

History in Focus

8. Art and History + Memoir of a Hijacking

Wednesday, November 2, 2022

Daniel Story

I'm Daniel Story. This is *History in Focus*, a podcast by the *American Historical Review*. In just a bit, we'll take you into a conversation between Kate Brown and Martha Hodes about Martha's History Unclassified article, "As If I Wasn't There: Writing from a Child's Memory," in which she explores what it was like writing about her childhood experience as a passenger on a plane that was hijacked in September 1970 by members of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine. You'll definitely want to stay tuned for that. But first, we delve into the complex but generative intersections between history and art. That's an area of inquiry featured in the AHR's September issue in the History Lab section, in a conversation between two internationally influential voices in the art world, curator Zoe Butt and art critic Lee Weng-Choy. In a moment, you'll hear my conversation with Weng. Zoe, we should note, wasn't able to join us for the very understandable reason that she was in the final stages of completing her PhD dissertation. Just before we dive into my conversation with Weng, a word with AHR editor, Mark Bradley.

So Mark, the September issue elevates this question of what can historians learn from the practices of artists, and the way that artists deal with history. That comes in the context of the History Lab section, which is still pretty new for the AHR. So maybe let's start there. Remind us, if you would, what the History Lab section is all about and how this new emphasis on art and historical method fits in.

Mark Bradley

So the September issue will be the third edition of the AHR's new History Lab. And the idea of the Lab is to open up the voices of who are doing history in the pages of the journal. So we've been very good about capturing the work of people who write articles. We've been very good about capturing books, because those are the kinds of scholarship that we've been reviewing for almost 100 years. It's clearer and clearer that there are people doing history all over the place. And they're doing it as community activists, they're doing it in the academy from spaces other than history, and they're doing it in a variety of spaces, again, outside what we think of as the normal kind of boundaries of the ways in which history are written. For instance, the first History Lab led with this really wonderful project about historical smells. And it's a team of

interdisciplinary scholars. There are historians there, there are social and cultural historians who are anchoring the project. But it involves curators, it involves heritage people, and, importantly, it involves hard scientists. So there are people who are working with computer science skills on the project, big data people, again, you need chemists, if you're going to be reconstructing scents from a long time ago. And so that project was a nice way of saying that, really, across the hard sciences, the social sciences, and the humanities, people are engaged in one form or another and doing history. Over time, we want to lift up the variety of ways in which humanists of all kinds are thinking about doing history as well. And that's in some ways where this September issue lands. So this new feature that is thinking about art as historical method emerges from an observation that many have shared over the last decade or so that contemporary art has had increasingly not only a focus around historical themes, but contemporary artists behaving like historians and interested in historical method in one form or another. And so artists in the archives, artists doing oral history, and that those methods are fundamentally shaping the kinds of work that they produce. And this is happening with contemporary artists in the United States, but it's really happening all over the world. And so, we want to introduce readers to what it is artists are doing in the historical frame. But it is part, again, of a kind of larger effort to think about, at some point, we're going to be talking about graphic novelists and the way in which they're using history. We're going to be talking, we hope, with poets and architects and playwrights over time about the ways in which they're thinking about history. So this art piece, again, launches something that will appear, we hope, with more frequency in future editions of the History Lab.

Daniel Story

And kicking things off in the September issue, we have a conversation.

Mark Bradley

Yeah, so we're lucky in this first installation of the artists historical method series to be in conversation with two internationally recognized curators: Zoe Butt and Weng-Choy Lee, both of whom their work and their practice is centered in Southeast Asia but really have a kind of global footprint in terms of the kind of work they do. One of the sites where readers and others can see what contemporary art is doing is sometimes outside of the museum space itself in biennales, triennales, these are international exhibitions that are held on some sort of semi regular period. And Zoe and Weng were part of the Sharjah Biennial in 2019. Sharjah is something that, in particular, is interested in contemporary artists from what we would call the Global South. And so that, in some ways, drives the kinds of work that come into that. But Zoe and Weng were particularly interested in thinking about history and the use of history by contemporary artists in the projects that they were curating for Sharjah in 2019. And so it

struck me that they would be ideal people to open this up in some ways to think both theoretically and more practically about what it means to be doing history in the space of artistic practice.

