

## THEME

**MARK OPPENHEIMER (VO):** Welcome to LBI Presents—a new podcast from the Leo Baeck Institute, New York. I'm Mark Oppenheimer. I'm the director of open learning at American Jewish University, and I've spent my career writing about Jewish history.

On this series, we dive into LBI's archive, with key experts as our guides, to learn about the lives of German Jews throughout history...beyond the stories you already know. Today, LBI Presents...fact, fiction, and finding yourself.

## THEME OUT

**MARK OPPENHEIMER (VO):** The LBI archive contains almost 2000 memoirs dating back to the 18th century. Some are bound and published; others are simply handwritten on scrap paper, to be circulated among family and friends. Many are firsthand accounts—but there are also memoirs written by younger generations trying to preserve their family's stories. And once you page through a few of these amazing documents, you start to notice a pattern about truth and memory.

## SFX: FLIPPING PAGES

**MARK OPPENHEIMER (VO):** Lisa Brauer, a Jewish refugee who made her way to Cuba in 1940, writes in her memoir, "I try to unravel an entangled coil of thread, looking for the right end in the hope it might be useful to give me the right beginning." Bonnie Suchman composed a memoir of her husband's family, many of whom died in the Holocaust. She noted, "We will never know the answers to our questions, but on some level, it really does not matter. I am sure my father-in-law would say, if he were still alive, that telling their stories is the most important thing." And here's another quote, from Robert Warren, who wrote a book on behalf of a close friend and Holocaust survivor: "What follows is the faithful recollection of another's memory; to that extent it is a true memoir." So it seems, when it comes to memoir, facts are always trying to overcome omissions and fictions. And this is especially true of second and third hand accounts.

## THEME

**RUTH FRANKLIN:** You know, in America, we do take this kind of absolutist, puritanical approach where we treat the memoir kind of like journalism, where it isn't.

**MARK OPPENHEIMER (VO):** Ruth Franklin's a writer and literary critic. She's the author of *A Thousand Darkneses: Lies and Truth in Holocaust Fiction*. And she has spent years considering the nuances of memoirs about the Holocaust—not just the firsthand accounts, but also the family memoirs, those written by authors once or twice removed.

**RUTH FRANKLIN:** We're talking about periods when they weren't, you know, taking notes or making recordings. They're relying on their memory.

**MARK OPPENHEIMER (VO):** We all know that memory is fallible. And that, as time passes, the past can take on new meaning. So what are the implications of that for Holocaust memoirs? And for the art of memoir writing more broadly? Where's the line between fact and fiction? And more important: does it matter?

## THEME OUT

**MARK OPPENHEIMER:** Ruth, how did you come to be interested in Holocaust literature?

**RUTH FRANKLIN:** You know, I'm not sure anybody has ever asked me that question before. I think it's sort of taken as a given that when you're a writer who identifies as Jewish, you're going to be interested in Holocaust literature. I grew up in a family that had been affected by the Holocaust, and as a child, I, you know, certainly was strongly encouraged to read Holocaust literature, and I kind of resisted it. I did a whole sort of rebellious teenage thing where I did not want to hear about the Holocaust or read about it. And it really wasn't until I went to grad school, actually, and started reading about the Holocaust in a more academic way that I guess I kind of felt the topic was safe to approach. I think for a lot of Jews of my generation, of our generation, all the emotion and the baggage of our family histories can make the Holocaust feel like a challenging subject.

**MARK OPPENHEIMER:** If I could ask for a little more specificity. When you say your family was affected by it, I assume you don't mean very, very distantly, the way my family was. Was there a closer connection?

**RUTH FRANKLIN:** Yeah. My grandparents were refugees. They were in Poland when Hitler invaded and they wound up fleeing to the east and were deported by Stalin. And that's a whole other complicated story that I actually wrote about a couple of years ago in the *New York Review of Books*. You know, I think it does in many ways feel like a Holocaust story in that they lost their families. They lost their homeland. You know, they lost their homes. They came to America with nothing. At the same time, they weren't in the camps. When I was growing up, you know, in the '80s and early '90s, I think there was much more of a sense of the Holocaust, as you know, that it was Auschwitz. And that was it. And I think they did have a sense, as many people said about the Soviet camps, that they were supposed to be the lucky ones. But I think it doesn't feel lucky to have been a prisoner of Stalin and suffered the starvation and privations of those camps and to lose everything.

