

Little Has Been Said: The Fredericka Martin Papers

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It seems to me then as if all the moments of our life occupy the same space, as if future events already existed and were only waiting for us to find our way to them at last, just as when we have accepted an invitation we duly arrive in a certain house at a given time.

W.G. Sebald, *Austerlitz*

Every story is endless, she said. The warning came during a crisp winter morning in Mexico City. I had contacted her by phone two days before. I asked if we could meet. I went further, in fact: I asked if we could meet at her house, on a day that I had already chosen. She hesitated, and then suggested the following day was better. No dispute about the location. The city streets were empty in early January 2018. I arrived on time and rang the doorbell. No answer. I rang again. I knocked and still heard nothing, and I thought about her age. She was seventy-six years old. She could have lost her hearing, I thought. She could have fallen down the stairs (even though I ignored if there were any in that house). She simply could have forgotten. It was, I knew, an unusual appointment. Perhaps this was her discreet and gentle way of telling me that I was not welcome, that I was too late.

In Svetlana Alexievich's *War's Unwomanly Face*, a woman says to the journalist holding the recorder in front of her fifty years after the end of World War II: *It was back then that you should have listened to us.* Standing in front of that zinc black door I realized I did not want to be that journalist, and so I kept knocking until I heard a shuffling —leaves, cats, feet—and Tobyanne Berenberg's voice asking: Who's there?

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Tobyanne Berenberg was my Geography teacher in high school. When we met she was sixty-five and I was fourteen. By then I had already heard many stories about her. She was the most respected professor in a small school in Mexico City —meaning, at our age, the most feared. When she walked through the hallways people would stand against the wall and become suddenly silent. We were all supposed to be standing when she entered the classroom, and to wait for her to sit down before we could. She wanted the lights off and the windows open, she said the first day. She also wanted someone to fetch every day a rolled-up, dusty map of Mexico that she kept in a cupboard. To be able to speak in class, she said, one needs to ask for permission and then stand up. Everything with her was solemn, at an age where that word had no meaning to us.

I was as impressed with her presence, her soft voice, her long, golden and grey hair, her white, frail skin, her black clothes, as was everyone else. I was absorbed as I watched her dust off her desk and chair every morning before class started. I remember her walking around the classroom and asking someone to finish her sentence. That someone failed (every time), and she would roll her eyes at us and look up towards the ceiling, or right, towards the windows, where the flutter of a bird's wings could suddenly capture her attention and leave us in silence, as she contemplated the crows, the sparrows, the thrushes, and whispered something short and perhaps important to them.

I was not the best student in the class. I am almost sure Tobyanne did not even learn my name that first year. Things got better two years later, when she was once again our Geography teacher, and I thought that I had matured enough to understand that communism was, perhaps, a good idea. Tobyanne made us memorize the names of all the rivers in the world —or so it seemed to us—, the exact location of the Karakoram mountains, and the difference between taiga and tundra. I enjoyed the class; I participated more and might have even fetched the world-map (now the course was *Universal Geography*) on some occasions. I was a good student, Tobyanne was a good teacher, and that

was that. I saw how some of my friends stayed after class to talk with her. I listened to some of them praise her in the most laudatory terms. I thought they were just trying to get a better grade. No high-school student is interested in the lives of other people, teachers being last of them.

It was only during my senior year when things really changed. I took two courses with Tobyanne that year, which meant I saw her more often than ever. By now she clearly knew my name and my interests: I was the *bodoque*¹ she had to lecture about the inadequacy of my Guns N' Roses t-shirt, because Nazis had used skulls in their clothing seventy years before, *señor* Madrigal, and had therefore cancelled that aesthetic possibility for everyone. In time I became another of her self-appointed apostles: opening windows and curtains before she came in, turning off the lights, volunteering for anything she asked for.

One day she called me to her office. She was in the process of giving away all her books, she said, and wanted to see if I was interested in some of the film-related titles that she had saved for me (she knew I was planning to go to film school at the time). It was strange for me, to see someone do this, and I immediately understood it as a gesture only explicable by the presence of death; a phenomenon that, luckily up to that point in my life, I had never given much thought to.