Lee Weng-Choy

Hi, I'm Lee Weng-Choy (my family name is Lee). I am in Kuala Lumpur now, but I lived in Singapore for quite a long time. And before then I was in the United States. In an upcoming issue of American Historical Review, Zoe Butt and I have a conversation. Zoe is currently based in Thailand, but for a long time she also lived in Vietnam, and was based there and work there. So it's an interesting comparison, me being from Singapore and her sort of being from Vietnam. While I sort of talked about myself as an art critic, Zoe's the one who's sort of the curator, the exhibition maker.

Daniel Story

I wonder if it'd be interesting to start out by just describing a little bit about how the ball got rolling between you and Zoe and Mark that led to this piece in the AHR. Like, how you kind of connected with each other. I mean, you and Zoe have known each other I think for a while.

Lee Weng-Choy

So Zoe and I have known each other for a very long time. I invited her to Singapore in the early aughts for a workshop. So that's how we got to meet. And we've always kept in touch. It's just more recently that we've really worked together and gotten to know each other. Mark I know through a mutual friend, an art historian who teaches at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, Nora Taylor. So when he was coming to Southeast Asia, Nora sort of put him in touch with us. And then so you know we met a couple of times, and sometimes we've met together. And then there was one time where University of Chicago did a project, or a workshop, in Hong Kong and Zoe and I came for that. I know the conversations that I've had with Mark were his interests in sort of thinking about the profession of history and the way he's found really some interesting things by looking at contemporary art in Southeast Asia. So you know, we had very, very productive conversations there. I always have a great respect for historians, both historians and art historians, but I don't think of myself as as one. So for me, it's also a really productive conversation. I think about history a lot. But I don't actually practice it in that way. I don't write histories.

Daniel Story

The other thing I wanted to ask you about, if you're interested in expounding on it, is the title of your piece—"We Are Not The Stories We Tell Ourselves: Weaving Different Registers of

Memory and the Arts." That's a really interesting and maybe somewhat provocative kind of statement: we are not the stories we tell ourselves. What did you and Zoe mean, or what do you mean by that?

Lee Weng-Choy

Well, I kind of want to foreground two artists, right? Ho Tzu Nyen (Ho being the family name) and Tuan Andrew Nguyen. Both of these guys were in the Sharjah Biennial that Zoe curated. Tuan Andrew is Vietnamese and Tzu Nyen is Singaporean. And I've known Tzu Nyen for a long time and Zoe has been very, very close with Tuan Andrew for a long time. We did this conference, and they were in a session together. So by having these sort of artists there, you know, a lot of the examples that I'd like to talk about, I always want to sort of come back to the artist, to artistic practice. And so the title itself is a good way of getting to this. So Tzu Nyen was in the 2011 Venice Biennale. I was invited to contribute to the exhibition catalog, and I did this overview of some of his earlier works, where Tzu Nyen is an artist who deals with history a lot. And one of the things that I've always found writing about Tzu Nyen is not only, of course, is there this issue of, you know, dealing with historical material, but I always find that I ended up writing about desire in his work. So in some ways, if you think about the title (we are not the stories we tell ourselves), there's some desire questions there. Right, you know, somehow we want to to be something, you know, there's that thing implied. So this is a little bit this kind of more provocative, generalizing, abstract kind of voice. We are not the stories we tell ourselves. "The problem isn't that try as we might to be honest and fair, the meanings and interpretations we impose upon our lives never equate with reality. History may be imperfect and approximate. But there's a reason we haven't taken up the urging of the band the Talking Heads to stop making sense. We can't help ourselves. We are storytellers by nature." And it's not so much that, you know, there's this gap, right. But we don't know what the stories teach us. It's like, we don't even know how to listen to ourselves. And I think that's kind of the schism I wanted to introduce. You know, so we tell ourselves stories, we know that memory isn't perfect. But we also don't know how to listen to our stories. And this also comes back to, I think, a theme throughout Zoe and my conversation is about listening. So it's not just about saying, I have something to say, but I know how to listen. And we are finding that artists are very good at listening, because they can listen in between, in ways, and this is where also the fictional comes in. Because you're weaving stories. So what does the story actually tell us? It's not always the stuff on the surface, it's what's between, underneath, and what are all the kinds of subtext. So that's where that came out. And that's how we sort of latched on to that as the title.

