

**Koffler Centre of the Arts**  
**The 2020 Vine Awards: History Shortlist Panel**  
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Allan Levine: Welcome to all of you, and I'm happy to be here. I have to say that it was a pleasure reading all of your books. I always know that I'm in trouble when halfway through any book I say to myself why didn't I think of that and why didn't I, why am I not writing this book, but that is the way it goes, so it was a pleasure. I suppose, to be honest, I enjoyed the history section the most, and I started off with that, and it was great to read. In any event, so tonight I just wanted to talk to you a little bit about your work and your approach, so I thought I would start off with some general questions, and I'll through each of you and ask you just to perhaps tell us what led you to select the subject of the book, like why this particular story, and in your answer if you could also address why, what other factors led you to pick this particular nonfiction book or nonfiction topic. Is it availability of sources, other books on the subject, publisher interest, you know, that kind of process that goes on. I think people would be interested, as well. So, Heidi, do you want to start off by telling us what led you into the subject of your book?

Heidi JS Tworek: Sure, yeah, so what led me into it initially was what I think happens to a lot of historians, which is I discovered that there was something I really didn't know, so I was doing my PhD and I wrote my paper about the 1866 Austro Prussian War, and I wanted to know what people thought about this war in both Austria and Prussia, so I started looking at newspapers, and then toward the end of my research I wondered where did the newspapers get the information from, and I realized that both sides of the war, Austria and Prussia, were actually getting their news about it from a French news agency so that my whole paper made no sense. What I really needed to know was how the networks behind the newspaper functioned, to look at these particular businesses, news agencies, so that's what led me to this topic, thinking about what were these businesses that supplied news to newspapers, how did they function, and then as I delved into the archives what I thought was going to be a story about trying to control news in Germany became a story about how Germans tried to control news around the world, and it was the story that was actually much longer in time that took me all the way into the Nazi period, so when I went into the archives it turned out to be a very different story than what I expected. A global story of fighting around news around the world and one that began really around 1900 and took me all the way to the end of the Nazi period.

Allan Levine: Interesting. Okay. Zelda or John, do you want to tell us a little bit about?

Zelda Abramson: Well, this story stemmed from a time just before my mom died in 2005, and she was already in her 90s and I realized I never asked her much about her early years when she came to Canada. She and my father were both Holocaust survivors. I asked her just innocently who helped you, and she looked at me, and she said no one, and I said how come, and she said no one cared. This was a bit puzzling to me because, you know, the Jewish community embodies the Holocaust, it's really so central, what do you mean that no one cared? A couple years later there was a similar story in the New York Times talking how that in New York City how the Jewish community there disparaged the Holocaust survivors, and so I was interested in the topic. I had left Montreal over 40 years earlier, and so I began looking at Holocaust survivors who settled in Montreal, and it was shocking that there was hardly anything written, so I had a sabbatical in 2012 and decided that, you know, I was gonna look into it, but it was a long time, you know, since I left Montreal, I didn't know people, I didn't know the community anymore, but we went and we started the research.

Allan Levine: I see. Okay. Matti?

Matti Friedman: This book, Spies of No Country, started with a conversation with an old spy who I was interviewing for an earlier book, and we were talking about something else, and he said, Matti, you should really meet a friend of mine who is an event older spy, a retired spy who was almost 90 at the time, and I didn't know why exactly I was going to meet this guy, but I learned, and I write this in the book, that, you know, over many years as a journalist, if someone offers to introduce you to an old spy, you should probably go. You're probably not gonna regret it. So, I got in the car and I drove down from Jerusalem, which is where I live and where I'm speaking from, and I drove down to Bat Yam, which is a suburb of Tel Aviv, and I got to this kind of very grim workers block of apartments, and I rode this tiny elevator up to the 7<sup>th</sup> floor, and waiting for me there on the 7<sup>th</sup> floor was this tiny man who was almost 90 with glasses and a moustache, and he sat me down in his kitchen and he made me black coffee and he told me a story about the founding of the state of Israel that I had never heard before. It was a story that blew my mind, and it was a story with characters that were unfamiliar to me and I had never heard. I thought I knew the story of the founding of the state, but I had never heard anything like it, and it explained something to me about the country that I had been trying to understand since coming here as a Canadian teenager. I was 17 when I came here in 1995, and I came here with a very European story about Israel, and I think that's probably true for many of us who grew up in North America in Jewish communities. We have a story about Israel that's very much about Theodor Herzl and pogroms in Eastern Europe and socialism, the kibbutz idea of the Holocaust, of course, looms very large, but if you take the Jewish population of Israel, fully half of the Jews in Israel don't come from Europe. They come from the Islamic world like the spy who I was interviewing who grew up in Aleppo, Syria, and suddenly I had a story about the founding of the state where the main characters

