

## Introduction

Każdy przecież początek  
To tylko ciąg dalszy,  
a księga zdarzeń  
zawsze otwarta w połowie.

—Wisława Szymborska, *Miłość od pierwszego wejrzenia*

Every beginning  
is only a sequel, after all,  
and the book of events  
is always open halfway through.

—Translated by Stanisław Barańczak and Clare Cavanagh

A JEW, POLE, daughter, mother, wife, widow, communist, migrant, refugee, Holocaust survivor driven to fight for a better world. Ordinary or anything but? In Tonia Lechtman's life, the lofty and the quotidian intertwined, making everything she did both monumental and mundane. Who was she?

Tonia Lechtman (née Bialer) was born in 1918 into a Jewish industrialist family in Łódź, Poland. Early in her life, at the threshold of her teenage years, she embraced communism. Through communism she articulated principles that would define her public stance and her private life. Her ideals strengthened in Palestine, where she met and married fellow communist Sioma Lechtman, a Russian Jew raised in Vienna. In 1937 Tonia and Sioma immigrated to France to build a new life. In 1943 she fled France as a single mother of two young children and spent the rest of the war, 1943–45, as a refugee in Switzerland. In 1946 she returned to Poland. That return was supposed to end her wandering; Poland in 1946 promised a new, better communist world

committed to eliminating hatred and injustices. Three years after her return, in 1949, Tonia was arrested as an “enemy of the state” and imprisoned for five years. She returned to Palestine (now Israel) in 1971 and died in 1996, surrounded by a loving family bewildered by the role communism had occupied in her life.

A couple of decades after Tonia’s death, a photo of Rosa Luxemburg still hangs in her old living room. For years communism—the way she understood and lived it—was everything to her. It freed her from the limitations of the class structures of interwar Polish and Polish Jewish society; promised a world free from antisemitism; framed her social relationships, allowing her to define herself on her own terms; and, later in life, helped her deal with loss and trauma. Tonia’s life encompassed many roles and identities: the liminal life of a person belonging to a national minority; the contingent life of a woman; the hopeful life of a communist; the desperate life of a mother, wife, and widow; and the contingent life of traumatic choices and few opportunities. Over and over again, some of her most consequential choices were driven by her convictions: to remain a communist, to define herself as a Jew in the middle of the war in France, to choose Poland and Polishness after the war. I imagine her as a restless and relentless woman, determined to live by her principles. Love is an essential element of this image, as are growing disillusionment and trauma of loss and fear. Toward the end of her life, she did not appear bitter or disappointed, but the pain that accumulated in her found ways to resurface.

### An Ordinary Life?

I frame Tonia’s life as ordinary. She was a migrant and a refugee searching for a place to settle and longing to be useful in making the world a better place—an urge that appears to be the best evidence of belonging for someone from the margins. Tonia was aware of the scale of the historical forces she faced. I see her life as a way to investigate how “human beings understand the world and their place in it,” make sense of their available choices, and try to retrieve agency even if it appears to be unavailable.<sup>1</sup> Isn’t this constant juggling of identities and a search for belonging ordinary, perhaps now, in our contemporary world, more than ever?

For her and members of her generation—Polish Jews born on the threshold of an independent Poland—choices appeared limitless. They lived in a

moment of “historical optimism and faith in national self-determination.”<sup>22</sup> Tonia represented a generation born and educated during the interwar years that believed it lived in an exceptional time that gave hope for inclusion. Yet this generation had its dreams crushed. In the name of these dreams and the impudence of acting upon them, Tonia was imprisoned four times by three states (Poland, Palestine, France, and Poland again). She was also interned in France and Switzerland for being a communist, a Jew, a refugee, or a Jewish communist. Her identities were sometimes advantageous and sometimes disadvantageous. The modern state providing her with choices was simultaneously categorizing, defining, and limiting these choices. Is that not an ordinary story of modernity, however brazen that statement and cruel that reality appears to be?

At the beginning of her journey, she was a young woman who unexpectedly became a widowed mother of two children. She had to face the responsibility of raising them alone under circumstances of war, chaos, and political and social transformations. The threatening world most likely made her question many life decisions. The documents she left behind portray a woman constantly attempting to balance her life with the lives of her children. Is this not the most ordinary of life trajectories?