**MARK OPPENHEIMER:** And when you say that you were encouraged as a young person, as a child or teenager to read Holocaust literature, was it your grandparents, the refugees, who were encouraging you? Was it parents, teachers, librarians..?

**RUTH FRANKLIN:** Yeah. I mean, it kind of felt like everybody. My grandparents, teachers, my parents, you know, I think in the '80s, there was a sense that we had some kind of obligation to the Holocaust as part of the generation that we were. You know, we were lucky not only not to have experienced anything like that, but also that nothing like that was ever going to happen again in our lifetimes. And I guess I always felt that sort of, in recognition of this unbelievable sacrifice that had been made by the generations before mine, there was this obligation, you know, and a very kind of amorphous obligation, right? What are we supposed to do? We're supposed to remember the Holocaust. But we can't remember something that didn't happen to us. But, you know, the tagline always was "never forget." And aside from that, I think, you know, there was a sense that we kind of had to figure out on our own what that meant and how that was going to look in our lives.

**MARK OPPENHEIMER:** So when you did get around in graduate school and thereafter to reading and writing about the Holocaust, you clearly read hundreds of books about the Holocaust. I mean, your own book on it has a dozen or so chapters about specific books or figures, but each one references dozens more. So you quoted one critic as saying that sometimes it feels as if a tenth of the bookstore is Holocaust-related. Is it a genre or is it just a topic?

**RUTH FRANKLIN:** Huh. Well, I guess we'd have to debate what's the difference between a topic and genre. You know, is it a genre of memoir? You know, I guess if a genre is something, you know, where there are many, many books in this category that share similar characteristics, I think, you know, we could say that the Holocaust memoir or testimony is a genre. When I first started thinking about that book in the late '90s, it did feel like we were seeing this resurgence of interest in Holocaust literature, which had kind of, you know, waxed and waned over the years. There's a burst of memoirs in the '50s and '60s, then I guess it was maybe kind of quieter for a little while. And then in the '80s and '90s, things started picking up again, I think, as people of our generation started to kind of come into their own with this topic or to feel a kind of ownership over it. And I think, you know, that was always a very tricky kind of ownership to negotiate. Because of this huge sense of, you know, on the one hand, this topic is so inescapable and so dominating of the conversation. At the same time, there is this kind of taboo that, if you didn't experience it, you don't have the right to write about it. And, we see that from people like Elie Wiesel, other writers. There's this very kind of prescriptive idea about who's capable of telling this story, you know, in a way that's appropriate or in a way that does justice to it. And so I think in a lot of those memoirs of the '80s and '90s, we're seeing writers negotiating with those taboos and trying to figure out what is acceptable? What is the route to being able to approach this story that, you know, at the same time feels so kind of inescapable and important and also sort of forbidden?

**MARK OPPENHEIMER:** And as you point out in your book, the question of what even is a memoir and what's a novel is so contested from the beginning. I mean, you have books that are published as novelistic that then become canonized as memoirs and vice versa. Books that are memoirs that we ultimately realize are mostly fiction. So I want to talk about this evolution of memoir in particular. Were there certain hallmarks of the earliest flight of memoirs that came out? Was there something that they had in common, or was it a diverse form from the beginning?

