

## ARTICLE

# Writing as Return: A Commentary on Doron Rabinovici's 'Nach Wilna'

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"Nach Wilna" is the story of a family trip to the Lithuanian capital of Vilnius that Rabinovici undertook with his brother and his parents in June 2011. His mother, Schoschana Rabinovici, had grown up in Vilnius before the Second World War, survived the Holocaust, and emigrated first to Israel and later to Austria. Her father, Isaukas Weksler, did not escape and, like most of Vilnius' Jewish population, was murdered by the Nazis. Rabinovici's sensitive and thoughtful tale of this trip weaves together family stories (from his mother's childhood, from his and his brother's childhoods, from ancestors' histories, and from the present), historical periods (Vilnius in the 1940s, Vilnius in the 1980s, Vilnius today), and different texts (most notably his mother's internationally-acclaimed account of her childhood in Vilnius, *Dank meiner Mutter*) in a deliberately non-linear manner in order to capture the range of conflicting thoughts and emotions that accompanied this trip through both time and space.

## Doron Rabinovici: Historian and Storyteller

Since his rise to prominence in the debates surrounding the election of Kurt Waldheim as President of Austria in the mid-1980s, Doron Rabinovici has consistently woven together insightful investigations into the questions and problems of history with a fresh and innovative literary style. His publications have alternated between nonfictional and fictional texts, including collections of short stories (*Papirnik*, 1994) and essays (*Credo und Credit*, 2001), three novels (*Suche nach M.*, 1997; *Onehin*, 2005; *Andernorts*, 2010), a history of the Jewish Council of Vienna during the Anschluss (*Instanzen der Ohnmacht*, 2000), a philosophical discussion of the concept of resistance (*Der ewige Widerstand*, 2008), and an illustrated children's book (*Das Jooloomooloo*, 2008). Within this varied body of work, however, three key themes continually emerge: the ways in which family stories interconnect across generations, the negotiation of multiple identities and, above all, the complex and constantly shifting relationship between the past and the present. All of these themes are at the forefront of 'Nach Wilna', the story that appears in this volume. In this text (and, indeed, we would argue, in all of his works), Doron Rabinovici the academic historian (who holds a PhD in History from the University of Vienna) and Doron Rabinovici the writer (one of the most celebrated and accomplished of his generation) work hand-in-hand to tell a gripping and touching story

that is also a meditation on the interconnections of the past and the present and a reflection on the ways in which families and histories intersect to form constantly shifting identities.

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### **'Nach Wilna' as a Travel Narrative**

'Nach Wilna' is the story of a journey that begins in Vienna and takes its protagonists east. As such it fits in with a long line of Austrian and German Jewish texts in which a Western author travels to Eastern Europe in search of Jewish identity. German and Austrian Jewish writers in the 1920s such as Alfred Döblin, Sammy Gronemann, Joseph Roth and Arnold Zweig famously visited Jewish communities in Eastern Europe in search of an alternative to assimilated Western European Jewish identities. But Rabinovici's account has much more in common with Austrian Jewish filmmaker Ruth Beckermann's journey eastward documented in her 1987 film *Die papierene Brücke* than it does with these pre-Holocaust texts.

Like Rabinovici's story, Beckermann's first-person account of her travels to Romania and Yugoslavia seeks to examine the points of intersection between the past and present and to uncover and narrate family stories. She begins the film by telling the viewer that she had spent many months investigating her family history, but that her attempts to piece together their stories and to understand them had been frustrated. As she speaks these words, the camera shows her riding a tram around Vienna's *Ringstrasse*, making us aware that she is, quite literally, going in circles and that these stories ultimately can not be told within the confines of Vienna. Underlying the trip to Eastern Europe is the notion that those Jewish stories that remain unfinished or unsatisfying in Vienna can only be completed by retracing the migrations of her parents in reverse. Like her German and Austrian Jewish counterparts in the early twentieth century, Beckermann seeks out Eastern European Jews whose recent history is not marked by assimilation, accommodation and silence but rather whose identity as Jews appears to be self-evident. Yet neither her journey to the East nor her return to Vienna provided the answers sought by the filmmaker, who resolutely leaves the central questions of the film open. *Die papierene Brücke* is a meditation on the intersections of history, memory, space and identity. It ends with unresolved questions but leaves a remarkable document of one filmmaker's struggle to answer these questions.

