

ONCE IT WAS WRITTEN: THE STORY AFTER *NOTHING TO BE WRITTEN HERE*

BY WENDY OBERLANDER

After 20 years, and on the occasion of the VHEC's "*Enemy Aliens*" exhibit, Wendy Oberlander reflects on the legacy of her film *Nothing to be written here*. In 1993, Oberlander embarked on a long and winding path toward the creation of this award-winning video — without knowing the narrative of the story.

Standing in the snowy woods alongside Highway 10 that runs between Fredericton and Minto, I found myself in Ripples, New Brunswick. There is nothing more than a gas station, a bar and a few farms — and across the road, a crumbling structure, four metres high. It was the base of a water tank that provided water to Camp 'B' where my father spent the winter of 1940 - 1941.

Just one day before, I had found the last of the wooden barracks from this camp at the University of New Brunswick — and was told it would be demolished the next week. It had been moved to town after the Second World War, and used as a repair shed for heavy equipment on campus.

Early in my research, I realized that narrative and place do not always add up, that facts are not written in ink, and that events are not fixed in time and space. Seeing a building that housed 'prisoners' bound by barbed wire on the campus of a public university, the building that held my father captive fifty years earlier, displaces the story again — could this really be true? How did it survive, witness to a story that had disappeared so long ago?

The French writer Pierre Nora conceived a term for such things: 'lieu de mémoires' — the places and objects, both concrete and ephemeral, that construct memories (*Les lieux de mémoire* (1984–92)). Over time and space, these 'sites' come to include not only the object, but also the ritual, the archive, the institution, the moment and the non-material, creating a memorial heritage for individuals and a community, to "block the work of forgetting" (Nora 1989: 7).

Standing in the woods of Ripples, I was pushed to remember — for my father.

For a myriad of reasons, my father Peter Oberlander, z"l did not talk about his war-time experiences when I was young. Stray references to 'camp' (always spoken without an article) alluded to some kind of deprivation here in Canada; much later, in 1991, he briefly spoke about one night spent on Île-Saint-Hélène in 1941. I had a growing collection of questions, and my father was not yet able to share his answers. Early knowledge of the internment of European refugees in Canada came from the work of Paula Draper, Ted Jones, Eric Koch, Neil Livingston, and Harry Rasky, and later, from the files housed at the National Archives of Canada in Ottawa, and at the Canadian Jewish Congress Archives in Montreal. In the public realm, I first learned about my father's experiences, and his private and very complex shame.

Over time, the search shifted as my father asked, with a sideways glance: what did you find? Me, not sure how to share the plaintive pleas written in broken English by his parents to the authorities: Well, some letters, a few news articles, many files, each with a name of an internee. Mine? he asked. Yes, yours.

Around this time, I immersed myself in the work of James Baldwin, Hélène Cixous, Theresa Huk Kyung Cha, Saul Friedlander and Edmond Jabès — writers who had fashioned bridges from broken languages and landscapes in order to inscribe their own identities. New questions emerged: How to tell a story of mistaken identity? How to find words in the silence? How to make something from nothing? Luckily, the time was right.

During the late 1980s and '90s, other children of immigrants started to "narrate their parents' past" (Arlene Stein, in

conversation) through their work as writers, artists and filmmakers. I place myself late in the second wave of this work, inspired by the work of Richard Fung, Shani Mootoo and Rea Tajiri, among others. We started with questions, asked from the privilege of here, not there, looking tentatively at the geographies of confinement and displacement: what could they tell us that our parents could not?

I took a hesitant step toward creating a documentary film that might give shape to my father's story, and my inheritance of his story. As an artist, I began to see images unfurl from the letters, documents, and scraps of paper; voices with gentle accents giving rise to some answers to an old (Jewish) question: why this exile, again?

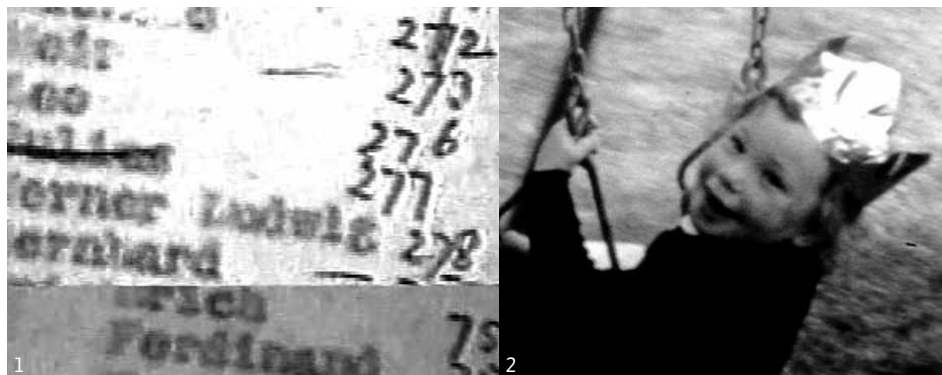
Into the box of questions was slowly added a collection of images that could stand in for my father's story: a suitcase, a boat, a fire, a book, the ocean. These formed an afterimage, where until then the screen was blank.