weren't Jews from Europe. They were Jews from the Arab world who could speak Arabic and who could use their Arab identities to become spies. It made the whole story of 1948 look different, and it made the country now look different to me, and that's when I decided that I had to write the story.

Allan Levine: Alright. I take it all of you didn't have any, when you started out did you find publishers easily for all your work, or is that something that wasn't an issue?

Heidi JS Tworek: Yeah, so, well, I first wrote it not quite knowing who exactly would be the right publisher because you want the publisher who can sort of get it to the right kinds of people and so on and so forth and, you know, being an academic then you're in a slightly different position because there are also expectations on where you as an academic should publish. So, in the end, I was able to work with Harvard, which was great, because they made it something called an academic trade book, which means that it's packaged as a trade book, priced in that way, but also has the academic apparatus like the endnotes and the listing of all of the archival sources, which was really important for all the academics who would read it, so that turned out to be a great fit for me.

Allan Levine: Okay, and Zelda and John?

Zelda Abramson: Well, I think it was really important that this book was rooted in justice, social justice, so I wanted a, you know, publisher who was rooted to social justice, and I also wanted it not only to be an academic book but sort of, you know, a book that would be attractive to the community, and so I contacted Between the Lines and I said is this something you'd be interested in, and they said put in a proposal and it went from there, and they were interested in the proposal, and the book got published, so I only tried one publisher.

Allan Levine: Right, right, right, and Matti, I imagine, I know you probably have connections from your other books, so.

Matti Friedman: Yeah, the three books are all published by the same publisher.

Allan Levine: Right. Okay. Let me know ask you some more specific questions, and I guess I'll start with Heidi again and we'll go that way. So, you know, as I said, I, you know, I think you've written a fascinating book on a topic that hadn't received much attention at least in English, and you've shown strong linkages between the pre Nazi period, as you said, and the Nazi era in terms of news and propaganda. Can you comment a little bit more about these connections? Did the Weimar Republic have any idea that they were providing, probably not with the Nazis with the system that they expanded and used to their advantage in ways German political leaders in the 20s probably couldn't have imagined or conceived? Were you aware of these linkages before you began your research?

Heidi JS Tworek: No, I mean, I have to say it was one of the surprises. So, what I ended up seeing in many ways is not that the content is the same, right, the type of news that is being distributed in the Nazi period is obviously antisemitic and racist and so on in a way that we don't see in the earlier piece of news, but what I found to be striking and I hadn't expected was that the

technological networks that were being used and the actual businesses, these news agencies were being used, were things that were developed actually early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century in the sort of semi authoritarian/semi democratic imperial German period, taken on by Weimar politicians and industrialists in this democratic period, and then they continued into the Nazi period. It wasn't what I expected. I thought the story was going to end with the Nazi period, that there would be radical breaks just like there were, for example, with newspaper ownership and journalists within Germany. I thought it was going to be a story to end in '33, and so I was really surprised to find it was actually a story that continued after 1933 and that the Nazis really built on these networks that had been solidified and financed by Weimar politicians. I would say that one of the things that the book shows is that it's actually politicians across the political spectrum who get really invested in news as a way to achieve political and economic goals, and those goals are different depending on whether these are leftwing pro democratic politicians or if they are rightwing nationalist politicians, but the point is that they are all trying to use news for these bigger goals, and some of them, of course, end up then being successful in the Nazi period, but I think what it shows us is that things that sound very boring like infrastructure and business history actually they come alive and they tell us really important structural things about how the news gets controlled, by whom, and for what reasons, and that's often a more important story than what's printed in the newspaper every single day.

Allan Levine: Right. Okay. Thank you. Zelda or John, as I think you mentioned, for a long time there was the general belief among the Jewish community in major urban centers in Canada that the survivors were welcomed with open arms, but, as you noted, this wasn't the case. Were you at all surprised by this? I think you sort of commented about this, and how did the survivors remember this when you talked to them?

