

## Invitation to historians: History, the historian, and an autobiography

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Drawing on perspectives he developed in studying other historians' autobiographies, Jeremy Popkin explores the circumstances that led him to become a professional historian, and the consequences of being a fourth-generation autobiographer. His parents, academics themselves, encouraged his intellectual propensities, as did the atmosphere of the post-Sputnik era and the family's Jewish heritage. The political excitement of the 1960s played its part, as did inspirational teachers, although Popkin came to see his studies as a refuge from the dilemmas of political activism. His career has been less adventurous than those of his great-grandfather, grandmother, and father, all of whom also wrote about their own lives, but it has nevertheless had its satisfactions.

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Of all historians invited to write about how I ended up in the profession, I should have the fewest problems fulfilling the assignment: in 2005 I published a book on *History, historians and autobiography*, based on my reading of several hundred autobiographical books and essays by members of my own profession.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, I come from a family with a habit of autobiography: my father, his mother, and her father wrote about their lives.<sup>2</sup> How could I improve on the opening line of my immigrant great-grandfather's account of his childhood in Poland: 'The first years of my life was useless'? (He suffered from paralysed legs.) Yet this double background, professional and personal, also creates obstacles to writing about myself. Other historians have turned to autobiographical writing as a welcome escape from the constraints of academic prose, but I know that first-person narrative can be just as demanding and difficult as scholarship. Looking at the personal stories crafted by my three generations of ancestors, all of whom I knew, I can also see that such creations are always controversial

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interventions in family dramas. Some relatives called my novelist grandmother Zelda Popkin's autobiography 'her greatest work of fiction'.

When I first became interested in the topic of autobiography in the early 1990s, I was acutely conscious of the connection between my personal life and my new subject of study. I joked about making academic capital out of my midlife crisis. Nevertheless, I chose to study the life stories of others rather than writing my own. Cautious and methodical son of a famous academic father who had put his career at risk when he suddenly swerved from his specialty to devote himself to a very public campaign to refute the accepted explanation of the assassination of President Kennedy,<sup>3</sup> I was relieved to discover that the study of autobiography had a respectable Library of Congress catalogue classification of its own – CT 25 – and established journals in which I could publish properly footnoted articles. Writing about autobiography got me out of the rut I had dug myself into after two decades of research on my original specialty, the history of the French revolutionary press, without requiring me to rethink the basic formula of my life; in some ways, it even promoted my career.

The better I became at deconstructing the autobiographies of others, however, the more daunting the prospect of writing about myself appeared. Daunting, but also tempting. Some of the historian-autobiographers I read had clearly enjoyed writing about themselves, even if they claimed to have found the process painful. According to my own argument, some historians' autobiographies had made genuine contributions to historical understanding and to the art of life-writing: should I refuse to take up the challenge? Others had written narratives so awkwardly structured, so fatuous, or – let's say it! – so boring that I thought I could do better. Was it even ethical of me to cling to my protected status as an observer, refusing to take part in the activity going on around me? In the back of my mind, I knew that I would accept an opportunity if it was offered, but, like most academic autobiographers, I would wait for an invitation.

The invitation to which I am now responding has come at a curious moment in my engagement with both history and autobiography. After completing two books in which autobiography and the questions about authorial subjectivity it raises figure heavily, I have now turned away from that subversive terrain.<sup>4</sup> The composition of this essay is interrupting the writing of the most 'traditional' book I have ever undertaken, an exercise in political history based on the most conventional sorts of documentation. Particularly since the death of my father in 2005, however, I have also been occupied with assembling his personal correspondence and other family documents, and thinking about the problems of reconstructing the lives of those with whom one's own life has been bound up. In reading my father's letters and writing about him, I have necessarily been examining aspects of my own life; since I also have 40 years of my grandmother's letters to my father, I can even extend this process back a generation. A few months ago,

when I helped my mother prepare to move out of the family apartment, I discovered that she, too, has written autobiographical essays. I may have decided, for the moment, to put my professional energies into scholarship about distant events, written in the third person, but I am also immersed in this family dialogue that vividly demonstrates the ways in which individual lives are always intermeshed with one another.