Daniel Story

Do you want to tell us a little bit more about Tuan Andrew's work, I think that maybe you guys talk about the piece, *The Spector of the Ancestors Becoming*.

Lee Weng-Choy

So, you know what's really interesting about this work, during the French colonial period, there were a lot of Senegalese in Vietnam fighting for the French. Now, of course, as things happen, you know, these people meet local Vietnamese people. And, you know, there were a lot of couples, and there were a lot of children. And when the war was over, you would have families that would be broken up by that. So, you know, sometimes the Senegalese men took the children back to Senegal with them. Very rarely did the whole families go back. And so this is a history that's very underserved as it were, right? So Tuan Andrew sort of discovered all this kind of stuff. And he did a lot of, you know, trips to Senegal to begin meeting people to have their stories. But what's so interesting is that how he then decided to present this work. So he would go back and meet the Senegalese children with Vietnamese mothers who have lost touch with Vietnam. So he tracked down a lot of them. And so for the Sharjah Biennial, the work is a four channel video work. What he did was he would have someone narrate the story, and then he would have young actors play out the parts.

Brief audio clip from The Spector of the Ancestors Becoming

What also I think was so interesting was that a lot of the scenes that are depicted are imagined scenes, for instance, of the Senegalese father speaking with the Vietnamese woman, and they're both young, and the child is much older. So it's also really interesting to see, you know, what generation does and what recall and memory does. So it's a really interesting presentation—screens that will show documentation, show archival photos, then have the kind of fictional element and then have the memoir element. So that multi juxtaposition, I think, was very important for Tuan Andrew to also show the kind of complexity of how stories get constructed and how they're always competing for our attention in multiple dimensions.

Daniel Story

I wanted to tackle the question quite head on, this question of what can historians learn from the ways that the artists, or the artists in particular that you're focusing, on deal with history. I wonder if there's something from Tuan Andrew's piece to tease out? What do you imagine historians can take away?

Lee Weng-Choy

Yeah, keeping in mind, you know, the way that Tuan Andrew is telling this particular story, or facilitating this particular story, there's the discovery of these facts and making them much more visible. So shining a light, which is what everybody does, historians, artists. But I think one of the issues for Zoe in our conversation is also to talk about the conditions of history in places like Vietnam. And the problem is that so much of the sourcing, you know, official history, in Vietnam is very problematic. It's very censored. How do you actually begin to do that kind of research? And so she found that artists, because they have that kind of permission to be much more fluid and mobile and multiple and ironic with the way that they use archival material, the way they recall, the way they tried to tell stories, sometimes they found ways of avoiding censorship. Of course, sometimes they run into that, but they're always dealing with that rather than the academies which have those kinds of problems. So those kinds of conditions are the way that she felt that the work that was being done by artists, and thinking about historical issues, and you know, sure, you know, she finds that in the local context of Vietnam, but then her research over the years, just as a curator, an international curator, she find so much of that, those kinds of resonances elsewhere. Erika Tan, we also mentioned her, and she's Singapore born, but she's, you know, spent a lot of her life in the UK. And the work that we sort of talk is this kind of categorizing, of course, Singapore's famous for Raffles being there, setting up the museum, really sort of categorizing. So, you know, all these kind of colonial technologies of the category, of the map, of the dictionary. So you can sort of see that there's this throughline of people really thinking about the tools of organizing knowledge, and then playing with that. And one of the fascinating things is that for a museum, they needed to cast a man. And so they got the janitor, and they cast him, and what Erika talks about as the story of how this person ends up, you know, being in the museum, but he's never sort of credited. He's just used as a body. So this kind of idea of repatriating objects from the British Museum, from the Elgin Marbles, to everything. So you know, this idea of repatriating this body. So, you know, her work sort of touches on that quite a bit. Artists tell these really interesting stories where you have such interesting intersections about capital and coloniality and the the museum. And I was thinking about W. J. T. Mitchell in his book *What Do Pictures Want*. And he was quoting Nietzsche and saying Nietzsche didn't want to just have the kind of iconoclastic, you know, completely refuse and refute. But rather, you sort of like hit the icon with a tuning fork. So you're sounding it, this idea of playing with it. So there isn't that complete refusal and kind of rejection, but how do you then play and embrace? And this is a strategy that I think a lot of artists, and working with historical themes, do that, you know, that introduction of play. It's both an embrace and a critique, but it isn't this outright refusal because it's material, and it's material that's gotten under their skin.