Zelda Abramson: There was real homogeneity of views, so in ways I was, I was sort of looking for this, but I didn't know it because my family was so insular of the survivors, but when I broached the topic, you know, and we talked about it, they all shared the same story, we had nothing to do with the Jewish Canadians. They weren't interested in us, and then they would say, well, maybe we're not so interested in them, either, you know, and there was a great divide, and I think that, you know, the Jewish, I'm gonna step back, so we tried to figure out why this was the case, why was there so much resistance to the rescued Jews, especially after what they experienced in Europe, and it just came to us that a lot of this had to do with systemic antisemitism and the history of antisemitism in Canada and especially in Quebec, and, you know, what transpired, I think for a lot of the Jewish Canadians, they had finally made it, they were successful, right, and they were scared that these groups of the immigrants who had come in to Canada would cast a negative shadow on their successes so they were embarrassed, and so the problem doesn't lie so much in the fact that the Jewish Canadians treated them badly but it lies in a society that condones

systemic, you know, this case is antisemitism or systemic racism.

Allan Levine: Right, right. I suppose, also, there was some disbelief about what had happened, and the survivors themselves probably, from what I understand, from my own work, they did not offer to talk about it very much initially at least.

Zelda Abramson: Well, it wasn't safe when they did talk about it. They said, well, we couldn't buy a chicken for, you know, a month, or there were no eggs available, and it was a silencing, right, so it was no longer safe for them to talk about it, and, you know, some people just preferred not to talk about it or to keep it within the community of survivors.

Allan Levine: Right. Okay, Matti. I was curious what has been the book's reception in Israel so far? Has it changed any perceptions about the 1948 war or about the role of the Mizrahi or Jews from Arab countries? You note that the story of these men has "something important to tell us about the country they helped create," so can you expound a little on the aim to draw more attention to the omitted significance of these non Europeans to Israel's modern history?

Matti Friedman: Sure. There's a big difference in the way the book is read in English and Hebrew, even though it's the same book almost word for word. For many English readers, this is the first time that they're being exposed to the fact that many of the Jews here come from places like Aleppo and Yemen and North Africa, so it's new. For Israelis, though, this is very much a part of national life, in part just because you can't miss it. If you stand out on an Israeli street and you just look at the people, it's quite clear that many of the people, even in a completely Jewish area, are Middle Eastern. They're Middle Eastern in their appearance, in their cuisine, in their approach to religion, and that's very much a part of what the country is and it's also a big part of our discussions and arguments as Israelis. Often, arguments that seem to be about left and right in Israel are actually arguments between people whose grandparents came from Eastern Europe and people whose grandparents came from the Arab world. In the Jewish population of Israeli, which is about 80% of the country, it's half/half, which is quite remarkable. So, for Israelis reading this book, this is very much a story they're aware of. Not the story of the spies, who are completely unknown, and not the story of this particular intelligence unit, the Arab Section, which has been completely forgotten and Israeli readers are learning about it, most of them for the first time, but the idea of this tension between Jews from Arab countries and Jews from Eastern Europe is very much something that's a big part of the Israeli psyche, and the country is actually incomprehensible without it. So, the book, when it came out in Hebrew, it was immediately, it immediately became part of that debate. Half of the country feels that its history has been kind of marginalized and feels that its stories haven't been heard and that their role in the Zionist narrative has been played down, which is completely true to this day. Outside Israel, when we think about Israel and Zionism, we still think about figures like Gulen and Moshe Dayan and Golda Meir, all of whom are of course are very important, but you don't hear a lot

about Jews who came from, you know, Casablanca or from Tunis, and that's changing in Israel and it's changing much more slowly outside of Israel, but it certainly is changing.

Allan Levine:

Right. Okay. Thanks. Okay. I'll come back to Heidi. This is actually, I suppose, apropos for the insanity we've been watching unfold, but there is in your book definite ideas and practices that resonate today, fake news, the lying press, clearly manipulating the news. They may have more technological platforms today, but, as you write, it's been going on for a long time. How do you interpret that kind of process?