If studying autobiography was, for a time, a way of putting some distance between myself and the discipline of history, can writing autobiography be a way of understanding how I became involved with history in the first place? At first glance, my story seems simple, and very familiar to me from my reading of other historians' autobiographies: academic parents, a house full of books, childhood trips to Europe that introduced me to a world with a longer and more complicated past than that of the United States. I can honestly say that I visited the *Bibliothèque nationale* in Paris for the first time at the age of three, waiting for my father, recipient of one of the first Fulbright fellowships, to emerge from the building after a day at his desk. When I was old enough to start borrowing books for myself from the public library in Iowa City, Iowa, where I joined the baby boom generation in 1948, I quickly gravitated to the shelf in the children's section that held the volumes of the Landmark Books history series: there was something about these 'true' stories that attracted me. I was one of those irritating children who delight in accumulating facts and inflicting them on unwary adults. Presented with a copy of the *Information please almanac* as a Christmas gift, I memorized indiscriminately: largest cities, longest rivers, worst nautical disasters. Perhaps to keep me from taking up too much of his time reciting what I had learned, my father introduced me to stamp collecting. Arranging my possessions added to my unsystematic store of historical data. I knew the battle of Vimy Ridge as the subject of Scott's Catalogue, France, numbers 311 and 312, long before I knew about the First World War, and Millard Fillmore remains indelibly engraved in my mind as the face on the 13-cent stamp in the American Presidents series of 1938.

The choice to be a reader, a sponge for information, was, of course, also a choice not to do other things. I was always small for my age and poor at defending myself in rough-and-tumble play with other boys – shades of my great-grandfather with his paralysed legs! Relatives of a long-lost childhood friend who passed away this year tell me that at his memorial they exhibited a photograph of the two of us, dressed as cowboys and armed with toy guns, but when I spent a year in school in the Netherlands, where such games were forbidden, I cheerfully converted to pacifism. My father had been something of an athlete in his youth, but he did nothing to encourage me in that direction; the first time we attended a sports event together was when he and I took my own two sons to Dodger Stadium. My mother saw to it that I had piano lessons for a couple of years; I developed an enthusiasm for listening

to my parents' classical record collection, but no passion for performing. I was shy but not friendless. Iowa City, where I spent my elementary-school years, was a classic mid-western college town where every school class included other boys like me.

Family life in my childhood years during the 1950s revolved around my father's career. Part of the first generation of American Jews to crash the gates of academia, my father started his first tenure-track teaching job at the age of 23. At the University of Iowa, where he taught philosophy until I was 11 years old, my father was at odds with most of his own colleagues, but he got along well with the historians; in later life, old friends such as George Mosse and Nicholas Riasanovsky still remembered him warmly. My father was also a historian in his own right. As a child, I could not understand the details of his work on the development of philosophical scepticism in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, but I absorbed the lesson that studying the past was somehow very important.<sup>5</sup> American history never interested my father, but on the three trips we made to Europe before I turned 10, he turned into an enthusiastic tour guide. He revelled in the opportunity to visit cathedrals, museums, and monuments, and kept my younger sister Maggi and me spellbound with stories about William the Silent, Napoleon, and the Second World War. Family life back in Iowa was more troubled: my father's unhappiness with his professional situation often expressed itself in black rages or bouts of depression. His burning desire to escape from Iowa City made it difficult for me to develop any sense of having roots there. Retreating into my books and stamps was a way of constructing a shelter for myself.