Daniel Story

You and Zoe spend a decent amount of time talking about fiction and anecdote in the conversation. Is there anything more you want to say about either of those, or both of those?

Lee Weng-Choy

What I like about anecdote is that anecdote often functions also to resonate. It isn't necessarily like the counter example. And it shouldn't be used as the paradigmatic examples. So you know, so many figures always trying to get attention. So they'd have to be unique. So they'll, they'll mobilize very quickly around some kind of anecdotal evidence that they have. And just say, like, Southeast Asian artists are always interested in tradition versus, you know, contemporaneity, those kinds of formulations. And I find that works if you want to have a show, but if you're arguing too hard, then sometimes it's, you can see that your evidence is just too cherry picked, right? So the anecdote has that kind of relationship to master narratives, where it sort of sounds them. So the careful use of anecdote, the careful use of fiction, it really matters, the application. You can be very reckless with, with that. So, you know, obviously, fictionalizing history can be very deeply problematic. So the use of, the how becomes so, so crucial. And that how comes back to listening very, very carefully.

Daniel Story

Yeah. And another thing related to this that you guys push on a little bit is the notion of what is allowed to be seen as "authentic evidence." This is where, you know, historians or artists might differ a bit, or have some level of debate, but maybe that's a productive debate.

Lee Weng-Choy

Yeah, besides that, I think sometimes artists will get ahead of themselves, you know, they, they can imagine a particular way and particular intervention. So you know, they often say with fiction is, these aren't facts, but there's truth here, right? You know, this, that kind of distinction. So sometimes the facts aren't right, but the truth is there. Not to always be on the side of artists, but also to have a critical relationship with artists, sometimes you can see that they're too close to something and they really feel that they have spoken the truth, even though they know they have to manipulate facts and so forth. One of the points that Zoe really wants to make is the idea of the arts as knowledge production, and to recognize that. So there's so much of a way of saying that, yes, you know, they've done this particular kind of work, and we can really see how this is embodied knowledge and a kind of way so that the historical contextualization and qualification and footnoting that might happen, there is where you can see that they can supplement complement each other very well. And even though there are debates about okay, yes, you know, this artists, you know, these are the problems with the

record there and, and correcting the facts, or that you can sort of still see how it's mobilized various other kinds of ways to recall what's going on or even allude not necessarily directly refer, but allude when they're not laying it out and talking about it so specifically. So there isn't any real kind of conflict with citation and framing because of that much more evocative way of referring to the material to mobilize an imagination about history in that way. And then, of course, the very analytical work of thinking, okay, how, you know, if we mobilize an imagination in this way, what is the story telling? How does that sort of sit with the other kinds of historical narrative and argumentation historians have done. So that becomes a very kind of interesting kind of tension.

Daniel Story

Any closing thoughts, or things that you hope historians reading this conversation will take away from your piece?