Communism, fascism, the Spanish Civil War, World War II, the Holocaust, and Stalinism were all part of her life experience. She certainly lived in interesting times, as the Chinese proverb that sounds like a curse has it. History with a capital *H* rolled through her life, shaping her and affecting her life intensely and intimately. At the same time, she resisted these forces as if she did not realize the scope of the unfolding events. She struggled to understand what the changing social and political horizons meant for her and her family and how she could remain faithful to the world she believed had shaped her and the world she hoped to (re)build. How could her life be anything but extraordinary? But a brief look at our last few decades reveals similarly powerful events and forces that have dominated our lives—for example, the Arab Spring, refugee crises, the European Community’s decline, the Black Lives Matter movement, climate change, COVID-19. Aren’t we all living through decades dominated by forces that are beyond imagination? Aren’t we living and experiencing history, sometimes in the most terribly intimate ways?

Larger historical context hung over Tonia’s life like a cloud, suggesting the next chapters of her story before we even begin reading them. Her story is one

of relationships between ethnic Poles and Polish Jews, the struggle of Jewish communists, “choiceless choices” and tragedies, acceptance and adaptation, rejection and trauma.<sup>3</sup> Careful investigation shows the scope of her various possible choices, decisions she made, and efforts she undertook to avoid the disasters toward which she was constantly heading. It also unveils the incidental nature of many of her decisions. Tonia encountered many misfortunes, but she also had luck and people willing to help her. Each of us can decide whether the presence of good people in our lives is ordinary.

“Then, how unique or representative was her life?” is another typical question historians ask. Did history produce her? And if so, how?<sup>4</sup> On one hand, social, political, and cultural factors defined her life: conditions circumscribed her responses. “No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the Continent, a part of the main.’ . . . To paint a man’s life is to present these things,” says biographer Hermione Lee, quoting poet John Donne in her book on the development of the biography as a genre in the Western world, suggesting that we all are part of a larger story.<sup>5</sup> On the other, this larger story does not fully explain who we are, nor does it exhaust the possibilities of how an individual can develop. Historian Marci Shore, in an interview inspired by her book on the choices of people who participated in the Maidan Uprising, the 2014 revolution of dignity in Ukraine, maintains that “any historical situation contains elements of both the particular and the universal. . . . No moment is ever *exactly* the same as any other, just like no human being is exactly the same as any other.” Shore insists that each particular situation teaches us something about the human condition: our strengths, weaknesses, and tendencies to normalize the abnormal.<sup>6</sup> To recognize that is to exercise one’s historical imagination and see individual behaviors as historically contingent yet developing in surprising ways.

### Biography: The Stream and the Fish

In her 1939 autobiographical essay “Sketch of the Past,” Virginia Woolf wrote, “I see myself as a fish in a stream; deflected; held in place but cannot describe the stream.”<sup>7</sup> Lee sees Woolf’s comment as representing a conflict within personal writing, such as a diary or autobiography, but also illustrating Woolf’s awareness “that one of biography’s tasks is to place its subject in its ‘age’: the question is how best to do it.” Biography “has a duty to the stream as well as to the fish.”<sup>8</sup>

While pondering big historical questions, historians usually play with the “how” and “why.” As historian Christopher Clark emphasizes in his breakthrough work on how the great powers went to war in 1914, the “why” invites us to search for categorical causes, while the “how” invites us to look at the sequence of interactions between the larger context and individuals. The “why” approach offers analytical clarity, but it also has a distorting effect because it causes the illusion of steadily building pressure” that leads to inevitable consequences.<sup>9</sup> Similar questions appear in works on individual lives. “How” creates space for individual intricacies: choices made, actions undertaken, or interpretations of one’s life. The “why” helps us define Woolf’s stream and reveals itself as epistemological impossibility for historians. History is always both overdetermined and underdetermined in that multiple outcomes were possible and multiple factors simultaneously played a role in those outcomes.<sup>10</sup>

The themes that flow through Tonia’s life are rich. The most apparent is the complex and dynamic intersection between Polishness and Jewishness, which helps us understand some of the intricacies of her life choices. Historian Katrin Steffen uses the term “Jewish Polishness” to reveal the close interconnectedness of both identities.<sup>11</sup> Tonia identified as Polish, but that Polishness was deeply and inseparably linked with her Jewishness. Polishness and Jewishness played parallel roles in her life: her understanding of Polishness and Jewishness, as well as the relationship between the two, kept changing yet remained dependent on each other.<sup>12</sup> In terms of citizenship, all inhabitants of the Second Polish Republic, the state where Tonia first learned what it meant to be Jewish and Polish, were Polish. Tonia’s experiences give space to question the experience of ethnic Poles as normative and suggest making a distinction between non-Jewish Poles and Jewish Poles rather than Poles and Jews.<sup>13</sup>