In retrospect, I can see that my childhood relationship with history was not necessarily as foreordained as this account makes it seem. I did have other interests, particularly in math and science. The first Sputnik went into orbit just before I turned nine; in the years that followed, American schools did everything possible to encourage bright students to study those subjects. My scientific interests were not a rebellion against my father: he had also been deeply interested in mathematics, and in fact wrote his Ph.D. thesis on a problem in mathematical logic. By the time I got to High School, my abilities in math and science even earned me a certain amount of celebrity. The 1500 students and teachers who listened to me compete in the finals of the 'Chalk talk' event at Occidental College's Southern California math contest in 1965 are still the largest audience I have ever addressed, and I can vividly recall the thrill when our team won that year's top prize.

Although my father was a historian by profession, my parents were in some ways bent on separating themselves from their own personal pasts. When they left New York City for Iowa, they left behind the thoroughly Jewish milieu in which they had grown up. In my early childhood years, we had a Christmas tree and did not celebrate Jewish holidays. My parents also detached themselves from the secular political radicalism of their families. It

was the era of McCarthyism, and my father, as a 16-year-old, had been a member of the Young Communist League; his parents' public-relations firm had represented the Spanish Loyalists. In fifth grade, my teacher had us research our family's origins. My mother told me that our ancestors came from Russia, homeland of the national enemy. I was awestruck by this unexpected revelation, but perplexed when she told me not to share the information with anyone but my classmates and my teacher.

In itself, as I now know, this effort at escape from the past was not uncommon among American Jews in the 1950s. Only in recent years, as I have read my parents' and my grandmother Zelda's personal papers, have I realized how complicated my family's own version of this story was. In particular, Zelda had been personally involved with the great events of Jewish history in the 1940s. She had visited the post-war DP camps in Germany a few months after the defeat of the Nazis, and in 1947, she used the material she had gathered to write one of the first American novels with a Holocaust theme. In 1948, she flew to Israel, arriving in Jerusalem during the last weeks of the fighting that secured the existence of the new Jewish state. Out of this trip came *Quiet street*, the first American novel about the Israeli struggle for independence. Had either of these books made my grandmother a celebrity, my parents' chameleon act would have been harder to pull off, but both were resounding flops. My disappointed grandmother, as I later learned from her papers, reacted by blaming her fellow Jews, who showed so little interest in books with Jewish themes.<sup>6</sup>

Like many other American Jews of their generation, my parents eventually acknowledged their origins, but the suddenness and intensity with which my father re-embraced the Jewish past was unusual. Since his death, I have had the opportunity to read his correspondence, particularly his letters to his former Iowa colleague Judah Goldin, one of the great figures of twentieth-century Jewish studies, and reconstruct some of the reasons that led him to embrace a Jewish identity and make it central to his career. As a child, I received no explanation: I simply found myself attending Sunday school and learning Hebrew. While I was becoming the local rabbi's star pupil, my father was developing his own idiosyncratic style of being Jewish. He could never reconcile himself to participation in community institutions, and he identified himself, not with the East European Jewish tradition from which our ancestors actually came, but with the crypto-Jews or Marranos who had had to convert or flee from Spain and Portugal after the expulsion of 1492. He would achieve scholarly fame for tracing their impact on European philosophy and religious thought, but he would also imitate them in deciding for himself just how much of Jewish belief and tradition he would accept.

While my father pursued the Marranos, I also became fascinated with Jewish history. Here was a whole new set of stories about the past to learn,

and one with which I had a genealogical connection. From Harry Golden's *For two cents plain* I learned about New York's Lower East Side, where some of my immigrant ancestors had lived; from William Shirer's *Rise and fall of the Third Reich* and newspaper stories about the Eichmann trial I reached my first understanding of the Holocaust, and from *Exodus* and my grandmother's novel, I imbibed a heroic legend about how Israel had come into existence. By now, we were living in Claremont, California, a suburb of Los Angeles. Our local congregation, where I prepared for my Bar Mitzvah, was small, but once a year, youngsters from our congregation went to a weekend retreat at a camp on the Southern California coast. As we rolled west on the freeway, we would gradually be surrounded by buses from larger Jewish communities, all heading the same way, visible evidence that we were indeed a people 'mighty and numerous'.