Brief scenes like these recurred during that senior year. In each I felt my debt to Tobyanne enlarge, while I also realized that I did not want the end of my school years to become the end of our relationship. After graduating I sent her a couple of letters addressed to the school. She responded by looking up my phone number in the student records and calling my house. From then on, we spoke

¹ No translation would make justice to this playful and mild insult that Tobyanne directed to her students without any prompt. Think *dimmit*, then think that this woman knows what she means when she speaks, and then think that you probably deserve it, and it is that *feeling* which comes the closest to a definition.

amicably over the phone perhaps once a year. She first made fun of the college I had chosen — “That’s an institute, *señor*, not a university”—, then she mocked my career choice as a journalist, then the newspaper I worked for, then the MFA program I got into — “Creative Writing”, she sighed, like she could not really believe such a thing existed—. We kept in touch during my first year in New York. We talked over the phone about the death of Fidel Castro, the election of Donald Trump, the Frick Museum, and the Blue Ridge Road upstate. Then one day, January 2018, I told her I was back in Mexico for a couple of days. I asked if we could meet.

When she opened that black door we did not embrace, or shake hands, or say hi with a kiss, as is usual in Mexico. We just nodded, a little smile on each of our faces, and she showed me the way. We sat and talked for four hours straight. Or rather, she talked, I listened. She talked about birds in Mexico City, about James Thurber, about retirement. Mostly, however, she talked about her mother. That is when I first heard Fredericka Martin’s story.

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She was born in Cooperstown, New York, on June 2nd, 1905. She wanted to go to college but her parents had other plans, so she became a nurse and worked in a hospital in Manhattan. Then the war in Spain broke out, and she volunteered as a part of the Lincoln Brigade in aid of the republicans. Or, as she would probably prefer, in the fight against fascism. She was head nurse in a small town in Murcia. She commanded a group of nurses and other volunteers whom she called “my girls.” She took notes and kept a diary. When she was sent back to the US, she knew she had a book in her hands.

Before writing it, though, she married a physician in Maryland. She was pregnant when Samuel Berenberg was offered a job as the sole doctor in the Pribilof islands: a small archipelago in the Bering strait, nestled between Alaska and Russia. That is where Tobyenne Berenberg was born on 1941. A

year later, after the Pearl Harbor bombings, the US government evacuated all the Pacific islands. The family moved back to New York. Four hundred and eighty Central Park West, according to what Tobyanne told me that day in her house. By that point, of course, I was completely enthralled by the story, but could not anticipate what was to come.

While in New York, Fredericka became an activist. Not only did she keep in touch with fellow anti-fascists from her time in Spain—including comrades in the Soviet Union—, but she also advocated for the indigenous populations in the US, after that powerful experience in the Pribilof islands. She met with workers' unions, she spoke before the US Congress, she wrote letters, and she attracted, of course, the attention of a certain senator McCarthy. She was not included in the first infamous blacklist, but many of her friends were, so she knew the best thing for her was to leave the country. She took her nine-year-old daughter with her and moved to Cuernavaca, a small town in central Mexico, familiar to those who have read Malcolm Lowry's *Under the Volcano*.

That is where Fredericka's story stopped. Tobyanne talked a little more about her own travails, and then I knew I had to leave, since it was lunchtime already and I had made plans to help a friend with a certain job at the other side of town.

Just before I left, however, Tobyanne excused herself for a moment. She returned a minute later to the living room with a book in her hands. *Before the Storm: A Year in the Pribilof Islands*, by Fredericka Martin. At some point Tobyanne had gotten in contact with the University of Alaska, which had agreed to publish the work that Martin had done during 1941-1942. Thanks to Tobyanne and an academic editor, the draft became a book in 2010, almost twenty years after Martin had died. I glanced over the contents and ended up on a picture taken at the island of St. Paul: it was the burial

site of Martin's remains. Tobyanne had gone back to the island in 2008, for the first time since she was born, to take her mother's ashes.