Lee Weng-Choy

Maybe one sort of takeaway is just to think about both Zoe and I as facilitators, you know, working with artists, who then also facilitate a variety of materials and voices as well. So there's been, there's sort of that sense of that role. I talk about listening a lot. I don't think I'm a naturally good listener, I think I'm just very committed ideologically to it, and all sorts of things. And so that sense of the multiplicity of voices, and to facilitate voices in conversation and also to listen to them, and by whatever means that we have to amplify those conversations or those multiple voices. So I think that's the practice that Zoe and I have, to the extent that historians might be interested in that practice in the specific context that we have. I hope it's productive.

Daniel Story

Well, thanks very much Weng for your time, and please do give my best to Zoe.

Lee Weng-Choy

I will. Thanks so much, Daniel. This has been a great pleasure.

Daniel Story

In September 1970, members of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine hijacked three airplanes. Historian Martha Hodes, just 12 years old at the time, along with her 13-year-old sister, was a passenger on one of those planes. All the passengers, including Martha and her sister, were released unharmed. Martha, for her part, didn't talk much about the experience for many years. As we'll hear, that began to change after the September 11th attacks brought these memories more to the surface. Now, Martha has taken on the project of writing about the

hijacking in more depth. Her forthcoming book, *My Hijacking: A Personal History of Forgetting and Remembering* will be published by Harper Collins. Her article, "As If I Wasn't There: Writing From a Child's Memory," about the experience of revisiting these events, appears in the History Unclassified section of the June issue of the AHR. Martha spoke about the article, the book, and her experience with AHR consulting editor Kate Brown.

Martha Hodes

My name is Martha Hodes. I am a Professor of History at New York University. I'm also serving as the interim director of the Coleman Center for Scholars and Writers at the New York Public Library for two years. The article we're discussing is called "As If I Wasn't There: Writing From a Child's Memory." And the article is about my forthcoming book called *My Hijacking: A Personal History of Forgetting and Remembering*, and it's being published by Harper Collins. The essay is about the process of writing about a world historical event in which my family was caught up when I was 12 years old. It's about the hijacking of three planes in September 1970. The hijackers were members of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine. They hoped to trade the passengers and crew for Palestinian prisoners. I was 12 years old at the time, a passenger on one of the planes. I was traveling with my 13-year-old sister, unaccompanied by adults. We were returning to New York from Tel Aviv and were held hostage in the Jordan desert inside the airplane for a week. From there, the essay is about how I faced the challenges of writing about childhood memories and childhood emotions. And to solve the challenge, in the essay, I look to other scholars and writers. I scrutinize their approaches in writing about their own lives, I consider the kinds of language they used in writing about their own feelings. And then, I guess, the larger project concerns not simply scholars writing memoirs, but scholars understanding their own lives and memories of those lives in a deep historical context. But the essay overall, I'd say, is about how to think about ourselves as historical actors. I write about myself as someone from the past, whose emotions I couldn't access. But then because that person is myself, I also had to face the emotions of my grown up historian self writing about that child.

Kate Brown

After years of suppressing the memory of your hijacking as a child, why did you suddenly decide to write a book about it?

Martha Hodes

It took me almost 50 years to come back to this event and begin to research and write it. I guess, that after so much time, I wanted to know more. I had written, as a historian, books about other people's lives and other people's grief. And I guess after decades of never talking

about it with my sister—she and I were both there—we broached the subject with each other after 9/11. It was the first day of school at NYU, and I was on my way to class when I saw the second plane hit from behind. So I didn't see the plane come in. But I was standing on the other side with many people on the sidewalk. So what I saw was the orange ball of fire, the thought of being inside the plane with all the chaos and everything that was happening was very triggering for my sister and for me. Before 9/11 I hadn't really talked about the hijacking much, and then I found myself telling people about it, that this had happened to me. I think one of the main triggers for me was that in the 9/11 planes, we know from the people who had cell phones that the hijackers promised that nobody would be harmed, and then everybody died. Our hijackers promised the same thing, that they wouldn't harm us, and they didn't. Nobody died in September 1970 hijackings, not to say it wasn't a very traumatic and fearful experience. But there was something about the 9/11 hijackers making that same promise that was very hard for me to process. And that made it very hard for me not to think about what had happened to me when I was 12 years old in 1970.