Heidi JS Tworek:

Yeah, that's a great question, and in some ways it's also a question about my own experience of writing and revising this book where, frankly, the present caught up with its history, both in a sort of practical and horrifying sense that many of the terms that the Nazis used, like Lügenpresse, lying press, were suddenly appropriated by far right anti-immigrant demonstrators within Germany and then also within the far right in the US, something I couldn't possibly have anticipated, so even just being able to explain how these terms emerged, how dangerous they became, and their original context was already something incredibly important, but even more so, when I was first working on this project, I had a kind of dissonance between me and everybody else, this sort of utopian world of what social media could achieve, and I was writing a book about the potential dangers of new technologies like radio, how they could be appropriated in all sorts of ways that one couldn't foresee at the beginning, and it feels like the world has caught up to that as we now sit here wondering about how platforms can be manipulated in all of these horrifying ways, including, once again, for antisemitism, racism, misogyny, etc., so I think what it tells us is that there's a lot of structural things going on here that, when platforms or radio or any technology becomes powerful enough, there are interests that want to be involved in it in different ways that help to explain attempts at foreign interference by Russia, China, Iran, etc., but also it reminds us that platforms and different types of technological platforms can also amplify and exacerbate existing tensions within society, some of which obviously Zelda and John wrote about, or Matti, as well. These are things that these technologies can amplify, and we need to be alive to that and the ways in which they can be manipulated to do that. Of course they look somewhat different when you have radio that's more sort of centrally controlled versus social media platforms, which any of us post on, but some of the underlying dynamics, so there are only a few companies that are the bottlenecks here, have remained quite similar, so the present has caught up to me, unfortunately, and that's a less utopian story, but it remains a very important one.

Allan Levine:

Right. Okay. Thanks. Zelda and John, related to the earlier question I asked, you noted in your conclusion that one of the questions that consumed you was how did the Montreal Jewish communities attitudes change from lack of interest in the Holocaust and a distancing from it to a collective identification with the Holocaust. Can you elaborate a little as to what you found?

Zelda Abramson: Well, we found that the question, you know, we tried to understand what shifted, how did it shift, right, what made the Holocaust so popular, or as one of the women we interviewed would say, à la mode, you know, and we sort of asked that question and, you know, we talked about Paul Newman and Exodus, we talked about Eichmann, we talked about the Six-Day War, we talked about Elie Wiesel, and then at the end we realized, you know, it doesn't really matter what shifted. The real question is why does it happen? Why are groups of refugees rejected? I think, you know, similar to what, you know, Heidi was just talking about, it's really interesting how relevant her story is to today and it's equally interesting how our story is relevant today. Why do we treat refugees so poorly? Why are we resistant to accept them into our country? Why do we pathologize them? I think those are the questions we have to grapple with because if you trace the history of Holocaust survivors, they contributed greatly to Canadian society, yet that piece of history doesn't seem to come to the forefront but rather we tend to pathologize sort of the negativity of, you know, the Muslim population or the Syrian refugees or any other refugee group not to include them into our society.

Allan Levine: Okay. Matti, in your research and interviews with the four key characters, did anything you discovered surprise you? Who were these men? As you write, were they Arabs or were they pretending to be people who weren't Arabs pretending to be Arabs? A conundrum of a question and a dilemma for them. They had to become the people they had fled from. Were they trapped in an internal identity crisis?

Matti Friedman: I think they were, and I think that their whole existence as spies was part of that identity crisis. There's this amazing moment where they're being trained, these very young men, street kids in some cases, kids who were in pre state Palestine in the 40s, you know, without their parents and trying to figure out who they were and what was going on. They were marginal characters in the Zionist movement at that time. The Jewish population here at the time was 90% Ashkenazi, so 90% European, East European, and a very small number of these Jews who seemed very Arabic and spoke Arabic as their native language and whose culture was Arabic, and the majority of the population didn't really know what to do with them, and the Zionist leadership didn't really know what to do with them, and they found that their way into the society was to become spies. That was useful. In that particular case, your Arab identity could be useful to the national movement. You could assume an Arab identity and then be dispatched back across the lines into the world where you came from because these kids had grown up in Aleppo and they'd grown up in Yemen and they'd grown up among Arabs speaking Arabic, and their whole experience of what Israel is and how it was created is completely different. Their whole experience of what Israel is and how it was created is completely different. The characters in the book experienced the founding of Israel in May of 1948 in Lebanon. They're in Lebanon when the state is founded, and they're pretending to be Palestinian refugees from the war in Palestine, and they are refugees, right? They're Jewish