Not everything in my life during these years of junior high school revolved around questions of Jewish identity. I had been a precocious reader of newspapers, and I followed public issues such as civil rights with increasing interest in the early 1960s. These were the years of the American Civil War centennial, and I diligently digested Bruce Catton's trilogy on the subject. Eager as I always had been to know things that no one else did, I then developed a passion for the history of World War I; my father showed me the bound volumes of the *New York Times* in the Claremont Colleges library, my first primary source, and an eighth-grade teacher let me give my first classroom lecture, in which I struggled to explain the Triple Alliance and the Schlieffen Plan to my classmates. At the time of the Cuban missile crisis in October 1962, my father, always the contrarian, distinguished himself by denouncing President Kennedy's actions. Convinced by his arguments, I produced my first original piece of historical analysis: a comparison of the number of years Russia and America had been at war, demonstrating that Russian fears of foreign encirclement were understandable if one took the past into account.

Just as I started high school, my father changed jobs again. From Claremont, we moved to the San Diego suburb of La Jolla, where he became the founding chair of the philosophy department at a new University of California campus. In time, I would adopt this beautiful beach community as my 'home town', but at first, the move badly disrupted my life. Among many other things, it dissolved my connection with things Jewish. Until just before we arrived, La Jolla had been virtually *judenrein*: restrictive housing covenants kept identifiable Jews from buying homes there. The creation of UCSD brought an end to this discrimination – La Jolla now has a thriving Jewish community – but during my high-school years, from 1963 to 1966, my father was able to live out his fantasy about a Jewish life without rabbis, synagogues, or fund-raising campaigns. In all of this, however, there was no place for me. I did not encounter any prejudice in school, but there were not enough Jewish students to form any kind of group. I threw myself into other

activities, and lost the opportunity that I might have had to immerse myself in a form of history rooted in personal identity.

After I had begun to make a few friends in La Jolla, I found many other things to keep me busy. My interest in history continued, and for the first time I encountered a competent teacher of the subject, Jules Tanzer. Perhaps he let me write a long paper on 'Grover Cleveland and the Gold Standard' to see whether my enthusiasm would survive such a subject. Math seemed to offer bigger opportunities, however. I played second fiddle to another student who was a real math whiz, but I thoroughly enjoyed the recognition that went with being part of the school's well-publicized competitive math team, as well as the school chess champion. I joined the Young Democrats, which operated like an underground organization to avoid attracting hostile attention in reactionary La Jolla. Lyndon Johnson's sweeping victory in November 1964 seemed to prove that history was on our side, but the Vietnam war soon taught me some of history's painful complexities. In July 1965, my friends and I made the placards for San Diego's first public anti-war demonstration in our basement, but many of the other Young Democrats could not accept the idea of opposing a president whose election we had celebrated just eight months earlier. Among the witnesses to the heated debate that soon sealed the demise of our club was my first girlfriend. That probably now-defunct institution, the annual 'Sadie Hawkins Day' high-school dance, to which the girls invited the boys, had allowed her to overcome my shyness.

History was not much on my mind as I graduated from high school in June of 1966 and prepared to start college. Determined to be a non-conformist, I had refused to apply to any of the Ivy League schools, particularly Columbia, my father's alma mater. My mother, who had had a struggle to be able to attend Hunter College, New York City's free municipal university for women, had a romantic attachment to the idea of my attending a small liberal arts college, something she must have dreamed about for herself. I applied exclusively to such schools and wound up at Reed College in Portland, Oregon. It was not a happy choice. Reed attracted imaginative, high-strung students, and I was too immature and too conventional in my ways to get along with most of them. The semester began with a public lecture by the apostle of LSD, Timothy Leary. My room-mate embraced Leary's urging to 'Turn on, tune in, drop out'; because I did not want to go along on his 'trips', I was frequently asked to evacuate myself from our dorm room while he dropped acid. Reed also did not tell students their grades. In high school, much of my identity had been built around my visible academic success; I was now suddenly deprived of that source of self-esteem. I had picked math as my major, and was placed in classes with more advanced students since I had already finished the first two years of college work in high school, but I was losing my passion for the subject. The most positive aspect of Reed for me was the required freshman