Reading through my father's files in public was unsettling, a violation of his privacy. In the archives, I found notes on his condition in the camps, his route through temporary camps in England, his safe arrival somewhere in Canada, his relocation to Camp 'T'. I unearthed pleading telegrams and letters from my grandparents to the British authorities, refugee agencies, American diplomats and the Canadian government telling of anxieties, fears, a family visa set to expire in weeks.

I also found my father's friends, the most generous and patient men who shared everything with me, an artist searching for the missing parts to her family's story. I asked: Where did the internment take you? What do you make of all this, so many years later? Out of cupboards came the stories, the jokes, the musical programs, and the drawings; reams of materials that were tucked away (one never knew what might be needed), showing me what I had missed at home.

The evidence was overwhelming, my father started to speak, and a narrative began to take shape. He shared what he could — the locales, the scenes, the restrictions, the imprisonment. A few papers surfaced, the suitcase, a name or two. (The notebooks included in the exhibition arrived at his house a few months before his death. He had packed them away, with all his worldly possessions c. 1948, into trunks that were stored in a colleague's basement for 40 years.)

The story of silence became *Nothing to be written here*, the title lifted from the



THE NEW WORD

While studying in Folkstone, in the winter of 1939, my father's English Composition class required essays written on the following topics, among others:

- How Englishmen regard foreigners.
- Travel as part of education.
- Traveling companions.
- Wildlife in wood and forest.
- The ideal home.
- The St. Lawrence River.

How is it that this textbook predicted exactly what my father would encounter, only a few months later?

The German and Austrian schoolboys remembered the swath of pink in their school atlas, etched into their imagination by the stories of Karl May. Did my father think of these stories from his childhood as he slept in the stone barracks of Île-aux-Noix on the Richelieu River, dating from the French and Indian War of 1759?



Image 1 and 2: Video still, *Nothing to be written here*, 1996 © Hahn & Daughters Productions - Courtesy Wendy Oberlander. Image 3: Letter from Peter Oberlander to his parents,

Prisoner of War stationery internees were forced to use, desperate to declare their innocence on paper already stamped with an offense.

After my father's death I found yet another ending to his story, a letter he wrote to his parents the night he was released from Camp 'P' in November, 1941. I cannot determine if this is a draft never sent, or the letter that my grandmother had saved that made its way back into our household.

So strange, so queer, I can hardly put it in words my vocabulary fails me. All seems like a dream, so unnatural, nearly impossible. Often I had to pinch myself, to know whether it was reality or just one of those mad nightmares... There (at the home of Mr. and Mrs. Ben Robinson, who provided aid to many former internees in Montreal upon their release) I at first had a deep breath of freedom and then went to bed. Imagine in a bed for myself with white linens, and I could sleep as long and I like, and could turn the light off when I like.

Somehow, I think, if I had read this twenty years ago, my project would have taken a different shape.

Trying to find a bit of poetry in this convoluted history, *Nothing to be written here* includes a parable attributed by Rabbi Abraham Yaakov of Sadagoria, read by my father. (Buber. *Tales of the Hasidim: The Later Masters*. 1948).

I tried to imagine the boats loaded with boys and me — psychoanalysts, yeshiva students, engineers, doctors, musicians, journalists, mixed with German POWs, no less — sailing across the ocean in the summer of 1940. Where was their faith in all this? How was this modern peril to end?

What can we learn from a train? one Hasid asked dubiously. That because of one second one can miss everything.

*And from the telegraph?
That every word is counted and charged.
And the telephone?
That what we say here is heard there.*

Two weeks after his arrival in Quebec, my father and his compatriots were transplanted into the woods of the Acadia Research Forest in New Brunswick where that winter, the internees were put to work both chopping wood and planting trees. Rows of saplings, laid out with Teutonic precision, have now grown into mature trees standing in perfect rows — a legacy admired to this day.

A new version of the parable, read by former internee Rabbi Erwin Schild, tries to reconcile an image of the “Casher kitchen” group studying after a day spent in the woods.