Her place in both communities was complicated by her gender: a Polish Jewish daughter, wife, widow, mother, and female communist. Communism and the various roles it played in her life—from providing a space to mature to giving her purpose and helping her deal with trauma—are indispensable elements of that story. Is communism a framework—perhaps a stream—for the identities within which she defined her other roles? I avoid the word “emancipation” to describe the role communism played, as emancipation implies a preceding subjugation. Her identity as a young Polish Jewish woman did not hold her back but propelled her forward; she embraced communism in this

context. She did not try to escape the world she came from but tried to build a new one from its depths.<sup>14</sup>

The fluidity of her identities underscored her mobility—a physical mobility of moving between places and a mental mobility of shifting among various social contexts and self-definitions. The moments when she traveled physically imbued her with the strength to reshape her life and restart her personal narrative. In other words, she consciously chose the life of a migrant as if physical mobility drove her mental capabilities for acceptance and adaptation. But she was forced to cease to be a voluntary migrant, and her status shifted to that of refugee. Her life became part of a larger story of modern prisons and camps that in many respects overshadowed the twentieth century. The Holocaust affected her, but her Jewishness was not the only reason why she was persecuted; her vulnerability was intensified by being a communist, a woman, a mother. Her life is a chapter in the study of one of the most barbarous moments in European history. It is also part of the modern story of ordering and categorization that came with the fluidity the twentieth century offered her as a promise of unlimited opportunities.

Tonia's life is a story of imagining a perfect home, searching for that home, and reinventing it over and over again. As a woman and homemaker, she reimagined home for her children: the small, more intimate home, the place in which they lived their everyday lives, and the larger home, the country in which they chose to live. A communist utopian vision of the end of history and the promise of the end of all suffering drove her efforts to fight for this home. Even if utopian, it defined her motherhood and also forced her children to share their mother's love with ideals that undermined their well-being. Her life is about reconciling the love of humanity with love for people close to her, neither of which were a given but which she had to constantly refuel.

Her story is about women. It is about the importance and physical presence of women in her life: her mother, her aunt, her female friends who encouraged her to join a communist youth organization, and many other women who helped her survive. In a literary sense, it is a story about social workers or women who felt compelled to help, modern angels who repeatedly came to her rescue. Their stories are largely unknown and forgotten. These women fed Tonia and her children, found shelter for them, took them in, and provided her with false documents. Beyond survival, they also enabled her children to

feel safe and even thrive under conditions of war. Their efforts transcended the boundaries of the various countries Tonia lived in and were international but delineated by languages—mostly German and French—that made connections possible. The form that remembrance takes is another aspect of her story. Women often remember through the presence of others in their lives. Tonia's story is certainly not unique in this respect. She constructed a life story centered on others, mostly women, who made her survival and growth possible.

Life writing and memory are certainly crucial for Tonia's story. Tonia never wrote an autobiography or a memoir, but the lengthy interviews she left behind and the effort her family put into maintaining contact via correspondence and then preserving that correspondence reminds me of the importance of life writing and individual self-construction.<sup>15</sup> How Tonia remembered, what she forgot, and even what she represented differently in various sources are also crucial. Oral history historian Alessandro Portelli has explained that how and what we remember, what we forget, and what we distort in our memory tells a tremendous amount about our individual experiences—much more than the story itself.<sup>16</sup> What Tonia and her children remembered or chose to remember was conditioned by the trauma they experienced. Her children have struggled throughout their lives with how to think about their own past and the place they occupied in their mother's life, a place they see as having been limited by her activism, her communism, and her urge to treat the outer world as a necessary prerequisite for the safety of her private home. The dilemma of Vera and Marcel, Tonia's children, of what to think of the heritage their Polish Jewish communist mother left behind does not belong only to them. The reflections and anxieties of her children speak to the experiences of many people like themselves, people affected by dislocation and loss. Her story and their stories show the diverse directions that “fish” can take in a “stream.”