**RUTH FRANKLIN:** Well, I think, you know, what they have in common is just this sense on the part of the writer of needing to get out the news of what happened in the camps. You know, these early memoirs, I think, are all about the camps. We don't see them about different aspects of the Holocaust, like being in hiding, although, of course, you know, with the exception of the diary of Anne Frank. And so, you know, obviously, the world did

belatedly learn about the Holocaust. But I think there's a sense among writers like Elie Wiesel or Primo Levi that even people who see it in the newsreel can't really understand the gravity of the experience, the gravity of what exactly happened. And you see them wrestling with that in the texts themselves, right? How to convey in words what feels inexpressible. And then we see that reflected also in the reactions of readers, who say, you know, these books are beyond criticism. They're in some kind of separate category. And, as I argue in my book, I feel that kind of did a disservice to these writers, you know, number one, in protecting them against frauds, because as we were going to see, there were going to be fraudulent Holocaust memoirs that critics also treated, you know, with this kind of hands off, kids glove type approach, not feeling able to to criticize or, you know, offer some fact checking, as it were. And at the same time, it did these writers a literary disservice, having an audience that didn't really appreciate the artistry of what they were able to do. There are hundreds and hundreds, if not thousands of Holocaust memoirs. But most of them don't achieve staying power, right? Most of them are not still being read 50, 60, 80 years after the fact. And the ones that are, it's because of those writers' enormous literary skill.

**MARK OPPENHEIMER:** But then, of course, they suffer this peculiar fate, like in the case of Elie Wiesel, where, as you put it, they get relegated to high school syllabi and then they don't get treated seriously by critics.

**RUTH FRANKLIN:** Right. Although then he got revived by Oprah, so I guess...

**MARK OPPENHEIMER:** Right, right!

**RUTH FRANKLIN:** But you make a good point, of course, about them not being treated seriously by critics. And I think that that also gets into critical reading as a way of expressing respect for a text, right? And when critics treat Holocaust memoirs as texts that simply have to be kind of, again, set in a separate genre and a different category, beyond the reach of normal criticism and normal discussion, it has unintended consequences.

**MARK OPPENHEIMER:** So, Ruth, one of the evolutions of this genre I find so fascinating is that other generations have picked up this memoir torch, and I mean generations who were not there. You have younger writers like Julie Metz and Arianna Neumann. You have books like Sarah Wildman's *Paper Love*. These memoirs are in LBI's archival and library

collections. And I wonder, why do you think the Holocaust continues to hold this appeal as a subject.

**RUTH FRANKLIN:** Well, you know, I think, for a lot of reasons. Here again, we get into the genre question. Are these books Holocaust memoirs? And, you know, I would say they're not, in the same way, right? If we're going to understand the Holocaust memoir as a testimony. These are more, you know, they're often called "family memoirs." Although I don't think most people write family memoirs unless they're talking about some kind of historical trauma like the Holocaust. But anyway, to answer your question, I think, you know, the reason we see this is, again, has to do with, not just the fascination of the family trauma, but the sense that these stories haven't been completely told yet. That, you know, despite all the ink that's been spilled over the Holocaust, it's still possible for a writer to open up a box in their parents' closet and discover a photograph they've never seen before, or a bunch of letters from an unknown person and fall sort of through this trapdoor into what might have been another life. And I think that experience can be so characteristic for this generation of writers. Dani Shapiro talks in a very different way about growing up in the wake of a family secret that she was never told and always feeling that there was something missing, that this part of her story was missing. And I think we see that in a lot of these writers, too, that some kind of family secret involving the Holocaust was kept from them. And as a result, they kind of grew up under this cloud, feeling as if they're somehow incomplete until they can make sense of this story.

**MARK OPPENHEIMER:** So it's almost as if the project has gone from informing the world about a major international humanitarian story that somehow wasn't being told or hadn't been told, to informing the world of a family secret that complicated one's own personal history.

**RUTH FRANKLIN:** Exactly. And I think, you know, for a lot of Jewish families, there can be kind of a taboo also about sharing family secrets, right? You're not supposed to air your dirty laundry in public. If there are things that your parents or grandparents didn't want you to know about, then, you know, they have their reasons, they had your best interests at heart and you're better off not finding out. And so what we see is, as you said, not people bringing the news of the Holocaust to the world, but figuring out how to reckon with these big gaps in their own history and their own understanding of who they are and where they came from.