I looked at the photograph as discreetly as I could. I did not want Tobyanne to know I had focused on the pictures, as children do. Least of all a picture of her. When I closed the book I asked her if she had written anything herself. About this, about their lives. No, she said sternly, I don't know how to. I laughed, but she kept a straight face.

And then, out of nowhere, she said: My mother's archive is at New York University, someplace called the Tamiment Library. I said something only a *bodoque* would, like "Really?" or "Oh, yeah?" She did not say: Look it up. She certainly did not say: You should try to read through it, and she most definitely did not suggest I write anything about it. But then again, what is a *bodoque* if not someone who does not follow his teacher's instructions?

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The Tamiment Institute Library and Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives is a rather prolonged way to refer to the tenth floor of NYU's Bobst Library. It is a place one can only know partially. The visitor is assigned a working desk, although confined might be more suitable, since you cannot fetch the materials yourself or even go to the restroom without explicit consent from the front desk assistant.

For my first visit I had reserved too many boxes from the Fredericka Martin archives. Contrary to belief, enthusiasm can work against research. When I found out the archive consisted of forty boxes (full of biographical files, correspondence, textiles, notebooks, pictures, drafts of the unfinished Civil War book) I wanted all of it, instantly. I wanted to learn everything that I did not know about Fredericka but also about Tobyanne, her daughter, my teacher, the woman whose name —and I knew

this from before, even though it was not Tobyanne who brought it up—was the happy conjunction of *Toby* and *Anne*, the names of two nurses who also took part in the Lincoln Brigade’s efforts.² I wanted to find them both —and I did, in the archive, I mean—, but before anything happened I had to open box one.

The first thing I found was a letter addressed to an Argentinian doctor, Gregorio Topolevsky, from Buenos Aires. It was dated December 17, 1971. By then Fredericka lived alone in Cuernavaca. Tobyanne had left some years ago for Mexico City. Fredericka presents herself to Dr. Topolevsky in the letter but, in a sense, I also felt she was doing it for me: “A few years later after the war in Spain,” she wrote in Spanish, “I left my profession as a nurse to become a writer.” She then proceeded to ask the doctor if he had any information regarding the whereabouts of another medic, one that was also part of the Brigade but with whom she had lost contact. She was in the process, she said, of writing a book about the experiences of the war and was collecting testimonies. She needed context, she wrote, because without it “our readers might consider our narration an adventure story.”

It was a warning, I guess, which included future readers of that letter. I know this because what I was holding before me was a copy of the original that Martin had sent. It was a yellow, thin, onionskin paper; in other words, a reproduction of the letter to Dr. Topolevsky, and therefore a perfect metaphor of the archival work: an almost platonic encounter with an experience that happened elsewhere; an echo.

I had not even finished with box number one when I was already missing a *search* function to help me with the work, a CTRL-F command, if you will. I realized how foreign analogous research was to me, while I simultaneously marveled at the fact that somebody had not only written that many

² Toby Jensky and Anne Taft.

letters during a lifetime, but also copied them without a CTRL-V. I kept browsing boxes full of letters like the first one; in all of them Martin presented herself the same way: I used to be head nurse in Spain, now I am writing a book on the subject, please help me. I feared for a moment that I would only find the letters that she had sent and no responses, as if she were a castaway throwing messages in a series of bottles to the sea. I pictured her alone and old, inside a Cuernavaca house in 1980s Mexico, and I wondered how that must have felt after being young and full of passion at the center of History itself.

But most of all I thought about Fredericka Martin's book. It became clear after the first couple of boxes that that project was the guiding element, the thread that ran through the letters and the notebooks and the newspaper clippings. It is a book that was ready to be written in 1940, but by 1985 Martin was writing to a friend in Spain: "I plan to consult the archive of the International Brigade to finish the story of our medical mission." The responses were there, and most of them sounded either helpful or extremely loving. That is how I found that friends referred to her as Freddie. That is the name that appeared in postcards, in Christmas cards from the Soviet Union, in questionnaires that Martin had prepared and sent to former nurses and that came back to the house in Cuernavaca full of memory holes.