### History as “Purgatorio”: The Challenges

My interest in writing Tonia's biography, a woman only few know about, grew out of my fascination with her complex story and my sympathy, even admiration, for her and her strength. While acknowledging my emotional involvement in her story, I still act as a historian, following Tonia's life trajectory

while simultaneously juxtaposing my understanding of particular historical moments with larger dynamics of history. Writing her story meant creating a plot and imposing a linear narrative on her life, with a beginning and an end. Ordering stories—organizing facts, finding references in the context of a master narrative, providing a story with necessary historical explanations—is what historians do because our trade and skills require that of us. But it is also what we do to make sense of the material we work with, to understand the avalanche of facts before they overwhelm us, and to respond to our internal drive and motivation. I can only echo the words of Daniel Mendelsohn, the author of *The Lost: A Search for Six of Six Million*, when he admits that putting facts in order is calming: he felt pain and anxiety when confronted with mass amounts of information that resisted being organized.<sup>17</sup> Likewise, at multiple moments in Tonia's story, imposing a narrative felt like an artificial impulse to control her life when chaos was the main principle. Consequently, at times including longer quotations from Tonia, rather than analyzing her story, felt more appropriate, allowing her to narrate her experiences in her own voice.

The question of how to organize a story and at the same time maintain the voice of the person being written about is crucial in any project centered on individual stories, the danger being that larger historical forces could easily dominate the individual's life.<sup>18</sup> Perhaps equally important is the question of what pushes historians to investigate individual lives. What are they searching for, what motivations drive them, and how do they situate themselves in relation to the story and people they write about? In other words, what is behind our curiosity and voyeurism, both essential factors in the process of reconstructing an individual's past?

The books that have inspired me while researching and reflecting on Tonia's life combine the stories of small groups of largely unknown individuals with transparency regarding the historian's own process and motivation, at least to the extent possible and bearable for readers. One such book is *The Lost*, in which Mendelsohn discusses his research on, or perhaps search for, six members of his family lost in the Holocaust, people whose presence despite absence has dominated his life. In family memory, they were not so much dead as lost because nobody ever spoke about them. From the fragmentary bits and pieces of information still available, he tries to establish what is unknown to somehow tame what is unknowable.

Ivan Jablonka's book *A History of the Grandparents I Never Had* is similar to Mendelsohn's in that it focuses on recovering his own family's past. He conveys his motivation with an existential urgency: "These anonymous souls belong not to me but to us all. Before they are erased forever, I felt it urgent to recover their traces, the footprints they left on life, the involuntary evidence of their time on earth."<sup>19</sup> Both books promote a romantic concept of history as imbuing historians with skills and the ability to return past experiences to the present, but the voices of both authors are also mediated by an awareness of their roles and positionality in the process of retrieving the past and making it available to readers. Mendelsohn's work, with dense references to antiquity, reflections on available sources, and the nature of witnessing the Holocaust, implies shifts in interest from a desire to recover the voices of the past to the fundamental significance of historical knowledge for us all, an imperative that is as powerfully illuminating as it is paralyzing. "For those who are compelled by their natures always to be looking back at what has been, rather than forward into the future," he states, "the great danger is tears, the unstoppable weeping that the Greeks, if not the author of Genesis, knew was not only a pain but a narcotic pleasure, too: a mournful contemplation so flawless, so crystalline, that it can, in the end, immobilize you."<sup>20</sup>

In that reading, history as a desire to immerse oneself in someone's past is about the present and the urge not so much to understand as to bring order and meaning to chaos. Historian Ewa Domańska, although in a more theory-driven context, writes about historians' attraction to tragedy in history as providing catharsis: writing about people and facts from the past is a process that conjures a new world. She notes that "the most important moments of becoming of the world, the moments when reality (and the past) reveals its true face, are moments of trauma, which is a wound inflicted on the world and people." Domańska implies something palpable in our attraction to tragedy and the people who experienced it. "The tragedy contains mourning over the history of a man (humanity), and history—the tragic nature of human purgatory. In both cases it is about cleansing. History (historical writing) is like a *purgatorio*. In history, unlike life, however, people get another chance when their deeds are brought to justice."<sup>21</sup> This comment clearly refers to Dante's *Divine Comedy*, which perceived purgatory as a relatively creative space, not necessarily a space of eternal waiting between heaven and hell. Rather than being an unnavigated space, it is liminal space that we cross to search and

receive “expiatory purification” or, to put it in less threatening terms, to search for catharsis, for self-enlightenment.<sup>22</sup>