humanities course. In retrospect, the reading list – Homer and Hesiod, Plato and Aristotle, Sophocles and Euripides, Saint Augustine and Saint Bonaventure, the three volumes of Dante's *Divine comedy*, with *De Monarchia* thrown in for good measure – seems woefully 'canonical', and history was the most poorly taught aspect of the course. For the first time, though, I really learned how to read and analyse a text, and how to construct a good essay. I did not think of it that way, but what I was doing was learning my father's skills.

I returned to San Diego after my unhappy freshman year, but at the end of the summer, I simply could not face the prospect of going back to Reed. For the only time in his life, my father pulled strings and got me admitted to UCSD just before classes began in the fall. UCSD, which had admitted its first undergraduates just three years earlier, was not known as a centre of student activism in that extraordinary year 1967–1968, but it proved to be a remarkably interesting place to be. Living at home after being away at college for a year was something of a comedown, but my parents, preoccupied with other matters, left me a considerable degree of freedom. I had my own entrance to the family house, which gave me and the new girlfriend I soon acquired enough privacy to conduct our fumbling sexual apprenticeship without serious interference. Unable to fathom the psychological problems that had made it impossible for me to return to Reed, my parents turned me over to an elderly European-trained analyst, whose patience and understanding helped me achieve a certain equilibrium.

I decided to give myself a break from mathematics and enrolled for courses in literature, philosophy, and history. Despite my passionate childhood enthusiasm for the Paris *métro*, I had never learned any French during my family's European stays in the 1950s – the only foreign language I had acquired was a little Dutch – but three years of high school classes and the connivance of the young native speaker assigned to evaluate my proficiency, who was also living with my family as an *au pair* and caring for my little sister Sue, got me into the French literature survey. I was genuinely enthralled by the discovery of the richness of the French literary tradition, from the *Chanson de Roland* to Stendhal, who became my favourite author for many years. Whatever I studied, French would be 'my' language. As an academic discipline, however, literature was both too subjective and too personal for me. I did not see how one could ever know if one had found the 'true' interpretation of Rabelais, and critical approaches such as Freudianism perturbed me: if there were so many hidden meanings in a literary text, how could one hope to make any sense out of one's own life?

My philosophy class was taught by Herbert Marcuse, a neo-Marxist thinker whom my father had brought to the campus just when he was becoming a worldwide celebrity as the third figure in the trinity of 'Marx, Mao, Marcuse', the supposed gurus of the period's student protest movements. Marx was dead and Mao was otherwise occupied, but I had



the honour of listening to Marcuse twice a week. In that memorable year 1967–1968, to be in his class was to feel oneself part of the charmed circle of those who were going to shape the future of the planet. For a revolutionary, Marcuse was a surprisingly traditional professor. He lectured from the podium, leaving discussion to sessions with his graduate student assistants – for one term, I was taught by the future African-American activist Angela Davis, who was then working with Marcuse on a dissertation about Kant – and the reading list was the usual list of dead white male suspects, from Plato to Marx. Marcuse left no doubt about his commitment to socialism, but he was eminently fair-minded in his presentation of other intellectual traditions. Although I was committed to seeing myself as a radical leftist, I found myself deeply affected by reading Edmund Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France* and by Marcuse's lecture on the even more reactionary French conservative of the period, Joseph de Maistre. For the first time, I was confronted with intelligent thinkers who did not believe many of the truths about justice and progress that I took to be self-evident. I continued to demonstrate against the war and denounce bourgeois society, but, thanks to Marcuse, I now harboured secret doubts.