Rabinovici's text is also a meditation on the complex and uncertain relationship between the intersections of history, memory, space and identity. And it too begins in Vienna and travels east from there. As in Beckermann's film, the journey east is also a journey to the past – a past that has been catastrophically disrupted by the Holocaust. It differs from Beckermann's and previous German and Austrian Jewish explorations of Eastern Europe, however, in that Rabinovici does not travel to Vilnius in search of some notion of an 'authentic' Jewish experience that is somehow rooted in the past. He is well aware that this simply does not and cannot exist in contemporary Vilnius. Nor is he ultimately compelled to undertake this trip, as we shall see, due to the inability of his family to tell its own stories. In fact, his mother's

successful narrative of her life and memories plays an important function in his own story. While it shares similarities with previous German and Austrian Jewish travelogues, it also differs in important ways. Rabinovici's text, we will argue, is ultimately a meditation on his identity as a writer and the roles that history, memory, family and space play in determining that identity and driving his work. He travels to Vilnius as an Austrian, a Jew, a father, a brother, a son and a historian. But above all, he travels to Vilnius as a writer.

### **'War es eine Rückkehr?'**

'War es eine Rückkehr?' This question, which Rabinovici poses repeatedly throughout his brief text, serves as the narrative's central structuring principle. It is a rhetorical question, never yielding a simple 'Yes' or 'No', but it is also a pressing question that Rabinovici sincerely wishes to answer. The question first appears in the opening lines of the narrative, followed by the first answer: 'Meine Mutter, Schoschana Rabinovici, entstammt diesem Jerusalem des Nordens, wie die Stadt früher genannt wurde.' A reader unfamiliar with Rabinovici's other work might immediately expect a nostalgic journey into a past golden age of Jewish Eastern Europe to ensue. But Rabinovici makes clear from the outset that there is no question of returning to the pre-Holocaust Polish-Jewish 'Jerusalem of the North' in which his mother had spent her childhood, for '[d]as Wilna, in dem sie aufgewachsen war, hatte längst aufgehört, zu existieren'. The Jewish Vilnius had long ago been destroyed; all that is left of it, Rabinovici writes, are its official chronicles, the birth, death and wedding registries that had been recorded in Polish and Hebrew and filed away in the city's archives. At this point, if one is familiar with the historian Doron Rabinovici, one might expect the 'historical Vilnius' to be reconstructed from these documents in order to narrate the stories that lay behind them – the time-honored archival work of the historian piecing together remnants of the past to tell the story of another time and place. But Rabinovici quickly lets us know that this is not what he is after on this trip either. He is in search of a different type of history, one that informs and haunts the present.

Even if Vilnius' past histories are ultimately inaccessible to the modern resident of or visitor to that city, Rabinovici assures us that they nevertheless continue to live on into the present: 'Modern ist nur die Fassade, aber weiter hinten lebt die Vergangenheit fort.' Schoschana Rabinovici is thus able to lead her family through the streets of the ghetto in which she was imprisoned during the Holocaust and correct a local historian about the actual historical location where Jewish prisoners of the Nazis had been selected for execution. Neither the ghetto nor its former inhabitants are to be found in present day Vilnius. And yet they continue to occupy a space in that city and to interact with the present. How? Through memories. Incomplete and often conflicting memories. His mother's childhood memories are of atrocities committed against Jewish victims by Nazi perpetrators during the liquidation of the ghetto. But many Lithuanians who live in Vilnius today, Rabinovici notes, view the Jewish partisans who joined the Soviet forces in the fight against the Nazis as perpetrators, rather than victims. The victims of Vilnius are, in this version of historical memory, those who fought against Soviet occupation from the 1940s to the 1990s. Again, one might think that one now understands what type of narrative this will be: one about testing competing versions of history – the contentious discussion of comparative suffering, traumas and victimhood. But Rabinovici is not interested in endorsing one historical memory to the exclusion of others; rather, he wants to investigate how history and memory work together to form each other and to form us.

'War es eine Rückkehr?' he asks again at the narrative's midpoint. And now he answers it by telling the story of an earlier trip to Vilnius. His mother had returned to her hometown in the Autumn of 1988, on the occasion of a soccer match between Austria Wien and FK Zalgiris

Vilnius. She spent ninety minutes cheering for Austria (no conflicted hybrid identity issues here!) and the rest of the time wandering the streets of her childhood home. This experience turned out to be a key moment in her life: 'Hier, angesichts der Orte des Verbrechens kehrten die Erinnerungen meiner Mutter wieder, doch wichtiger noch war, diese inneren Bilder damit zu vergleichen, was sie nun sah.' In this dialectic between her memories of 1940s Vilnius and her experience of 1980s Vilnius, Schoschana Rabinovici found something: a voice to tell her story. 'Erst durch diese erste Reise', her son writes, 'konnte sich meine Mutter ihrer selbst vergewissern und sie setzte sich hin, um zu schreiben, was ihr einfiel, aber, so sagt sie, im Schreiben fielen ihr auch neue Details ein, und so kam Manches aus ihrem Innersten wieder zum Vorschein.... Durch das Schreiben fand Mutter zur eigenen Stimme.' As mentioned, the book in which she relates that story, *Dank meiner Mutter*, has been an enormous international success.