Another element in the trope of searching for and retrieving stories of those lost in the past is the lives of ordinary people whose existence is somehow inseparably linked with that of the writers. For Mendelsohn, his search begins with his physical resemblance to one of his lost family members, suggesting a search for his own identity, “his face in the face of the Loss.”<sup>23</sup> For Jablonka, it is a search for the grandparents he never knew but whose life choices determined his own life in Paris. In another book, *East West Street*, international law specialist Philippe Sands explores the life of his maternal grandparents while arriving at a different understanding of his own past.<sup>24</sup> Finally, Katja Petrowskaja, in her part memoir, part family history *Maybe Esther*, poses an important half-statement and half-question: “maybe,” as an adverb that permanently describes the scope of silences around her family but also evocatively describes the twenty-first-century condition of people whose past is buried in history yet whose lives are closely intertwined with history.<sup>25</sup> An important caveat is appropriate here: none of the above-mentioned authors are professional historians, which may give them courage to stretch the disciplinary boundaries to use history as a tool for a deeply existential and personal search. They walk the fine line between existential urgency, their own lives, and the lives they write about, but they do it with caution in reading the sources, academic honesty for the claims and comparisons they bring forward, and a commendable sense of responsibility for the representations of the various lives they have taken upon themselves.

The strong presence of autobiography, even if indirect, in many history texts, especially biographies, has been noted by scholars for years. For example, Lee states:

It has been argued—especially in the modernist period . . .—that all biography is a form of autobiography. Even biographers who resist the notion that the story they are telling has anything to do with them, and put themselves in the narrative as little as possible, have to admit that their choice of subject has been made for a reason. . . . We write from a certain position, constructed by our history, nationality, race, gender, class, education, beliefs. More specifically, there is likely to be some shared experience between the writer and the subject.<sup>26</sup>

Sociologist Aneta Ostaszewska writes evocatively about the place of subjectivity in academic writing. In her view, the road of writing and researching is a road to (self-)discovery. She argues that objectivity means “situated knowledge,” resulting from looking from a particular social perspective. Furthermore, she maintains that reflexivity on individual experience and all the factors that condition it are elements of our feminist—and I would argue also academic—imagination and therefore should become part of our methodology.<sup>27</sup> Thinking about a woman who struggled most of her life with fragmentation, mobility, and choices brings me to reflect on the affinity between us and the heroes of our stories, the people we find fascinating, who teach us with their lives about our own lives.

Only toward the end of the research did I gain the courage to admit that my autobiography had played a role in this project.<sup>28</sup> My own experiences as a feminist, scholar, migrant, and mother who daily struggles with solitude and a desire to make the world around me “home” were elements of the story I had set out to tell. Some moments made this crystal clear. One was that people involved in this project kept calling me Tonia. At one point, two of my research assistants—Meryl Lavenant and Taylorann Lenze—emailed me saying that they needed to be careful not to call me Tonia. Ruth Fivaz-Silbermann, a researcher from the University of Geneva, did this as well. Taylorann is a friend who knows me well; Meryl and Ruth do not. They were getting to know me through Tonia’s life, and in their minds I became associated with Tonia. For some reason, this association was pleasing. Does it mean that I identify with Tonia? No, but the intensity with which certain moments of her life lived in my mind somehow transpired in my relationships with the people who helped make this book possible.

Willingly or not, I read some moments of Tonia’s experiences through my own experience. One such moment was particularly salient. It was December 2019, and I was traveling to Dearborn, Michigan, where I work as a participant in the Inside-Out Prison Exchange Theory Group. On the morning of a scheduled visit, I was enjoying coffee in my favorite café in Dearborn, waiting for the time to pass. I was looking forward to wishing a good holiday season to the group. There is nothing like the holidays to remind us of the importance of various communities that sustain us through life. While waiting, I noticed an email from Amicale de Vernet, an organization located at the site of one of the camps where Sioma, Tonia’s husband, was confined during the war, a place

Tonia had attempted to visit. The email contained her denied application to visit. Almost precisely at the same moment, my visit to Macomb was canceled due to some circumstances that had decreased the number of guards. The reasoning seemed trivial, but my opinion was of course irrelevant. Here I held both Tonia's and my thwarted attempts to visit the imprisoned. Of course, the situations differed, but there was something in that moment that made me think of my own investment in stories replete with individual vulnerabilities and negotiations between individual needs and institutional barriers. Tonia's story was uniquely intense yet ordinary in the way it also evoked an anger at the coldness of state institutions. At this particular moment, the story was also very personal: it reminded me of my own painful limited ability to protest circumstances I disagree with. Is writing about injustice akin to activism?