**MARK OPPENHEIMER:** It's so interesting when people talk about a characteristic of the Jewish family being that we keep secrets. I wish my parents had kept more secrets. I came from one of those families where, you know, they'd all be in analysis. They thought it was good to share things! And I would sometimes feel like, could you share a little less? Could you please be a little more reticent?

**RUTH FRANKLIN:** It's funny, I came from a family like that, too, where my grandparents talked, you know, over the dinner table to anybody who would listen about their experiences in this Stalinist prison camp. And as a child, you know, as I told you, I reacted by really rebelling against that. I did not want to hear these stories anymore, and I certainly did not want them to be told to, you know, my boyfriend having dinner with...the sense that, you know, in any conversation we could open this trapdoor and fall into the Holocaust was, you know, really kind of scary for me as a child, I think. And I just wanted to be kind of a normal American Jew where we were in this nice, stable place. But, as I got older and I started really thinking and trying to figure out what had happened to my grandparents, I realized, or I really understood that even though they talked about it a lot, I still didn't understand it. I didn't understand what the historical forces were. I didn't even understand exactly what had happened to them or where they had been until I started doing my own research into that long after my grandparents had died, sadly. And I think that's also something we see in these texts is that the family stories aren't enough to explain what happened. It starts with the bundle of letters or the picture, and it ends up, a hundred books later, in the archive where you're trying to piece together, you know, where was this prison camp after all?

**MARK OPPENHEIMER:** And I wonder if the more recent urge toward fiction is because ultimately there's so much that can't be discovered. When you see books like Art Spiegelman's graphic novels, like *MAUS*, or *Everything Is Illuminated*, or I'm thinking about the work of people like David Bezmozgis, for whom the more recent family tragedy was, of course, being under the Soviet regime. We have recently seen a lot of significant Holocaust-related fiction. Is that coming from writers a couple of generations removed simply because at a certain point memoir becomes impossible? Either because they don't find the cache of letters or because it's a dead end?

**RUTH FRANKLIN:** Well, that's an interesting question. I mean, you know, I think there are always going to be writers who are drawn more towards fiction or more towards nonfiction for their own reasons. I don't know if Jonathan Safran Foer would have written a family memoir rather than *Everything Is Illuminated* if he had found the cache of letters. But I think you're right to say that that is another method of filling in the gaps in the historical record. And in fact, probably did feel like the only way to do that for a certain point. Archives are more accessible now to research than they ever have been before, with so many things being digitized and, you know, just much more accessible. And I think there's also a broader understanding of history writing in a way that's become a kind of informed speculation, has become, you know, a more acceptable or acknowledged way to write history. And so I think we see a lot of more, kind of, creative, nonfictional techniques that inform these memoirs.

**MARK OPPENHEIMER:** You begin your book by saying that it's astonishing that the scandal of the fraudulent Holocaust memoir by the person who called himself Binjamin Wilkomirski. Did I say that right? How does he say it? Do you know?

**RUTH FRANKLIN:** I mean, I think that's the Polish way to say it.

**MARK OPPENHEIMER:** Good enough!

**RUTH FRANKLIN:** I don't know how he says it! He wasn't Polish anyway, so, right?

**MARK OPPENHEIMER:** He wasn't, right. That the scandal of the fraudulent Holocaust memoir by Binjamin Wilkomirski didn't happen sooner, that there hadn't been more of them. Because, of course, we do know and we knew from very early on, that books like Elie Wiesel's *Night*, which purported to be memoir, had certain elements that likely were invented. We knew this. We knew that Jerzy Kosiński's book was more fictional than he let on, although even he always claimed there was a fictional element. So there's always been this blurring of fact and fiction. I mean, to get right down to it, has this impacted memoir writing in general? You discuss in your book how we have tacked back and forth between allowing for lots of creative license and indeed sometimes encouraging the creative license and then being super abstemious and puritanical and, one might say, prissy about any lapse in total facticity. How has this tension in Holocaust writing affected the way that we read memoirs today or the willingness of people to write memoirs?