*Acts of the Book
A yeshiva student sees an axe leaning against the table.
He asks: Why is there an axe in a house of study?
A Rabbi replies: Each blow of the axe etches the Word into the tree.
Another student asks: But who can read the words when the tree has fallen?
The elder responds: The tree becomes the pages of the Book.
The first student asks: And how do you turn the pages of a wooden book?
The answer: With the blade of an axe.*

Nothing to be written here was my first documentary, made with the camera in one hand and the manual in the other. I had no template to follow, and no way to expect any interest in this unknown history. I was driven only by a need to give shape to my story.

My father asked again and again, after I returned from



no date. - Courtesy Oberlander Family Collection. Image 4 & 5: Winter at Camp B (Ripples, New Brunswick), c. November 1941. - Courtesy Acadia Forest Experiment Station

screenings of the film with stories from afar: Why are they all so interested in this? What would he say now, about the handsome exhibition at the Vancouver Holocaust Education Centre, seeing his worn suitcase behind glass? He would be amused, bemused, bewildered — and he would have loved being embraced by this re-invented community which has sprouted from the “*Enemy Aliens*” exhibit. Peter might have found peace among the familiar.

For a long time, I sensed my father was relieved that someone had told his story; this was no longer his burden alone. But just last month I made another discovery. Among the papers he left behind were a few copies of the McGill Daily dating from the early 40s. Knowing him well enough to keep a copy or two of anything he wrote, I found a few short articles by him, sharing news from the School of Architecture. I found nothing familiar in one issue; scanning the front page a second time, I read a side bar without a by-line titled “Thank you, McGill!” It is written in the third person, describing a student without papers or history, accepted by McGill after release “from a refugee-internment camp”. It describes a profound sense of displacement that was eased by the generosity of the Registrar and the Dean. The student’s name was Peter. In 1945, my father had written his story, in his own way.

The video gave my family an illustrated narrative of a story never shared, yet one that lived in the most intimate places: scraping the dinner plates clean, keeping every fragment of paper, never crossing one’s parents. It also provided words for the things we never questioned: a fierce attachment to family, a dedication to the preservation of truth, a commitment to sharing good fortune, and a gratitude toward the country that offered us refuge. We were no longer framed by what was hidden.

Personally, I found a place to lay my questions down, even if some remain unanswered. It was a journey, a search, a mission to write this story, if only for myself.

As I met other children of former internees, it was clear I was not alone. I found people whose faces reflected mine, whose families were also pieced together with bits of string and glue, and whose fathers never shook off their bizarre backdoor entry into Canada during the Second World War. Our fathers may not have resolved their internment in the same way, but surely we had found our ‘cousins’.

Adding a footnote of irony to a story that has none, my father was appointed as a federal Citizenship Judge in 1998, an honour he took to heart. Using his best French, first learned

in the camps and later practiced in Ottawa in the early 1970s, he welcomed new Canadians from all the corners of the globe. After the war, with the promise of a new passport, Peter made a deliberate decision to make Canada his new home; he effused that these new citizens should also embrace the bright future that Canada promised.

Sitting down to write this piece, I found myself starting to write the narration all over again. In the beginning, there was silence. But then I remember: the story has been told. The surviving ‘camp boys’ have spoken and the artefacts cataloged; the extraordinary work of the Vancouver Holocaust Education Centre ensures this episode is now part of Canada’s historical narrative.

In the beginning, I needed to fill in the blanks. By the end, I had discovered so much, finally grasping how the silence offered protection to my father when words — in any language — failed him, and how the promise of tomorrow was always greater than the losses of the past. I learned, too, that xenophobia and distrust of the ‘other’ was not unique to this internment; it persists today, close to home and around the world. Twenty years later, I remain humbled by my father’s courage, and by the spaces between the stories, the silences and gaps that will never be filled — and the need to speak about them. In this ‘in-coherence’ lie the forces of time and space — recollections that contradict, numbers that do not add up, a familiar face in a photograph, the identity of whom my father was never certain.

It is not just the vagaries of memory, not just one opinion over another, but the mix and flux of human experience that conspire to keep the openings, creating new ‘lieu de memoires.’ Just as the spaces between the letters in the Torah yield deeper meanings, the gaps in this story give me a place to fashion my own site of memory, in honour of these men.

Written in memory of my father, Peter Oberlander, z”l. My profound gratitude to Nina Krieger, “Enemy Aliens” curator, Frieda Miller and to the whole staff of the VHEC for bringing this story to light. With sincere thanks to Don Falk, Alan Habn, Susan Moser and Arlene Stein for sustaining the conversation over the years.

Nothing to be written here screens at the VHEC on April 24th at 7pm. RSVP: education@vhec.org 604.264.0499



Wendy Oberlander is an interdisciplinary artist whose award-winning documentaries have screened across North America and Europe. Oberlander has taught in diverse settings, including Emily Carr University of Art + Design and Simon Fraser University, prior to joining King David High School. *Photo by Adam Rootman*