Kate Brown

You do a wonderful job in your essay describing the alienation you felt as you tried to capture your childhood self? Did that process lead you into any insights about the job of trying to figure out the lives of other people's pasts who you research?

Martha Hodes

I think during the process of writing the book, and the article is about writing the book, I don't think I thought that it was alienating as much as just elusive and difficult. My career as a historian helped me figure out how to access that character of the 12 year old girl who felt like a historical actor in the past. That's what we do as historians. So that's what I do as a historian, I recreate the lives of people in the past when we have no access. And so I did something that we do as historians all the time, which I and others have called parallel accounts, where you read accounts of other people who are in the same time in the same place if the person you're writing about hasn't left any records. So of course, in writing the book I read interviews that my fellow hostages gave upon their release and return. I also read many other contextual documents. So just to give a few examples, the International Committee of the Red Cross in Geneva, Switzerland, served as an intermediary negotiating party and also served to address the health needs of the hostages. And so I went to the Red Cross archives in Geneva, and I read all of the health reports that people who had come out to the desert and come on to the planes had written. Richard Nixon was president in 1970. I went to the Nixon Library. I read through everything, from White House situation reports, to transcripts of telephone calls with then National Security Adviser Henry Kissinger. And then other contextual kinds of parallel

accounts were the airline archives. The airline I was on, TWA, doesn't exist anymore, but they have archives. Every member of the crew wrote what were called crew reports. I didn't contact any of our captors, but I did read their writings. Some had written autobiographies. Of course, there were manifestos from the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine from 1970 in the months and weeks surrounding the hijackings. So I also wanted those voices. That was very important to me. There were also interviews that other people had done with them. And also retrospective interviews that some of them had given. So these were my parallel accounts. It made clear to me how much personal accounts, diaries, and letters omit. And of course, historians, we know this, but it was such a firsthand experience of seeing what actors don't record, because part of what I discovered in my research was that although I kept a diary on the plane, and I wrote in it every day, and I have that diary, there was a lot I did not record, because it was too frightening to keep a record of, or at least that's how I see it now. So it was just really fascinating to have an experience of knowing what happened and therefore seeing so clearly what that character in the past had omitted.

Kate Brown

Did you call up anyone who was on the plane with you and talk to them about the experience?

Martha Hodes

To write the book, I did contact fellow hostages. This was 50 years ago, and I was 12. So many of the grown ups I remember are no longer alive. And so that was very sad. But there were a number of people I remembered who I did find, and I did meet with them. It's very important to me to be clear in the book, and in anything I write or say about this, that this is my story. It's not anyone else's. It's certainly not the other hostages. It's not even my sister story. It's my story. But it was amazing to reunite with some of these people to talk about what we remembered. I can't call what I did interviews. What they were were conversations, because we were asking each other What do you remember? What do you remember? They were all conversations, and that's how I cite them in the book. I think what happened for all of us is seeing each other after so long. We're all caught up in the moment. And we were all just so interested in each other's stories that I didn't at all feel self conscious. I don't think any of us did. It was so amazing to me after so long. And of course we remember one another as young and now we're not young anymore. And yet to have those memories of when we're all so young and a different time in place.

Kate Brown

Has researching this book changed the way you view memory and oral testimonies about the past?