There is always a moment when a story begins speaking to a historian on a personal level. In a conversation with a curator at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum about his book *East West Street*, Sands evocatively explains that the title refers to a street where many walked. Hersch Lauterpacht, a human rights advocate, had lived in Lwów near Sands's grandmother, Malka.<sup>29</sup> The last street she walked on toward Treblinka, where she died, was the same street on which Bella and Joseph Lemkin walked. Bella and Joseph were the parents of Raphael Lemkin, another man Sands studies. They all died in the same place. Sands's grandmother's life is thus "bookended" by the men he studies. Reflecting on this bizarre coincidence, Sands comments, "You could not invent that. You would not believe it. I discover these points of connections . . . that situate you in that place."<sup>30</sup> Was it a coincidence? Of course. But the questions remain: How do we make sense of these coincidences, and how do they guide us through our research and seemingly voyeuristic attempt to uncover certain lives?

The "points of connections" that Sands mentions increase our affinity to the researched people/topics and push us to think about what initially led us to a given topic. Tonia's story is the story of a woman who constantly negotiated various roles and vulnerabilities but also insisted on the need for morality and values in the public world. Toward the end of her life, Tonia began doubting her belief in communism, but her insistence on the necessity to fight for the collective good beyond pure individualism remained steady. Along these lines, for me personally, her unwavering belief means returning to the reasons for her engagement in communism, which at a particular moment in

history was life-sustaining for many. For people of my generation, who grew up at the beginning of so-called postcommunism, at a time when the Western world blamed communism for all the evil in the world, unraveling the complex motivations of people who supported ideologies aimed at healing the world is important. It carries redemptive qualities.

My decision to call Tonia by her first name also requires editorial commentary. The argument goes that a man would never be called by his first name in a biography because that is not how we would address him. Despite their life trajectory, most men create an air of seriousness that pushes one to think about them more formally. Yet in my mind Tonia Lechtman was “Tonia”—that is how I think about her. She organized her life around friends and intimate relationships. Reading her letters, I felt like one of her friends, one who tries to understand her choices and empathize with her in her struggles. To me, she is Tonia, and that is how I have presented her to you—intimately, personally, ordinarily.<sup>31</sup>

### “Maybe” and the Illusion of Sources

Multiple sources are available to tell Tonia’s story. I first encountered a 1994 interview with Dorota Dowgiałło, the daughter of the first ambassador from postcommunist Poland to Israel. The available version lacks the questions that were posed, so we know little about the process and intentions of the person who collected the interview. Since the conversation took place two years before Tonia’s death, it certainly created a space for Tonia to reflect on her life. While reading it one cannot help wondering if Tonia ever considered writing an autobiography. Interviews “suggest a strong, consistent, unitary voice looking back in time, in control of a narrative.”<sup>32</sup> Her interview with Dowgiałło hence plays the role of an autobiography that Tonia dictated, perhaps curated by Dowgiałło.

In my attempt to understand the story, long conversations with Tonia’s daughter, Vera Lechtman, and Tonia’s son and his wife, Marcel and Henryka (Henia) Lechtman, followed. Our conversations began and still continue in kitchens in Tel Aviv, where Vera lives, and in Stockholm, where Marcel and Henia reside. Tonia’s children’s input into this book is significant; this special kind of cooperation is deeply linked to the intuition that comes with children’s intimacy to their mother.

The biggest draw was Tonia's private documents and letters, in the possession of her children. I call it "Tonia's closet," almost a living being with a heart, mind, and guts. The richness of this collection is one of the most convincing arguments for writing this book. The cache of photos and letters seems to be never-ending. Some of the documents are as distant as the medical certificate of her grandfather, Tobiasz Bialer, stating that her father, Aron, had chickenpox when he was nine years old. The touch and smell of these old documents help us practically feel the family's presence. This feeling reminds me of the romantic absorption with which Natalie Zemon Davis wrote about historians' fetish for archives: "Absorbed as we are, we experience the wonder of the register when it finally comes, its look, the touch of its binding, and the feel of its paper or parchment. We struggle with handwriting difficult to decipher and are relieved when the reading is easy. We turn the pages, hoping for discovery, not just for what we planned ahead of time, but . . . for the unexpected, the surprise."<sup>33</sup>