When my wavering leftist convictions needed strengthening, I found inspiration from my history professor, Geoffrey Barraclough. Like Marcuse, the distinguished British medievalist had been hired by UCSD in an attempt to build up the fledgling campus's reputation in a hurry. Barraclough resented Marcuse's notoriety and left La Jolla after a year or two, but he was there long enough to convince me that history really was what I wanted to study. At UCSD, Barraclough taught a sprawling course on 'contemporary world history', linking the past directly to the dramatic events that dominated the headlines. He was a masterful lecturer, clear, dramatic, and always opinionated, and in retrospect, it seems remarkable how well his course anticipated many of the major themes that have changed the discipline in the past forty years: the provincialization of Europe, the importance of Asia, Africa, and Latin America, the creation of a global urban culture.

As exciting as my sophomore year at UCSD had been, I was determined not to stay there. No one realized that the extraordinary concatenation of events that marked the first half of 1968 – the Tet offensive in Vietnam and the subsequent upsurge of antiwar protest in the USA, Johnson's withdrawal from the presidential election, the assassinations of Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy, the *événements de mai* in Paris, which Herbert Marcuse told us about first-hand when he returned from his visit there at the end of the month, and the Prague Spring – would turn out to be the high-water mark of a political wave that was about to recede. It was no time to be living at home with one's parents and attending a small branch campus of the University of California system when one could transfer to Berkeley, the birthplace of 1960s student radicalism, and enroll for

something like \$240 a year, thanks to the state's now long-vanished policy of free tuition. Eager to be in a place where history was not just being studied but was being made, and a good deal more self-confident than I had been when I left for Reed two years earlier, I headed for the Bay Area.

Unlike UCSD, whose small history faculty could only offer a limited number of courses, Berkeley had a broad range of offerings, but, in spite of the lessons I should have learned from Geoffrey Barraclough, I gravitated to the field of modern Europe. Somehow I learned that *the* class to take was Carl Schorske's course on modern European intellectual history. Although there were 300 places in the class, it was so popular that one had to survive a screening process to be admitted. The effort was worth it. Schorske had the talent for making it seem that he was discovering the insights in his lectures as he delivered them. Around that time, quite unknown to me (and, probably, to Schorske), Jacques Derrida was pronouncing that 'there is nothing outside of the text.' Schorske made it seem as if everything was inside the text: by teasing out the full meaning of Locke's *Treatise on education* or Goethe's *Faust*, one could recapture the richness of the world in which those works had been written. The tradition of intellectual history of the 1950s and 1960s that Schorske represented is now often criticized as narrow and elitist, too concentrated on a high-cultural canon, but in Schorske's version, it foreshadowed the more elastic interpretive cultural history that would flourish several decades later. The more limited topics on which Schorske focused also seemed more manageable to me than the grand panoramas sketched out by Barraclough: this was a way of doing history that I might learn to master.

The orderly progression of Schorske's two terms of lectures on European thought was constantly interrupted in the fall of 1968 and the winter of 1969 by turmoil on the campus. Here was the present-day history I had wanted to participate in, but I found myself less and less sure of my proper part in it. The winter term was marked by a long-drawn-out 'Third World Strike' called by black and Mexican-American student groups demanding more attention to minority issues. Schorske, well known for his sympathy with the student protesters of the Free Speech Movement in 1964, felt that his responsibility as a teacher required him to keep his course going, while the strikers attempted to disrupt classes and intimidate other students from attending. I was very torn. I believed in the justice of the Third World students' cause, but the tactics their movement adopted troubled me. I was finding my courses, and especially Schorske's, too stimulating to renounce them; like other male students, I was also worried about putting my draft deferment in jeopardy.