refugees from Arab countries who are pretending to be Arab refugees from a Jewish country, and there are so many layers of displacement and identity confusion there that make the story so rich, and it becomes even more important when you realize that half of the Jewish population of Israel has a story like that, not just the spies. In the case of the spies, it's convenient to talk about double identity because that's really their job, but for half of the Jews and the Jewish state, the story is similar. They come from here, and they joined a project that was started by European Jews for European Jews, basically, but they changed the nature of the project and they changed the country that emerges, and that's one reason why North American Jews come to Israel and are often confused by it because it doesn't seem like the Jewish world they know from North America. If you're looking for bagels here, it's hard to find. Jewish food here is the food of the Levant and the food of North Africa because that's where the Jews come from, and it's a big difference between Israeli Judaism and Diaspora Judaism, and it's a big part of the gap, the growing gap, I think, between those two Jewish worlds.

Allan Levine:

Right. Okay. I'm gonna ask you one, each of you another round of questions, and then Jared's been posting several bigger, all sorts of questions that you can all and I'll direct them to you in a few minutes. Okay, so, back to Heidi. I just have, I'm also just curious, too, but you're an academic historian but you've written a very accessible book published by, you know, an esteemed academic publisher, which is impressive. Can you comment on that experience? I mean, was it, did you run into any issues in terms of trying to make the book, you know, stick with, being and making it an academic book but yet making it available to a general audience?

Heid JS Tworek:

Yeah, it's a great question. I mean, there's a balance, I think, to be struck when you write these things, so if you look in the endnotes of the book you'll see some of the more kind of academic discussions end up in the endnotes rather than in the body of the text, so, you know, more of the sort of scholarly discussion of literature and that kind of stuff. I really tried to make it a book that could be read by a more general audience, policymakers who are interested in these questions, and then also academics, as well, so there was a bit of a balancing act. It required a lot of redrafting of the introduction in particular, and I'd say actually, honestly, though, the bigger challenge for me, because I believe we should write academic things that are accessible to other people, particularly as historians, we have material that people are deeply interested in so it should be on us to write it in a way that people can read, the bigger challenge for me was figuring out how to write a conclusion to this book. Should I write a conclusion that's like an epilogue that goes up to the present but the present kept changing and I didn't want a book that was out of date because it's telling a historical story that will still be important in 20 years, so I ended up writing a conclusion that talked much more about the sort of broader principles of what we can learn from this moment and then going back at the end actually to Walter Lippman, who was writing

about public opinion and these questions in the 20s, to show we are still grappling with the same basic issues.

Allan Levine: Yes, yes. Okay. Zelda and John, oral history, and in particular the oral history of Holocaust survivors, recounted decades after the events described took place have sometimes been questioned for accuracy. Did you have to deal with this issue at all, and, if so, how? Also, I myself have interviewed Holocaust survivors over the years and found it can be a very emotional ordeal. How did that work for you?

John Lynch: Well, I can start with that. In the interview processes, I was there to film Zelda interviewing Holocaust survivors. That's the way I started. I found that they hadn't talked about the war. When we started to interview them, they thought it was just going to be about the war again, and a number of them had already been interviewed, but when we focused a bit more on after the war they hadn't spoken about that at all and they'd say I came to Canada, I got a job, I had kids, and that's it. You know, like, really, what do you want to know? As we pushed into that, they got more reflective and excited, and we found at the end of the interviews they wanted to continue to talk whereas if it had been just about the Holocaust they would have said I'm about to have a sort of a migraine headache and this is so hard to talk about, but for us it became a gift to them and for them a really strong, a gift to us because they were excited. They could talk about their lives in a positive way, and they were very proud of what they had accomplished.

Allan Levine: Right, right. Did you ever wonder about the accuracy about what they were telling you?

Zelda Abramson: There were a couple of people we interviewed who had advanced dementia, and, you know, there were bits and pieces of the stories that were accurate but we were uncertain and couldn't use it for that reason, but generally, no, we really, the memory was really quite incredible, the details, when we asked them, you know, where did you live, what was the street number, how much money did you earn, and without a pause they would just go into great detail into the facts, and then you heard recurring themes, right, over and over again, so the situations were a little bit different but the overarching themes were the same, and, you know, there was a rawness, I think, you know, as John said, they didn't know how to tell the story. They knew how to tell the Holocaust story, what happened to them during the war years, but they never really talked about after the war years, so it was raw in that sense, you know, that, and I, we found it totally credible.

