Memoirs and Diaries in Modern European Jewish History

This course uses memoirs, diaries, and letters to analyze modern Jewish history. These sources, sometimes called *ego-documents*, offer an abundance of detail about the public political, economic, social and religious worlds of individuals. They provide valuable, often rare glimpses into the motivations and expectations of a minority group regarding those who control or oppress them. Moreover, these *ego-documents* reveal often concealed thoughts and emotions. They depict the full human being as well as her or his attitudes and behaviors within the family, friendship networks, and the religious community. These documents also allow us to delve into relations between parents and children, spouses, generations, neighbors and friends. Finally, memoirs, diaries (and also letters) give us clues as to the ways in which people thought they should write about their lives and the ways they fashioned their own images in relation (or opposition) to their societies.

The course begins with one of the earliest memoirs we know about, written by a 17th c. rabbi, and continues through the Holocaust and postwar generation. It includes, among others, the autobiography of Glückl of Hameln, a businesswoman and widow, Pauline Wengeroff, a traditional Jewish woman in 19th-century Russia, and 20th-century diaries and memoirs. It asks how memories/memoirs differ from interviews and how they have been passed down to another generation.

Books to Purchase (The books are also on reserve at Bobst Library, and you can purchase them at the NYU Bookstore, but you may also purchase them at a variety of websites including *(used books at)* abebooks.com, Amazon.com or barnesandnoble.com.)*

Marc Cohen, ed., *THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF A SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY VENETIAN RABBI: LEON MODENA’S LIFE OF JUDAH*


Slucki, David, SING THIS AT MY FUNERAL: A MEMOIR OF FATHERS AND SONS (Wayne State, 2019)


**Goals:** Why read about other people’s lives? What can we learn from them? What can we learn about them? their historical moment? and history more generally?

**Requirements:**
1. Serious and consistent class participation (this means attendance is essential because your participation is part of your grade); 10% of grade
2. Regular introductions of the homework readings -- each class will begin with a student presentation of about 5 minutes in which s/he introduces the author’s life based on her/his own research (online or at the library); 10% of grade
3. Three short written assignments; 25% of grade (first paper = 5%, others =10% each)
4. Two oral presentations; 20% of grade (10% each)
5. Term paper; 35% of grade

Late papers will be docked a grade a week.

**Schedule**
1. (Sept. 3) Introduction: Why are we interested in the lives of individuals? What can we learn from them? We will read some examples in class: Colm Toibin “My Old Flame,” New Yorker, June 9 & 16, 2014; Andre Aciman, “How Memoirists Mold the Truth,” NY Times, April 6, 2013. You may also bring in thoughts you had while reading EDUCATED: A Memoir by Tara Westover.


**1st Writing Assignment** due today: Write a 3-page double-spaced response paper analyzing one or two of the themes (there are many) raised by Modena in the autobiography. How does he address these themes; give examples. What have you learned about him or his society by reading his memoir?

3. (Sept. 17) THE MEMOIRS OF GLÜCKL OF HAMELN. Books 1, 2 and 4, pp. 1-40 and pp. 90-146

Prompt: For our discussion of Glückl of Hameln, I would like each of you to react to 3 or 4 ideas/topics that recur in her narrative. What stands out for you and why? Please jot these ideas down in your notebook, so that I can call on you and you will have a response you have thought about (including pages to which you may want to refer). This is the 1st oral presentation for which you are responsible.


**#2 Writing Assignment** due today. Write a 3-page comparison of Pauline Wengeroff’s and Glückl’s memoirs. Some suggestions: Does their writing style change? How does the context influence their religious practices, their family structures, and their relationships with Jews and non-Jews? What did you find most striking about each of them?

Oct. 15, no class. NYU is on a Monday schedule.