Most of the sources in Tonia's closet are letters. The first letters go back to the 1920s. The most intense correspondence begins in 1937 and continues for four decades. Her friends were becoming her family's friends, who had no choice but to be pulled into a conversation about Tonia's life. The letters mention mysterious friends, family members, events, and trips, which show the richness of her life. Life continues uninterrupted in the bliss of the present, awareness of the past, and uncertainty of the future. The letters are mostly in Polish and German, with multiple fragments of Yiddish and Hebrew. Over time, German disappears, and Polish becomes dominant, while Hebrew and Yiddish remain.<sup>34</sup> Over time, Tonia's closet became the depository of other memories. For many of Tonia's friends, her house became the best place to store their letters, writing, and deathbed memoirs. Was she a person seen as able to keep secrets?

Besides letters, her closet includes collections of photos in beautiful albums documenting the pre-Holocaust Jewish world of prewar Poland. Many carry images of people impossible to identify. In the 1970s and in accordance with the Israeli school curriculum, her granddaughter, Anna Rajf-Ligęza, wrote down her grandmother's story; her project helps to return from oblivion the oldest family members whose faces are documented in these old photos. Historian Anna Landau-Czajka asserts that surviving sources from the war usually push us to idolize the past.<sup>35</sup> Looking at the photos of a world

that disappeared with the Holocaust makes for an easy idolization. People lived normal lives. Vacation photos depict smiling faces rather than locations the family visited. The 1920s was a time of increasing leisure, and that leisure is well documented in Tonia's closet. The photos do not end in the 1920s: through the war and postwar years, Tonia kept getting photos taken of her and her children. Many of these photos made it to her family back in Tel Aviv and ultimately became part of the rich depository of Tonia's closet.

But there is more in her closet: family porcelain from Łódź, Rosenthal porcelain from postwar Poland, a collection of graphics Sioma collected in one of the camps and Tonia smuggled out. The depth and richness of its contents took my breath away. The photos as well as material witnesses to Tonia's story work as Barthesian punctum, inviting a special relationship with the owner. Her closet is evidence of historical self-awareness, first developed by Tonia's parents, perhaps even grandparents, and curated by Tonia in the last decades of her life. It was then passed on to Vera, who held it under lock and key while turning it into a depository of Tonia's past. In recent years, the collection was organized by Marcel, who used it to replace his lack of memory. Eventually, he decided to give most of this collection to Polin: The Museum of the Polish Jewry, located in Warsaw, where it is left to researchers' and curators' imaginations.<sup>36</sup> Family decisions about what to keep and what to share showcase how memory of the past evolves through time within one family. Whenever possible, I tried to comment on these particular struggles with family memory throughout the text.

The family archive provides a sense of wholeness. This contrast between personal and official is most visible when these family documents are juxtaposed with state-produced sources—for example, police documents that appear especially fragmentary, as if cutting people out of their daily lives. The family archives do not necessarily tell the truth, but as Michel Foucault would say, they tell of the truth as they expose an individual wedged between relationships of power and herself.<sup>37</sup> There is no way to access "truth," but the juxtaposition of various sources helps to confirm that sources are impossible to understand outside of their audience and that the confusion or tensions we recognize as emerging between various voices speak to the complexity of an individual life.

The extent to which various states interfered in Tonia's life is impressive or perhaps intimidating. With the help of friends and research assistants, I

found traces of Tonia in the state archives of Poland, Israel, France, and Switzerland—in each country in which she lived. French archives presented me with bits and pieces, appropriate to her presence in this country as, first, an illegal immigrant.

Absolutely fascinating for me, as a Polish historian accustomed to sources gone missing—due to war, chaos, shifting borders, communism, neglect, and displacement—were the Swiss archives and the scrupulous tendency of the administration of different levels to note her whereabouts. It reminds me of historian Arlette Farge’s poetic words: “The judicial archive . . . makes it harder to grasp. It is excessive and overwhelming, like a spring tide, and avalanche, or a flood. When working in the archive you will often find yourself thinking of this exploration as a dive, a submersion, perhaps even a drowning.”<sup>38</sup> In reality, the experience was overwhelming. I often got lost switching back and forth between three languages, unfamiliar administrative levels, and stamps and signatures of various importance, which I was unable to recognize and whose meanings, outside the absurd Kafkaesque bureaucracies, would have been lost on me if it were not for Ruth Fivaz-Silbermann, whose help in deciphering, explaining, and keeping me sane was invaluable.