**RUTH FRANKLIN:** Well, that's an interesting problem for the memoir, you know, more generally and not just in terms of Holocaust memoir. And you're right that, you know, in America, we do take this kind of absolutist, puritanical approach where we treat the memoir kind of like journalism, where it isn't. And a lot of these writers are coming from Europe, where there's a much more kind of relaxed and open approach to memoir and less of an urge to draw a sharp line between the genres, you know, between memoir and fiction in the way we do here, as if we want to just know where to put everything in the bookstore. So, yeah, as you say, one thing that really surprised me to discover when I was researching that book was how many of these memoirs, you know, really all of the canonical memoirs, involve some sort of blurring of the line between fiction and nonfiction. And, you know, certainly didn't conform to the kind of journalistic standards that we seem to be trying to hold memoir to today. And it struck me just as sort of a category mistake that we expect people to be able to write about their histories with this sort of journalistic precision when we're talking about periods when they weren't taking notes or making recordings. They're relying on their memory. And we all know how fallible our memories are. And just how much room for, you know, forget about fraud, how much room for honest error there can be.

**MARK OPPENHEIMER:** And you make the point that this is a huge problem in a world of Holocaust denialism, because some malevolent types have taken the really interesting discourse around where the lines are blurred in certain memoirs and said, see, they make stuff up about the Holocaust!

**RUTH FRANKLIN:** It is a problem. And, you know, I got a lot of criticism for broaching that subject. I mean, speaking of taboos, you know, that is one thing apparently that you're not supposed to say is that there can be elements of fiction in a Holocaust memoir. You know, although I've tried to bend over backwards to say that I'm not talking about the Holocaust as fiction, I'm talking about using fictional techniques or, you know, literary techniques to convey a larger sense of reality, right? That's the paradox, is that a strict, straightforward journalistic account often isn't able to convey what a writer can convey. You know, the emotion, or to produce the kind of sympathetic response in the reader that the most creative nonfiction or fiction does produce. So, yeah, it is a paradox that...I don't know if there's a way to resolve that one.

**MARK OPPENHEIMER:** Mm. How central is what we might call Holocaust literature, or let's just say American Jewish books that take on the Holocaust in some way, to Jewish literature? Or put another way, if you took the Holocaust books out, how impoverished would it all be? Could we imagine Jewish literature without Holocaust literature, or have they just become too entwined?

**RUTH FRANKLIN:** Well, I kind of think we wouldn't want to imagine Jewish literature without Holocaust literature at all, because when something like the Holocaust happens to a community, literature is one of the main ways in which we understand it and reckon with it. And, you know, I'm not criticizing those writers who choose not to write about it, but I just, I think literature is an extraordinarily important force, both culturally and psychologically, in helping us make sense of our past, you know, of our history. And so I think it's wholly appropriate that, as you say, the majority of our major Jewish writers—you know, I think of Michael Chabon, for instance, Jonathan Foer, obviously, Philip Roth. They've all got some kind of book dealing with the Holocaust, at least in some way or other. And I think in many cases, those are those writers' best books.

**MARK OPPENHEIMER:** Oh, that's so interesting. I think most teenagers, certainly during our childhood, and I think it's still the case. If they've read a book start to finish that deals with the Holocaust, it's either Anne Frank's *Diary of a Young Girl* or it's *Night* by Elie Wiesel. Are we over relying on memoirs then, for our historical knowledge of what happened?

**RUTH FRANKLIN:** Interesting. I mean, you know, now a lot of them also read *The Book Thief* by Markus Zusak.

**MARK OPPENHEIMER:** I guess so!

**RUTH FRANKLIN:** Which is a, you know, YA novel.

**MARK OPPENHEIMER:** I haven't read that. You're right. But, you know, there is no 250 page digestible volume of Holocaust history as nonfiction history. If you want to give them something that's assignable and digestible in a month, in 11th grade, memoirs are what we have to turn to. But it is one person's perspective.