7. (Oct. 22) JEWISH LIFE IN GERMANY (Weimar [1918-33]), pp. 301-381 on *Classes*
As you read these short memoirs, look for topics that crop up often. For example, increasing antisemitism. (Since I just suggested this, you can’t use it!) Then note 2 or 3 such *recurring topics* in several memoirs (write the pages down under the theme, with one phrase descriptions) and see if you can describe them. Each of you will present your observations in a 2nd oral presentation pointing out the documents you used. In other words, like a historian, you will make a statement based on some hard evidence.

8. (Oct. 29) Kluger, STILL ALIVE: A HOLOCAUST GIRLHOOD REMEMBERED (entire book). Be aware that this is memoir focuses on two generations. Kluger and Friedlander (next week’s reading) are both aware of and wary of memory. As they look back, they also tell us about the present in which they live.

9. (Nov. 5) Zapruder, SALVAGED PAGES, diary selections (1-63, 190-226, 361-395). Film clips: “Partisans of Vilna,” 1986 DVD 51231 at Bobst or

*After viewing*: Make a one-page outline comparing what we can learn from diaries (Zapruder) to what we can glean from a documentary film. Be prepared to hand this in.

10. (Nov. 12) Friedlander, WHEN MEMORY COMES (entire book)
**# 3 Writing Assignment** due today: 4 pages. Compare diaries [from Salvaged Pages] and memoirs [Kluger and Friedlander] to survivor testimonies [Partisans of Vilna]. What are the advantages and disadvantages of each form of historical information?

11. (Nov. 19) Hoffman, LOST IN TRANSLATION: A LIFE IN A NEW LANGUAGE (entire book)
**3rd oral presentation.** How is this memoir similar to some memoirs we have already read? (Which ones? How?) How is it different from other memoirs? (Style? Subject matter? Readership? Message? etc.) What would you point to as 2 or 3 of the main points Hoffman is addressing in her memoir? Please write your answers down in outline form.
This memoir focuses on 3 generations. Be ready to discuss how this memoir differs from the others you have read.

**Term paper outlines due DEC. 2 BY NOON.**

13. (Dec. 3) First part of class: Slucki, SING THIS… pp. 135-256.
Second part of class: Be ready to discuss your own Term Paper topics* and approaches.

14. (Dec. 10) **Presentations** of term papers to the class. *Use note cards to help you organize what you want to say.* [You should not read your paper, but talk it with notes.] Use your classmates’ questions and response to help you edit or add to your paper.
Term papers should be 10 pages.

*Term Papers:*
Hundreds of ego-documents (memoirs, diaries, letters) tell the story of history through a personal lens. Find **two** that allow you to compare different viewpoints during a particular era. You can decide – in consultation with me – which books you would like to read. For example, you could read a memoir written by a French Jewish leader and a diary of a young girl in France of the same era. Or you could read a memoir by a young German-Jew and a young German non-Jew living in Nazi Germany. Also, you could choose to read the memoirs of an Italian family escaping from Europe during World War II and compare that to a non-Jewish onlooker or someone who helped refugees escape. You could choose to read a book of letters among one family and compare that to a diary from the same era. We will discuss this further in class.

Disability Disclosure Statement: Academic accommodations are available for students with disabilities. The Moses Center website is www.nyu.edu/csd. Please contact the Moses Center for Students with Disabilities (212-998-4980 or mosescsd@nyu.edu) for further information. Students who are requesting academic accommodations are advised to reach out to the Moses Center as early as possible in the semester for assistance.

WRITING GUIDELINES for assignments:

Please learn the definition of **plagiarism**, one of the most serious forms of academic misconduct: “*Presenting another’s words or ideas as your own.*” Always cite your sources (including books, articles, and web sites) and use quotation marks whenever you use a phrase of more than 3 words in succession from another person’s work. Paraphrasing an idea does **not** make it your idea. You may use it, **but give credit where credit is due.** Remember that professors can find websites as easily as students. Plagiarism will result in an F for the course and notification of the deans.

*Write every paper as if it were for an English class and remember to edit and re-edit.*