I thought of Alexievich then, about the book she wrote after listening to the voices of the women in the Soviet army who could not remember, or did not want to remember, or who were told by their husbands (who sat next to them during the interviews), *what* to remember.³ I thought about

³ It was impossible not to make the connection. Here is an excerpt from Martin's writings: "[...] little has been said about the nurses, the ambulance and lorry drivers, the social workers, administrators, pharmacists, and lab technicians—the women who made that work possible". And here is Alexievich's *War's Unwomanly Face*: "Women's' war has its own colors, its own smells, its own lighting, and its own range of feelings. Its own words. There are no heroes and incredible feats, there are simply people who are busy doing inhumanly human things [...] I want to write the history of that war."

the years it took Alexievich to finally collect that chorus of voices into a single volume. Fredericka Martin started the same type of work decades before the Nobel laureate did, but apparently could never bring herself to finishing it.

*

In 1937, Mr. Fishman was a college dropout working in a laundry and driving a truck. He was also a member of the Young Communist League, having joined partly to meet like-minded young women at dances the organization sponsored, he said in an interview with The New York Times in 2004. "Why did I go?" he said. "That's hard to say. That's a key question. I was active in trade union work. I wanted to travel. I belonged to the 92nd Street Y.M.H.A., and we were very anti-Fascist, much opposed to Hitler, Franco.

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In box nine I came across Toby Jensky and Anne Taft. In one of her trademark questionnaires to subjects for her book, Fredericka had asked Jensky: "Have you ever regretted going to Spain?" The answer was no, not for a single day, and one can imagine them both becoming friends instantly aboard the SS Normandie, on January 16, 1937.

*

FREDERICKA IMOGEN COHEN

HAIR: BROWN

EYES: BLUE

BIRTH: COOPERSTOWN, NY, JUNE 2, 1905

DISTINGUISHED MARKS OR FEATURES:

XXX XXX XXX

NOT VALID FOR TRAVEL IN SPAIN

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Around fifty American women went to Spain as part of the American Medical Bureau to Aid Spanish Democracy. The banner under which they aligned was the Abraham Lincoln battalion of the International Brigade: the several thousand Americans who enlisted to fight for the Republic.

Martin called herself “the only non-volunteer:” “Someone from the nurses’ union asked me if I would be willing...to leave my pleasant rut...and, of course, I was,” she said to a journalist from the San Francisco Chronicle on February 10, 1977. She also said: “We were so romantic when we started out. We looked like such a very important force, so elegant. The people in the fields stopped working—they couldn’t believe their eyes. They thought we were forerunners of the American government’s approval. To our shame, we were never able to get the government to that position.”

The book was meant to be titled either *Proud Within Themselves*, or *Proud Within Ourselves*. Martin preferred the first one, and in several notes she mentions the need to get permission to paraphrase “a Hemingway quote” that might explain the relevance of the title. However, said Martin, if that is not possible then the second version would be fine. To me it seemed that the whole Hemingway issue was a false flag: if one reads through Martin’s drafts it is extremely hard to find emotional, first-person narrative. She refers to herself in the third person, as “the writer.” The struggle between *themselves* and *ourselves* was surely more than just a “Hemingway quote” matter.

The book has an outline, an index, full chapters, copies of chapters, notes for future reference and readings. It is a project that approximates completion but that is lacking something, scattered over the forty boxes of the archive that is kept behind locked doors on the tenth floor of a university library. I am not sure what it would take to finish that book, to publish it as Tobyanne did with her other manuscript. I mean that in the most literal sense: sometimes I feel it would not even be possible without deciphering, first, how to read Fredericka Martin's extremely obscure handwriting. Other times I think that, more than the skeleton of a book, the archive is the physical representation of Fredericka Martin's memory; a sort of museum, where newspaper clips and pictures and notebooks and an agenda from 1948 try to reject the notion that memory might be that which we forget, or that which cannot be remembered. Martin's archive embodies memory, and reflects, instead, the ideal of the archive as that which cannot be described fully, built out of fragments, regions, levels, tectonic layers or plates that shift and clash and create deeper and deeper chasms between then and now as time flows between them.

