reality. “You can’t go home again” was the famous phrase of Thomas Wolfe and this could apply not only to the actual individual who left, but also to anyone trying to recover that past. “Memory has a body breakable as any other body” (Kulyk Keefer, 251).

The focus of the two texts differs as much as the Poland remembered by Irena Karafilly contrasts with the Ukraine recalled by Kulyk Keefer’s mother and aunt. Both writers say they are on journeys of discovery. But for Kulyk Keefer, the Ukrainians and Poles met during her journey and their situations are incidental to the major aim of her story and, as she admits, she cannot speak the languages. Thus, if we want to learn about present day reality, we will find more in the text by Karafilly. Read together both provide an interesting composite picture.

In Postmodern geographies, Edward W. Soja states that “[…] life stories have a geography too; they have milieu, immediate locales, provocative entanglements which affect thought and action” (Soja, 14). We are conscious of this geography in both of the texts discussed. What then are the narrative voices in the two texts conveying? It is significant that these are books written by women. In an interesting discussion of feminist autobiography, Jeanne Perreault speaks of the subjectivity involved and quotes Audre Lorde who claims that “[…] the transformation of silence into language and action is an act of self revelation that always seems fraught with danger”\(^2\). How does one go about speaking the self? This is the problem faced by any attempt at memoir. How much to include and how much to omit becomes a primal question. To place oneself in the past according to Deluze is to “leap into entology” and to Bergson “to leap into being”\(^3\). This applies whether it

\(^2\) Qtd. in Perreault, 25.
\(^3\) Qtd. in Kalaga, 186.
is one’s own past or that of the family under consideration since it is always an attempt at a discovery of self. Memory is a particular space where culture and nature come together. Natural memory, at the same time, has to be articulated in terms of cultural codes, and itself becomes a cultural constraint (Kalaga, 189). On the other hand, “whether pleasant or dismal, the past is always a safe territory, if only because it is already experienced and the species’ capacity to run backward – especially in its thoughts or dreams […] is extremely strong in all of us, quite irrespective of the reality we are facing” (Brodsky, 16-18).

In addition to such considerations, in these texts there is, as well, a deconstruction of accounts. This is seen to a greater extent in *Honey and Ashes* where the author examines the stories she has been told and then, when, once in the place (space) of the Old World, attempts to find “truth”. In order to do this, she must deconstruct the stories, sift through the images and recollections of the survivors. It becomes a polysemic concept, drawing as it does from many sources. Both Kulyk Keefer and Karafilly have to find a mediating space and, in order to do so, they must go behind the masks – whether their own or those of others. In this they work through layers of silence, memory and dialogue and, doing so, structure a new discourse, one that will blend into a single narrative the many strands of experience – their own and those of others.

As to the representation of memory in narrative, how can it be rendered uncorrupted? Much attention is paid to the idea of its importance in what has been termed the recovery of the self. In connection with women this takes on special significance as both of the texts under consideration confirm the statement that “the experience of being women is represented as part of a larger, more complex human history” (*Writing*, xiv). Perhaps for women writers, the problem is even more acute and the statement that “To be without history, to be without the ability even to imagine the emotional lives of the people who came before you, is an incredibly damaging thing, an ache that hurts in a way that you don’t even realize hurts” (Tobias, 197).

At the end of her journey to this section of the world, Kulyk Keefer re-examines the meaning of home, aware that “home” is hard to define, that it is not a place in the past – real or imagined. This final section is full of water imagery that suggests the sense of the flow of time, adding greater meaning to the author’s decision to focus now on the present. This is the lesson learned from the journey back to “the Old Place”. Just as in Karafilly’s text,
the resolution, while not stated, seems to be similar – the acceptance of time, of place and of blood ties with an emphasis on looking toward the future.

“Writing so as not to die is a task undoubtedly as old as the world […]. We know that discourse has the power to arrest the flight of an arrow in a recess of time, in the space proper to it”\(^4\). In telling the story of family, Kulyk Keefer is exploring the self, the mystery of the past and arresting that past in discourse. Karafilly begins with a different aim; she is simply going to do research, but in the course of her journey, she finds herself doing more than that. She too is deconstructing, reconstructing the past and thus creating a discourse that integrates her into her family’s past.

It is important to consider the titles of these texts more closely – each provides a balance. The word “ashes”, mentioned in both is an appropriate one. The reader will note the connotation of this word – that which is left after burning, that which remains and is acrid and bitter. Each narrative contains this element. But both texts contrast it with other words in the respective titles – in Karafilly’s case – “miracles” and in Kulyk Keefer’s “honey”. Insofar as the outer journey is concerned, as well as the inward one, there is the balance shown in the title.

Time present and time past will always interact. The history of peoples and of land is woven into each discourse and we observe how each writer has changed through her personal journey into memory.

Works Cited


\(^4\) Blanchot qtd. in Foucault, 53.
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