Unable to give myself over to campus activism but unwilling to be left out of the excitement altogether, I found a solution by joining the staff of the student newspaper, the *Daily Californian*. As a reporter, I had a reason to be on the scene whenever anything interesting was happening, but I also had an excuse for not taking sides. Journalism and newspapers had interested me

even earlier. My grandmother Zelda, who began her autobiography by describing her hiring as the first woman reporter for the Wilkes-Barre *Times-Leader*, encouraged me, and it was she who had presented me with a copy of *New Yorker* writer A.J. Liebling's *The press*, a collection of columns he had written about American journalism in the 1940s and 1950s that became one of my favourite books in my teenage years. Now, at the *Daily Cal*, I tried my own hand at the business, and had the heady experience of seeing my words in print the day after they were written.

I quickly showed that I did not have the instincts of a great reporter. Sent along with another staffer to cover a protest that resulted in a mass arrest, I took my notes, flashed my press badge at the police, and went back to the office to write up the story. My companion quickwittedly discarded his own badge, allowed himself to be arrested along with several hundred other students, and wrote a sensational first-hand report that exposed the brutality of the Alameda County sheriff's department and won national attention. I nevertheless made myself useful at the paper. I wrote decently, but my main talent was for overseeing the actual production of the paper, which was then still set in 'hot type' by crusty printers none too patient with the long-haired students sent to work with them. My skill at proofreading, writing headlines, and doing emergency editing when stories did not fit in the spaces allotted for them won me their respect. Within a few months, I was promoted from cub reporter to 'night editor' and became part of the paper's inner circle.

During the two undergraduate years I spent at Berkeley, the *Daily Cal* absorbed far more of my time and energy than my history studies. The inspirational Carl Schorske left Berkeley for the calmer environs of Princeton after my junior year: on one of my visits to his office, he showed me a rock that had just been thrown through his window because of his refusal to call off classes in support of the Third World strike. Still intrigued by what Marcuse had told me about de Maistre, I did a senior honors thesis on French counter-revolutionary thinkers under the direction of the Russian historian Martin Malia, who also taught courses on European intellectual history. Reading Catholic reactionary writers was an odd choice in the atmosphere of the time; perhaps I had inherited more of my father's contrarian streak than I realized. I did not become either a reactionary or a Catholic, even though my interest in Judaism had hit a low ebb during these years, but I learned that history is not just about studying people and ideas one finds congenial. My interest in the counter-revolution should have given me something in common with Malia, a probing analyst of the defects of Communism, but we did not hit it off on a personal level. For various reasons, I would eventually return to Berkeley as a graduate student and complete my dissertation under Malia's direction, but other teachers had more influence on me.

As I finished my undergraduate studies, however, I first had to decide whether to go on to graduate work at all. In the spring of 1969, while

Berkeley was rocked by yet another wave of violence and demonstrations following the university administration's decision to fence in a vacant lot that local activists had turned into as a 'People's Park', I had been a major player in an internal revolution at the *Daily Cal*, which overturned the traditional process of cooptation by which the paper's top editors were chosen. Narrowly defeated in the first staff election for editor-in-chief, I became the paper's city editor for a semester. Many of the colleagues alongside whom I put in 12-hour days went on to distinguished journalistic careers, and I seriously considered joining them. In early 1970, however, I learned another history lesson. The editorial team I had been part of was swept out of office by more radical staffers, bent on turning the paper into 'The People's Daily', and I was unceremoniously ousted from my position. It was a painful experience, and dimmed my enthusiasm for journalism. Contemplating the entry-level positions with small-town papers that some of my *Daily Cal* colleagues were landing did not help. The one job interview I secured for myself was even more disillusioning. Summoned to a local bar, I watched the interviewer rapidly down three double scotches and listened as he told me how miserable the paper he worked for was. As I eyed the three untouched drinks the man had ordered for me, I wondered if this was really how one made it to the *New York Times*.

