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Review: Agata Tuszynska's Family History of Fear is an act of psychic archaeology

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In 1943, while occupying the Polish town of Leczyca, the Nazis built a road: an entirely unremarkable public-works project save for one striking detail. The road in question, which ran from the nearby train station to Leczyca proper, was paved with tombstones pried from the local Jewish cemetery, which dated back to the middle of the 15th century. It's an astonishing metaphor: for both the Nazi's calculated erasure of Jewishness in particular and the march of history and memory in general. The lives and histories of Leczyca's Jewish population were quite literally trampled underfoot.

Agata Tuszynska recounts this story of the road to Leczyca paved with the city's Jewish past in her bestselling memoir, *Family History of Fear*, which was published in Poland in 2005, and recently translated – from an existent 2006 French-language edition, and not the original Polish, oddly – into English. She knows that it's a telling historical anecdote, practically overflowing with meaning. When George Orwell wrote that “the most effective way to destroy people is to deny and obliterate their own understanding of their history,” this is exactly what he was talking about.

Tuszynska puts a twist on Orwell. It's not just a matter of brutal autocrats steamrolling memory, grinding the past into non-existence. It's a matter of the people suffering under those autocrats doing that work for them.

Tuszynska illustrates this idea with another story. This one's also set in Leczyca, albeit in the fall of 1939, just as the Nazis were making their jackbooted push into Poland. The Nazis marked Leczyca's Jews, and ordered executions, as a horrifying matter of course. One evening they strung up 10 Jewish men at the gallows. But instead of executing them personally, the Nazi occupiers sought out a local Jew to do it for them. Reluctantly, one of the condemned men's sons accepted. Not exactly a willing participant in such an atrocity, but a participant nonetheless.

In a similar example, Tuszynska mentions offhand that German PoW camps established in Poland also segregated the Jews – reproducing the conditions of ghettoization even in warfare, among members of the same national army. The Nazis were not merely perpetrating crimes against Leczyca and Western Jewry writ large. They were teaching the oppressed to perpetrate such crimes themselves: to adopt and enact the mentality of the oppressor; to become ashamed, self-loathing and deeply afraid.

Family History of Fear is as much a chronicle of personal history as it is a piece of psychic archeology. Tuszynska digs into her family's past, sifting through records and stories, and retracing the steps of her ancestors. She writes with compassion of her atheist father, for whom “Jews were the reason, vague but ubiquitous, for everything that didn't go as it was supposed to.” And she writes of her mother, who kept her own Jewishness a secret until late in her life, both out of practicality (Poland, like much of Western Europe, and the world, was anti-Semitic well before the Nazis blitzed in) and a deeper, more personal sense of shame. It wasn't until she was 19 that Agata Tuszynska was told of her Jewish heritage.

Until then, she lived as a Christian, celebrating Christmas and heralding the Second Coming. A generation before, her grandmother changed her name from Adela Goldstein to the less conspicuous (by Polish standards, anyhow) Zofia Zmialowska, purchasing a fake baptismal certificate from a local priest. “I didn't know any Jews,” Tuszynska writes. “For me, the Jews were as long ago as the Egyptians and as exotic as Indians.”

For a North American reader (especially one totally oblivious to the historical and social milieus of Western Europe in the 20th century), the revelation of a long-hidden Jewishness may not scan as such a big deal. Perhaps, and I'm just guessing here, this is what accounts for the protracted period between *Family History of Fear*'s publication and its English, via French, translation? That, despite its many awards and accolades abroad, there is something about it that may seem deeply unrelatable?

Tuszynska overcomes such disjoints in understanding by always framing Jewishness not as a religious or cultural affiliation, but as a psychology. Finding out she was Jewish didn't just precipitate a run-of-the-mill identity crisis. It was an existential crisis. For 19 years she held to the belief that she didn't know any Jews. Now, suddenly, she was one. And to be Polish and Jewish seemed fundamentally irreconcilable.

"We are our memory," she writes. "We are what we remember." It's a galling cliché, but Tuszynska barely lets it slip out before cleverly revising it. "Even more than that," she goes on, "We are what we forget, what in self-defence we blot out of our memory, chase from our consciousness, avoid in our thinking." It touches on an idea I've found myself circling back to for years now: that we, as individuals and as cultures and as a whole shared civilization, are defined as much (or even more) by what we throw away, destroy or try to erase. We are what we are, sure. But we are also what we're not. Or what we think we're not. We are ourselves, cast in relief.

Studying her family image, rifling through stories and unlocking long-kept secrets, Tuszynska finds a way to mollify the tensions between what she thought she was and what she thought she wasn't, between her Polishness and her Jewishness. "Both make me what I am," she writes. "Even if they oppose one another and accuse each other – I belong to both." *Family History of Fear* is not only a memoir or work of restorative personal history. It's an act of un-erasure. Tracing her bloodlines of fear, secrecy and self-loathing, she uncovers a history of survival and solidarity, of profound love.

When Tuszynska visits Leczyca, where the Nazis used gravestones as paving stones, she treks out to the site of the now-bygone Jewish cemetery. There she finds small parcels of land, where vegetables are growing. An old woman is weeding and gathering vegetables for a broth. "She can't *not* know what was here before the war and why her vegetables thrive here," Tuszynska notes. From death – and not only death, but the hollowing and expunging of death – life, somehow, is nurtured.

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