Martha Hodes

Following from my previous response, obviously the unreliability of memory. Also the way what I would call reminiscences are unreliable sources. And this reminded me so much, or maybe I should say I learned so much from, my last book, called *Mourning Lincoln*, about personal responses to Lincoln's assassination. And one of the things I realized early along in writing that book was that I wasn't going to be able to use reminiscences of Lincoln's assassination. So the sources I used in that book were real time sources. My favorite example is, Lincoln was shot inside Ford's Theater. As many people know he was carried from Ford's Theater across the street to a boarding house. And if you read all the reminiscences from people who claim to be in Ford's Theater that night, 100 people would have carried Lincoln across the street from the theater to the boarding house. It's not that people are necessarily fabricating or lying, but it's how they reimagine themselves in a traumatic moment or an incident. So what I did for this book was I did use people's retrospective accounts. But I always put first the realtime accounts. What also was so fascinating to me was the way families' stories can turn into scripts. I found in talking to my father that after all these years, he has a number of stories he tells over and over again about the hijacking. One is about going to my school to tell the principal that I was going to be late. Another story that he loves to tell is when we were released and he picked us up at Kennedy Airport, the first thing we said was, Dad, we were so worried about you. And that was a very important story for him, because I think it gave him the sense that we were okay. because we were worried about him. And so memories are what people can tolerate, what people can live with. And I learned that quite deeply in talking with my family and also thinking about the stories that I told about the hijacking. They were largely happy ones. One of the stories that was very important to me was that every so often the commandos would let us out of the plane onto the desert floor and at one point one of the crew members found a rope from the lifeboats and started using it as a jump rope. And then one of the commandos joined in the game with the children and with his heavy boots and his uniform. He was jumping rope with us, and it was a genuinely lovely moment. And that was the kind of moment that I wanted to remember. So those are the kinds of stories that I focused on for all those decades until I returned to the forest. There were certain very frightening memories I didn't record but that I never succeeded in erasing from my own memory. In the AHR article, I talked about this memory of the copilot emerging with a gun at his neck. But because no other hostage saw or recorded that incident, I began to wonder if it was something that I had fabricated. And then after two years of searching, I found the copilot in his late 80s, and we talked about the memory and he helped me understand what that memory was, and that's in the book.

Kate Brown

What did you write in your diary?

Martha Hodes

I described what happened up in the air, but pretty perfunctorily. I wrote things like what they gave us to eat. I listed the people who I had become friends with, although in a 12-year-old fashion, I didn't write down anyone's last name. And I didn't remember most people's last names, although I did eventually come across passenger lists. So I wrote down friends. I wrote down what we ate. I did write down some of the things that were frightening for other people. The commandos took people off the plane, took some of them and off the plane and took them to an unknown destination. And so I would record that. What I didn't do was write about my own feelings. When we were released and brought to Amman, my record is very happy and very ecstatic. And I wrote about things like oh, the New York Times interviewed my sister, and I put like four exclamation points. We spent a night in Amman and I wrote about the other girls we shared our room with and that we stayed up that night talking and singing and wasn't that fun. But what I didn't say was there was a war going on in Amman between the Jordanian army and the Palestinian resistance. And we could see the war from our balcony and people told us to lie on the floor if we heard firing. But I didn't write that down. But I know it's true, because I remember it, my sister remembers it, and other people wrote about it. And I read extensive news accounts of the war in Jordan that week, And we were there that day. So again, that's a perfect example of, you know, if you didn't have those other sources, the diary would be so deficient.

Kate Brown

Did you run the book or this essay for History Unclassified by your sister? Does she agree with your version of the hijacking?

Martha Hodes

She hasn't read the essay yet. She will read the book before it goes to press. She has known about the book from the very beginning. She has been nothing but supportive, answered all my questions. I've shared some documents with her. But I think just speaking here as historians, what I've said a couple of times now: this is my story of the hijacking. I do expect others who are there to disagree with my narrative. And I do have a statement at the very beginning of the book very explicitly saying, although I used other people's accounts, this is my story of the hijacking.

Kate Brown

Wonderful. Well, thank you so much.

Martha Hodes

Thank you so much, Kate. It's been a pleasure to speak with you.

Daniel Story

That was Martha Hodes speaking with AHR consulting editor Kate Brown about the article "As If I Wasn't There: Writing From a Child's Memory," which appears in the June issue of the AHR. Earlier you heard my conversation with Lee Weng-Choy about his and Zoe Butt's conversation about art and historical practice for the AHR September History Lab section.

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