Finally, the biggest collection comes from the Polish Institute of National Remembrance (Instytut Pamięci Narodowej, IPN), which houses thousands of pages of minutes of numerous interrogations of Tonia by Polish security personnel after they arrested her in 1949. The questions she was asked often seem deprived of logic, yet in the context of her life story they serve double functions: to help us to understand the confusion and cruelty of her imprisonment in postwar Poland and also to establish some elements of her life. There is nothing like judicial archives to make real the harsh reality of police repression—archives that document the rough traces of lives never expected to be told in the way they were.<sup>39</sup> Paradoxically that harshness brings a level of detail that would otherwise have been lost. These documents helped me reconstruct events and also hear Tonia’s voice, especially when she asserted something surprising in light of other sources.

All sources are partial. There’s a translucence, not transparency; they present only a fragment of a reality. How I present them here may seem based on the dualism between personal and state-produced—secrets revealed and secrets forced to be revealed and documented. Being drawn to

the sensuality of the documents, I tend to recognize myself in the words of Tomasz Kietliński, a political philosopher and cultural and social analyst, who, in a book of stories and photos that evoke a little-known face of a Polish woman, writes, “Archives are the secrets of existence enchanted in the secrets of images and texts. . . . Archives are senses and sensuality of wardrobes, drawers—real and virtual, visual and written, thought and written, spoken and concealed. . . . The archive is a multivoiced, open, process, infinity.”<sup>40</sup> Our emotion-hungry and voyeuristic nature should always be in check when in contact with the bottomless potential archives open. Archives do not provide ready answers but rather suggestions or insights into an individual experience, the process of creating an individual as a family being, a lover, a state subject, an individual sometimes lost in the overproduction of the documents but ultimately also saved thanks to the same overproduction. I would like to end my reflection on sources with the words of Farge:

The allure of the archives entails a roaming voyage through the words of others, and a search for a language that can rescue their relevance. It may entail a voyage through the words today, with the perhaps somewhat unreasonable conviction that we write history not just to tell it, but to anchor a departed past to our words and bring about an “exchange among the living.” We write to enter into an unending conversation about humanity and forgetting, origins and death.<sup>41</sup>

To continue with a metaphor of fish in a stream, archives tell something about the currents in the water cycle, instruments in groundwater replenishment, and corridors for fish and wildlife migration: they help us understand the stream of Tonia’s life. They also say something about history itself, the urgency with which historians peruse archives, as if in search of meaning and potential redemption. My experience reflects a specific modern experience, when much is delegated to online searches that deprive us of the touch, the sensuality that archives offer. In this particular case, it also reflects the reality of COVID-19, which turned my research year into a shutdown in my parent’s house with a view of the walnut trees I climbed as a child. The internet and the good will of many people made finishing this book possible but also made for a unique—or perhaps modern—research experience.

## Traveling with Tonia

Tonia's life was amazingly mobile. Hers was the life of a woman who continued crossing various real and imaginary boundaries, and from the beginning I felt that the internal structure of this book would need to reflect that road. As a result, chapters are organized chronologically, or, I should say, her travels created a compulsion to organize the chapters that way.

The first chapter, covering her life in Łódź, provides background on a young Polish Jewish woman. The second is devoted to her maturing as a communist, which coincided with her first major move, to Palestine. The third chapter accompanies Tonia in Paris, where she migrated before the war. The fourth chapter is about her life in France outside of Paris, when, in contrast to her Parisian life as a refugee, her life was dominated by the condition of being an unwanted Jewish refugee. The fifth chapter turns to Tonia's life in Switzerland, to which she fled from the Nazis in France. The sixth chapter is set in Poland after the war. Her return was physical and mental, to a world she hoped would reconcile her private and public lives, giving her a chance to create a home for her children. The last chapter briefly reconstructs her life after she left prison and focuses on her communism as viewed by her children.

In the book's conclusion, I return to Tonia's life historiographically, engaging in the question I skipped here—namely, the meaning her life has for the various historiographic topics that emerge. I end with a return to the question about ordinariness versus extraordinariness. The conclusion hence ends with another larger historiographical question about what we lose (or gain) when we give up the urge to insist on someone's uniqueness yet read that experience through myriad, chaotic, and revealing choices and opportunities.