Allan Levine: Right. Okay. Matti, you may have sort of touched on this, but I'll go through it anyway here. It seems as if the book was for many years in the making. You mentioned that you had said that you had spent many hours over several years with one of the men featured, Isaac Shoshan. You note that you were most interested in spending time with old spies, which you add, is never time wasted. At what point did you figure out this was gonna be a good book?

Matti Friedman: It actually took years for me to realize what the book was. I started

interviewing Isaac Shoshan, the only one of the four spies who was still alive when I started to work on the story, I interviewed him in 2011, and the book, you know, was published eight or nine years later. I wasn't initially sure what he was telling me. The story was so strange that I didn't really know where to put it, and I rushed to interview him because he was, you know, very elderly, and I wasn't sure how long I was gonna have, so I went back and I'd go back again with my recorder and I kind of drove him crazy. He didn't really know, you know, what I wanted, and I was insistent, and then, by the way, he is 96 and still alive and kicking, but I didn't know that at the time in 2011, and it took a few years before I found the stories of the other men who had been with him in this unit called the Arab Section and before it really clicked for me that this was not just a story, it wasn't just a spy story, it wasn't just a kind of an exciting adventure story, it was really an alternative creation story for the state of Israel, one which explains a lot about the country that I found confusing when I came, and that's when the pieces fell together, but that was several years before that happened and then it was a few more years to actually write the thing, so it was quite a long process.

Allan Levine: Right, right. Okay. I'm gonna ask you, I've got several questions here that were sent to me, so this is one for all of you and we can just go through the process here. The question is has your journey writing your book profoundly changed you? Is there an instance where you learned something through your research that changed you specifically? Heidi, do you wanna comment?

Heidi JS Tworek: Yeah, I mean, I think this is maybe particular to being a historian, but there's something so visceral to sitting in an archive when you discover someone's personal story and you read through it and you don't know in the archive how it will end and then, you know, this being German history, it doesn't end well for many of the Jewish participants because of course many journalists are Jews, and my grandparents fled Germany in the 30s so for me there was a sort of very visceral moment where you read these documents and there are people you sort of lived with for a week because you're reading this chronologically and all of a sudden you get to the 30s and their lives fall apart and often you don't know what happened to them in the end, so you know they're fired, you know they might have been expelled in some way, but you never know exactly what happened and the Yad Vashem doesn't give you the answers to everybody, so I think for me that's a really sort of visceral experience to sit and live something in forwards time where you really don't know what will happen to someone is a sort of profound experience and maybe one other thing that I'll say is that as a result of this research I have gotten much more involved in thinking about public policy and how we regulate social media, in part because I think this is such an urgent question of our time and a historian's view is crucial in trying to figure out how we prevent any of this from potentially reemerging. We've seen lots of terrifying and troubling things that have happened on social media or have been accelerated through social media so I guess that's another thing that fundamentally

changes my commitment to bring this historical research to a broader question of how we deal with these problems today.

Allan Levine:

Okay. Do you want me to repeat the question, or, Zelda, or -

Zelda Abramson:

No, I think I'm good with it. You know, I think I might defer to John, but I just want to say quickly is that it goes back to another question you asked earlier is it sort of reaffirmed my belief in oral history, the power of the individual story to tell history, so history from below and what you get in these stories are counternarratives, so the most poignant one was about the French language question that something that isn't talked about. When the immigrants came, they went to what was called the Protestant School Board of Greater Montreal. It was the anglophone school. The reason they went was they weren't allowed to go to the francophone school because they weren't Catholic. They had to go speak, you know, to English school, so many of the immigrants settled, for example, in Belgium or in France after the war and they wanted their kids educated in French because that was the language the kids learned in school or they were both familiar with and that wasn't the option. So, it's those narratives that are so important that, you know, history has ignored, and it's the power of the individual story.

Allan Levine:

Right. Okay, Matti?