If you ask contemporary German and Austrian Jewish writers what urges them to create their narratives, you will often hear the common response that they are compelled to tell the stories that their survivor parents refused or were unable to tell. This intergenerational relationship, in fact, forms a key element of the plot of Rabinovici's novel *Suche nach M*. But Schoschana Rabinovici *did* tell her story. And she was able to tell that story because of her return to Vilnius and the resulting interplay – conflict, perhaps, is a better term – between the present and the past of that city. In the interview recorded in this volume, Julia Baker asked Rabinovici what role his family – and his mother in particular – played in the development of his career as a writer and historian. Rabinovici first answered abstractly, citing that 'Erinnerung als Widerstand treibt mich an. Die Geschichte der Vernichtung prägte mich.' This response – which is certainly a worthy impetus and is just as certainly confirmed by his literary output – is one that he shares with many of his contemporary colleagues. But then he turns to a more personal impetus. Without explaining the transition, he tells Baker that '[u]nsere Familie, also meine Eltern, mein Bruder und ich reisten im letzten Jahr nach Vilnius, wo meine Mutter herkommt. Ich sprach darüber in meiner Dankesrede für den Wildgans Preis und schrieb dann auch einen Essay darüber.' That essay, 'Nach Wilna', holds the key to the relationship between his family's story and his role as a storyteller. He does not answer the question about whether his mother's career as an author affected his own in the interview but rather points to the essay, that, as we have been arguing, is ultimately his declaration of his understanding of why he writes. Doron Rabinovici did not title his essay 'Dank meiner Mutter', but he could have. The final page of the story makes clear that the journey to Vilnius was, for Rabinovici as well as for his mother, a return. That return is not primarily a physical journey but rather a narrative journey. The essay 'Nach Wilna' *is itself* the return, in all of the complexity with which he answers the rhetorical question 'War es eine Rückkehr?' throughout the text.

### Writing as Return

Perhaps, Rabinovici ventures, 'ist jedes meiner Bücher auch eine Rückkehr nach Wilnius'. But not only Vilnius. His writing is also always a return to his father's native Romania, and to the Israel of his childhood. And always from the perspective of (and in the service of) the present time. At this point, it is worth recalling that Rabinovici initially told this story upon accepting the Anton Wildgans prize in recognition of his literary achievements. He has not simply been telling his audience a thoughtful and personal story (although it is that as well). He has not simply been telling his audience a historical narrative (although it is that too). He has been reflecting on why it is and how it is that he tells his stories. Picking up at the end of his essay on an anecdote about finding unexploded Second World War-era grenades buried under a

house, Rabinovici turns this image into another metaphor for the relationship between the past and the present and then turns to literature's key role in trying to understand these shifting relationships: 'Literatur weiß um diese Sprengsätze der Geschichte, aber sie kann auch die Zündler der Gegenwart benennen.... Poesie entschärft keine Bombe, aber sie lotet die Scharfmacher aus, ob sie aus Wilna kommen oder aus Wien. *Sie kennt unsere innersten Minenfelder.*' Literature relates different moments, different memories and different stories to one another in order to clarify both the past and the present and the relationships between the two. And not only – indeed, not primarily – in the interest of either the past or the present but of the future: 'Sie macht uns verstehen, warum, was einmal geschah, immer wieder geschehen kann.'

These thoughts, while powerful and important and consistent with Rabinovici's career, are not, of course unique to Rabinovici. In the final lines of his story, however, Rabinovici makes another turn that reminds us of his unique power as a writer: 'Sie erlaubt *mir* den Blick auf das Andere, auf das Abseitige. Sie erinnert uns an das, was geschah, und daran, wie uns geschieht, indem sie uns immer wieder davon erzählt, wie es gewesen sein wird.' The personal and the historical, the impact of history on the individual and of the individual on history, the storyteller and the listener – all are brought together in a mutually sustaining relationship in these final lines. As we mentioned above, in his answer to Julia Baker's question about whether his family influenced his decision to become a historian, Rabinovici asserted that 'Erinnerung als Widerstand treibt mich an' and pointed to this story as an example. 'War es seine Rückkehr?' Can one return to a place or a time that is always already a part of oneself? That is a part of all of us? We do not return to the past; we continually attempt to make sense of it in the context of an unfolding present. We are not *The Great Gatsby's* 'boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past', but rather Walter Benjamin's interpretation of Paul Klee's backward-facing Angel of History, in which the storms of the past are continually thrown at us. To make sense of the past in the context of an unfolding present and to make sense of the present in the context of a constantly shifting past are the impulses at the centre of all of Rabinovici's work, be they academic histories or fantastical novels or philosophical investigations. Or family travel stories. He is always traveling *to* Vilnius (or Romania, or Israel, or Vienna etc.) without ever expecting or hoping to arrive. It is all in the journey. And in the stories that it produces.

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