But precisely because of its personal nature I wonder if I should be looking at these files, reading Freddie's letters. There is method in this madness, says Polonius, but perhaps it is only visible to the author herself. Perhaps the archive is not destined for anyone but she who cultivated it. If one is really thinking about posterity and future transcripts of your notes, you write in print, not cursive.

There is, of course, fantastic detail in the documents, a verifiable intention of thoroughness in the work. But there is also a large amount of onionskin that could be omitted, or shredded, or disposed of in a separate box; there is no effort to summarize, to condense, to eliminate duplicates, to discard elements that add confusion. A *curatorial process*, to use current terminology, has not taken place in the Fredericka Martin archive. There is no space for modesty either: was everything that Fredericka ever scribbled *vital* to the project? The answer is probably no, and that is how one ends up back at the

beginning, wondering if the archive is just a way of looking inside a person's mind; wondering, in fact, if we really meant to see that. No mind is clean and neat and compartmentalized. Fredericka Martin tried but it that meant something else had to be forsaken. That something was the book itself.

*

Dedicate(d) to the Spanish people

with regret

that we were so few

and

our help was not enough.

*

There is a letter from Anne Taft from 1948 addressed to Fredericka Martin. It concerns a woman called Margaret Hamilton, who had apparently visited Taft and now was on her way back home, and able to meet the former head nurse. It says:

She has a book I bought for Tobyanne. It's about Sea Lions and it is to go under the Christmas tree.

Tobyanne was seven years old.

*

Did Fredericka Martin ever give in to the temptation to write fiction? Or, put differently, how much fiction ended up seeping into her memory, and therefore, into the project? I ask because I read, for example, a single sentence in the manuscript's outline that could very well be a novel in itself:

Dr. Posner, with his musicians, and what they did to relieve this tension.

Or:

Story of the Brooklyn boy shot through the head, left for dead, but now a valued worker in the base hospital.

Or:

Story of 'Texas', a 'pulp' story writer and the nineteen American boys who sailed for Spain on the 'Paris' with me. More than half have been killed.

Or:

Bernard (Bernabe) Burras: Ciudad Juarez. Was illiterate so he could only be a sergeant. Used to "read" a newspaper in a café and when someone came would ask them to read something. Listening, he would remember, and in that way learned to read.

At some point, Fredericka even writes an alternative title for her project:

Madam Freddie and her Bery of Bouncing Beauties

And I just want to keep reading.

*

There is only one folder with Samuel Berenberg's name on it in the Fredericka Martin archive. For Freddie's standards, it is very slim.

It contains a letter exchange between Dr. Berenberg and the editor of Collier's magazine back in January 1945. The editor is attaching to his letter a recent article they are publishing on the Spanish

Civil War and Franco. It is called *Battle for Spain*, by Ted Allan. The editor thought Dr. Berenberg could find it interesting, and asked for his insights on the text. In his response, the good doctor says he is glad the magazine has shifted towards subjects like these, and asked for twenty-five copies of the article so he can distribute it among acquaintances.

There is no mention of the former head nurse of the American Medical Bureau in Spain during the war.

*

A letter from Moe Fishman, executive secretary-treasurer of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade veterans, dated August 12, 1992, addressed to TobyAnne Berenberg.

Dear TobyAnne,

How are you doing? Any change re Freddie's condition?

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In its Latin origin (*documentum*), the term document used to mean *instruction* or *admonition*, but also *warning*.

*

I can well understand that you miss your friends even more after seeing them & spending some time with them. This happens to me also, even after I just talk on the phone. I'll teach you self-resistive exercises to make your arms, legs, body stronger. Keep well.

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I talked to Tobyanne recently over the phone. I told her I was graduating from NYU soon, that I was going back to Mexico City for the summer, that I wanted to see if we could meet up again. She did not say yes, but rather: We will, see, *señor*, we will see. Then she made a joke, asking how it could be that anybody in the world would want to see her. She did not ask me if I had visited the Tamiment, and I did not say.