

GIFTS AND CRUELITIES OF DISPLACEMENT

Nothing to be written here

A VIDEO WRITTEN, DIRECTED AND PRODUCED BY WENDY OBERLANDER

EDITED BY JENNIFER ABBOTT

CAMERA BY KEVIN MATTHEWS, BO MYERS AND WENDY OBERLANDER

HAHN & DAUGHTERS PRODUCTIONS, 1996, 47 MIN.

REVIEW BY NANCY POLLAK

Toward the end of *Nothing to be written here*, Wendy Oberlander's video meditation on large and small Jewish histories, we encounter a close-up of grass. The long, motionless blades are woven together by weather and time, collapsed with their own weight and heaped into grey waves. A Hebrew word is surprinted on the field. The word fades, gives way to another tranquil image—but of what? Fabric? Water? Something lifting and falling—surely a wave, perhaps linen, perhaps a froth of ocean disguised as cloth. What really are we seeing?

More words appear, in English: "Can one really change one's language as if it were a shirt?" Yes, then: cloth. Language as clothing, Oberlander seems to be saying, intimate as skin, a medium that sheathes and projects a person's being. Cloth spun from grass, grass sprung from fields, fields as geography, as place. Now we hear the videomaker's voice: "If I sound like a stranger, who will listen?" In this fragment of the forty-seven-minute video, Oberlander is pondering her unsettled relationship to the German language: the mother tongue of her Jewish parents; the childhood language of "tenderness" that still rouses her in some primal way; the language of the people who tried to murder her family.

Nothing to be written here has many such complex moments. Yet there is nothing obscure about the work—remarkably, given the territory Oberlander covers: from a portion of little-known Jewish-Canadian history, to her relationships with her father

and herself, to silences both official and particularly Jewish, to the perils and imperatives of tracking memory and wisdom. As *Nothing to be written here* unwinds, we find ourselves inside a composition that is full of feeling (though restrained in its emotions), often beautiful, and suffused with a quiet, ethical tone. The video has an atmosphere of inquiry that seems political, emotional and spiritual all at once. In a word, *Nothing to be written here* is substantial.

The work is principally about her father's wartime experience. Today, Peter Oberlander is a Vancouver-based urban planner. In 1938 he was a fifteen-year-old boy who, along with his middle-class Jewish family, fled from Vienna to England to escape further persecution. With the outbreak of war in 1940, Peter and about 29,000 other Jewish refugees of Austrian and German nationality were rounded up as enemy aliens and potential spies. The British war office, like Canadian officials later on, didn't seem in any hurry to distinguish between Nazis and victims of Nazis. To put some distance between Britain and the putative spies, the teenaged Oberlander and thousands of other male refugees were deported to Canada and Australia.

They didn't cross the ocean alone. The vessels were crammed with angry German POWs, including Luftwaffe flyers who

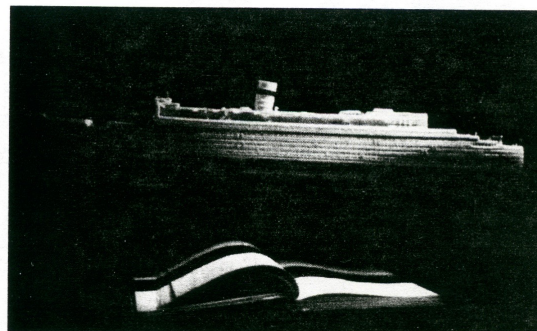


Photo credit: W. Oberlander © 1996

sang loud songs about how, in Peter's words, "they're going to kill the Jews." The other Jewish refugees, ranging in age from sixteen to sixty years, included men who had already escaped camps such as Dachau and Buchenwald. Once in Canada, the refugees were loaded onto trains and sent to rough, rural prison camps in New Brunswick, Quebec and Ontario. Peter chopped down trees in a maritime forest and endured the oppressive conditions of the camp.

In the meantime, Jewish organizations and the internees' surviving relatives quietly campaigned for their release—quietly, because Ottawa's hostility toward foreign Jews-in-distress was well known. Camp life was anything but pleasant and the future was terrifying; after all, the war's outcome was uncertain. The campaigns eventually succeeded and between 1941 and 1943 the internees were released. Peter decided to stay in Canada and he enrolled at McGill. Evidently he was a first-rate student: Jews needed higher marks than Gentiles to be accepted at the Montreal university.