**RUTH FRANKLIN:** Well, you know, I think the just the it's the burden is the teachers' to place it into that context and say this is what happened to one person in a very specific place and time and that the Holocaust unfolded very differently for people in other groups, you know. In other countries and other other nationalities. One thing that I've been really, really struck in researching the book I've been writing about Anne Frank, is how different the Holocaust was in the Netherlands, right? How different the Holocaust experience was for Dutch Jews or Jews like Anne Frank's family who were German Jews who had been taking refuge in the Netherlands after Hitler came to power. And so, it's really hard to grasp the scope and diversity of Holocaust experience. And one way to do that is through, obviously, through reading a whole bunch of different memoirs by people in different places, but also just try to remember that there is no one voice who speaks for all the survivors or, you know, even more so, for all of the victims. There can never be such a voice. And you know, this didn't come up, but of course, the vast, vast majority of the Holocaust memoirs we read are written by men. And the experience of women in the Holocaust has really been neglected. And that's another taboo topic. In fact, even to suggest that women did have a kind of distinct experience because of course everybody was persecuted because they were a Jew. And that's the fundamental basis. But it's the truth that women, for instance, in Auschwitz had a very different experience from that of somebody like Elie Wiesel or Primo Levi. They're in a different part of the camp, and there was a different organization, and they served different functions. And of course, they also were vulnerable to sexual violence in a way that men weren't. And many of these topics have been taboo for a long time and are only just being explored.

**MARK OPPENHEIMER:** Who doesn't want to hear about that? Why are they taboo?

**RUTH FRANKLIN:** I think there is a sense that there's maybe, a fear? That to claim a special victimhood for women, although I think the scholars don't really do that, just to emphasize that the experience is different. That somehow it detracts from the idea that Hitler wanted to kill all Jews, full stop. And you know, that obviously is the primary message we take from the Holocaust. But, and I think, sadly, especially with things in the world the way they are, there is a reasonable fear that to downplay that in any way could lead to Holocaust revisionism or denial.

**MARK OPPENHEIMER:** So we've already talked about how the first generation of memoirists died, but there were other generations of people who stumbled into family

stories or were writing about secrets that were kept. Those people, too, will age or die or stop writing. There will still be writers who identify as Jewish. Whether or not they want to be called Jewish writers is a separate question. But as the Holocaust and World War Two really do recede into the past, are there ramifications for Jewish literature or literature by or about Jews? Is it going to change or will the Holocaust fade out of it as a subject matter, or will it somehow keep coming up but differently, do you think?

**RUTH FRANKLIN:** I think, sadly, I think that antisemitism is always going to be a force in the world and that as long as it is, the Holocaust is going to be an important subject for Jewish literature, just as we see that slavery is still an important subject for Black literature. And it's because, you know, in many ways it's not over, right? The ramifications, the repercussions of slavery are still being felt by Black writers. And that's a story that they feel they need to tell. And I think, unfortunately, the same is true for us as well. Perhaps we won't see as many stories about the Holocaust. Perhaps, it won't be as much of a focal point. But I can't imagine that it's going to disappear from Jewish literature because it's still going to be a subject, unfortunately, that feels relevant.

**MARK OPPENHEIMER (VO):** That was Ruth Franklin. I'm Mark Oppenheimer. And this is LBI Presents. 'Til next time.

**PRODUCER:** For more information and to visit LBI's digitized archive, go to [lbi.org](http://lbi.org).

On the next episode of *LBI Presents*... Incredible stories of how the Leo Baeck Institute and its archive have helped families unearth their pasts and connect with their histories. Including one man's discovery that his mom's eccentric cousin moonlighted as a spy against the growing Nazi movement in New York.

**DANNY SHOT:** And I told him, I think that woman is my mother's cousin, Flory. And he said, "We've been looking for living descendants of her for years, for years!" And I was like, here I am!

**PRODUCER:** Ghosts of your family past... Coming up on *LBI Presents*.

LBI Presents is a production of the Leo Baeck Institute, New York and Antica Productions. It's hosted by Mark Oppenheimer. Our Executive Producers are Laura Regehr, Stuart

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