I did not have enough imagination to think of any alternative except graduate school. The enormous expansion of American universities in the 1960s had created the illusion that the demand for new professors was bound to keep growing; my professors assured me that I had all the necessary talents and was bound to succeed. Certainly this was what my parents had always expected me to do. Becoming a professor had meant upward social mobility for my father, even if his own mother occasionally needled him because his books never made much money; being part of an academic family had meant even more to my mother, whose family had been much poorer than my father's. Most of my parents' friends were fellow academics, and academic success was the only kind of achievement my parents truly valued; neither of them had ever suggested that I should aim at money, celebrity, or public influence. The life my father led made academia seem glamorous indeed: by the late 1960s, he was at the top of his field, regularly awarded fellowships and invited to lecture in exotic places like Budapest and Jerusalem. I understood nothing of the stresses and pains that I now see so clearly in his letters, although I can recognize the reasons why he had little time to pay any attention to my problems.

And so, in the fall of 1970, I became part of the largest cohort of American students ever to enrol in graduate school in history. I still had much to learn about history, and even more about being a historian, but my path was clear. I persisted in my studies even when the booming job market of the late 1960s turned almost over night into the prolonged crisis that would drive many of my peers to law school or other careers. Was it an

inevitable choice? Certainly, academia suited my personality, as it had developed from childhood on, and while my parents had never insisted that I must follow in my father's footsteps, there was no doubt that they had always seen me as a future professor. American society played its part, too: the years when I was growing up were a time when research and researchers enjoyed more prestige than at any time before or since.

Fate seemed to destine me for academia, but becoming a historian was nevertheless a choice, one whose meaning becomes clearer when I compare it with my autobiography-writing ancestors' experiences. I was fortunate to have a choice at all, unlike my greatgrandfather Harry, who spent his life being buffeted by a harsh world he never understood. My grandmother Zelda may not have been quite as much the adventurer as the title of her life story, *Open every door*, suggested, but she did help create a new professional field – public relations – and she had some success in that most individualistic of endeavours, novel-writing. Should I have been willing to take the risks she did? My father took a big gamble when he embarked on an academic career: even after Hitler's defeat, some of his professors warned him that antisemitism would stand in his way. A generation later, I faced no such problem. The risk I took was that of following in the footsteps of a successful parent, so that my achievements would be judged – if not by others, at least by myself – in comparison with a very high standard. The title my father chose for his own autobiographical essay – 'Warts and all' – reminds me, however, that his success had its shadow side. The private dramas of my own life have been far less painful than the struggles with alcoholism and manic-depression he wrote about.

'Call no man happy before his death': Solon's warning is one of the memorable lessons I learned in Reed College's humanities course. On balance, history has given me a satisfying career, but I remain uneasily aware of some of the limitations I accepted by embracing it. Now, as I watch my two sons, intelligent young men who have chosen paths outside of academia, I gain new perspectives on my own choices. Both did well in school, and I sometimes imagined that one or the other would follow in my footsteps. I can only admire their determination to strike out on their own, as their mother did when, as a young woman, she left her native Germany to come to the United States. Will one or the other of them become the fifth generation of my family to write about their own lives? Or will that also be a tradition they will feel the need to break with? Perhaps they will come to realize, as I have, that one can acknowledge the role of family and circumstances in one's life and still feel that one made meaningful choices for oneself.

#### **Notes on contributor**

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### Notes

1. J.D. Popkin 2005.
2. Feinberg 1995; Z. Popkin 1956; R.H. Popkin 1988.
3. R.H. Popkin 1966. I have published some documents about my father's obsession with the Kennedy assassination and other political causes célèbres in an article based on his letters: J.D. Popkin 2008.
4. Following *History, historians and autobiography*, in 2007 I published *Facing racial revolution: Eyewitness accounts of the Haitian insurrection*, a collection and analysis of first-person accounts of the Haitian Revolution of 1791–1804.
5. R.H. Popkin, *The history of scepticism from Erasmus to Descartes* (1960). My father continued to revise this book, which made his career, until the very end of his life; the final edition is *History of scepticism from Savonarola to Bayle*. For my own reconstruction of the story of its composition, see J.D. Popkin 2009.
6. J.D. Popkin 2001. The novels were *Small victory* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1947) and *Quiet street* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1951; reprint 2002).

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