Internment Camp B, Ripples, New Brunswick, c. 1941.
Photo credit: Acadia Forest Experiment Station

Nothing to be written here excavates this buried and appalling chapter of Commonwealth history, links it to Canada's anti-Jewish immigration policies of the day, and to what Wendy Oberlander calls the "transtemporal" oppression of Jews. She uses some conventional documentary methods to tell this history—newsreel footage, family movies, documents and newspaper clippings, clandestine camp drawings and photos (Canadian officials didn't bother to create an official photographic record of the camps), interviews with Peter—but Oberlander doesn't stay fixed on explicit time. There is a deeper view here, conveyed in images of seamless ocean, stranded suitcase, burning page, and in poetic phrases about the gifts and cruelties of displacement. The ocean may be what literally carried Peter away, but on screen it reads as a pooling of the unconscious, the wash of other sorts of knowledge.

We are traveling into "the infinite text," as Wendy Oberlander says, of Jewish exile and escape. And she does not let us go unequipped. Lifelines are offered, often in the shape of the traditional Hasidic survival tool: everyday existence. As the train transports Peter and other internees to their prison camp in Canada, we hear a man's voice:

"What can one learn from a train?" asks one of the Hasids.
"That because of one second, one can miss anything."
"From a telegraph?"

"That every word is counted and charged."
"And a telephone?"
"That what we say here is heard there."

Nothing to be written here is also about Wendy Oberlander's exploration of her

father's internment and hence about the ethics of "visiting the place of his pain." At first she is astounded at the silence within her family, yet she also senses the story is old. The daughter's journey is painful and painstaking, as "memory and forgetfulness chase the facts in a circle" while she attempts to undo the erasure.

Oberlander brings compassion and delicacy to the search. Her father's privacy is protected, his courage implicit. Peter Oberlander, she makes clear, "never denied [his] internment, but in 1941 the silence was forced on him." There was fertile ground for such silences: the shame of being targeted as unwanted and dangerous—as Jewish; and the impossibility of comparing Peter's experience with the exile of other Jews. As the daughter observes, how was her father to "reconcile his internment with the losses in Europe?" Oberlander's honouring of her father is one of the pleasures of this work—and a rare pleasure, too.

She inserts herself into the video in various guises: as narrator reciting the chased-down facts; as daughter confronting her hunger for what the father jettisoned; as researcher treading though unaired "private suffering" in a public archive; and as Jew bearing personal and transpersonal witness to hatred. We "see" Oberlander mainly in her voice, but also in home movies. She comes to us as a young Jewish man (her father in Vienna?), then as a blurred figure peering into the silences. Yet there is never too

much of her. Oberlander is absorbed in her inheritance—in "the residue [that] is inherited"—not in her self.

Nothing to be written here does have some unsatisfying elements. The video's typographical look (the surprinted text, segment titles) is not well designed and sometimes reads like mediocre advertising. If artists are going to use type, they should approach it as a painter does paint: with due respect for its power and subtlety. And Oberlander's use of home-movie shots of herself as a youngster is part of an autobiographical tradition I view with suspicion. What do such images ever really convey except that home movies have an intrinsically evocative quality? We see the washed-out 1960s graininess, the jump and jerk of images, the faces grinning at the cameraperson—it's intense and, yes, something pulls us in. Yet I feel it isn't these particular images that do the capturing, rather some seductiveness built into the medium.

On the other hand, Oberlander spares us that most manipulative of elements: the musical soundtrack. *Nothing to be written here* has voice and images only, the occasional lapping of waves, but no music to inflate—and violate—the silences. How wonderful, I thought. A videomaker who trusts her medium and her audience.

Altogether, *Nothing to be written here* has a thoughtful, almost gentle tone. We do feel involved with infinity here, perhaps the infinite edge of exile and of the exile's response. Where once nothing could be written—by the edicts of authorities, and the authority of pain—the video writes a great deal. Oberlander inscribes this traumatic realm with patience and a careful desire. She wants hard knowledge and disclosure, and she wants more: to know a way in, and then a way throughout.

Nancy Pollak is a writer and editor living in Vancouver.