Matti Friedman:

The work on this book really changed the way I see the country and my own place in it, and it also taught me a lot about spies. You know, a lot of what we think about spies is nonsense. The way it actually works when you look at the minutia of their work is much more mundane and much more interesting in some ways than the kind of fictionalized versions of spies that we love to read about, but I think that the main takeaway for me ended up being just an insight into age. I spent a lot of time talking to very old people about when they were young, and it sounds like this is similar to my colleagues here. I spoke to this spy who was almost 90 and to several other people who were involved in this story, all of whom were about 90. In the documents that I was reading they were 20, and in their stories they were 20, and I had this back and forth between these dynamic, young people who were alive and active at this absolutely chaotic moment and the person sitting opposite me who was this very elderly person who lived an entire life and had children and great grandchildren in some cases, and I think it made me realize that someone is, I'm 43, so I'm kind of, you know, heading in one direction, as we all are, and I think it made me realize just how fast that happens and how, you know, every very elderly person you see on the street was once some dynamic 20 year old with ideas about the world, some of which were right and some of which were wrong, but I think it changed the way that I look at just people on the street and people I see on the bus.

Allan Levine:

Right, right. I'm just curious, just as a personal, were you able to get, because I can't remember from the book, but were you able to get access to any, are there classified documents about this that are available or anything like that?

Matti Friedman:

Yes, there turned out to be a lot of documents in the military archive that

had never been declassified, including the radio transmissions that the spies had been sending to Israel in the summer of 1948. It's just a handwritten log in pencil. Israeli intelligence was not what it later became. It was a shack with a radio transmitter on a wooden table, and there was a guy or a woman who was sitting at the table with a pencil writing down the transmission, and those were stuck in a file and remained classified until I asked for them, in part, I think, because no one had ever asked before I did, and there was a declassification process that took several months, but they gave me most of the stuff, not all of it, and that helped me put the story together. Again, I don't think it was necessarily that the material was of enormous national significance, although some of it was, I think it was mainly that no one had been interested in this story for several years.

Allan Levine: Right, right. Okay, this is a question from somebody else, specifically for Heidi. Do you feel a system should be in play for truthful curation on social media, and how would that even be done?

Heidi JS Tworek: Yes, you know, it's a great question, and part of what this research I think showed is that sometimes trying to think and discern what is truth can lead you down a very troubling path if certain groups of people are determining what that is, so, you know, a lot of how I've tried to think about social media regulation has a couple of parts to it. One is trying to think about the long-term unintended consequences because one of the tragic stories that I tell in the book is how someone who is deeply committed to democracy in the early 1920s in the Weimar Republic ends up creating a regulation regime for radio where he thinks this is gonna save democracy but that means more and more state supervision to try and save democracy, and so ironically when the Nazis come to power it means the Nazis have control over radio, so one thing I think we can bring to our current discussions is not just thinking about what happens in the next year but what happens in the next 10-15 years depending on how we set things up. The other thing to think about, I think, is who gets amplified and how, so trying to think less maybe about truth and non-truth, because that's all sort of very, you know, epistemologically complicated as truth changes over time but rather who gets amplified and how and what are the incentives. We see, for example, there was an investigative story in the Wall Street Journal very recently that showed that in 2017 Facebook changed its algorithms to promote conservative content over leftwing content, so we see that these are potentially political decisions. They are decisions that are made, these things are not neutral, and so we can bring, I think, the historian's eye to understanding the power dynamics behind why social media functions the way that it does and then we think about regulation from those perspectives, and then maybe finally, for the sort of Canadian perspective on this, is thinking about what does it mean to have social media within Canada, a place that has a charter committed to multiculturalism that thinks about rights and freedoms in a very different way from the United States and even if both are democracies committed to free expression what exactly that means is actually quite different in Canada because of the various subsidies for cultural expression,

multilingualism, indigenous rights and so on and so forth, so that's one thing I spend a lot of time thinking about, what does it mean to regulate social media in democracies that don't think about free expression in exactly the same way as the US, which is a major challenge.

Allan Levine: Right. Okay. There's another question here from somebody else. I know that when I finish a book that's taken me a long time and then when someone asks me about the question I'm about to ask you, what are you working on next, is always a tough sometimes question to answer. I hate finishing a book because I realize I need to then thereby come up with another idea, and I've been doing this a long time and it's never an easy process, especially these days, but do you have a project, so someone wanted to know if each of you have any project in the works that you can just share a little bit of information about or, you know, it's up to you, of course. So, Zelda, we'll start with you guys, John and Zelda.

John Lynch: Well, it turns out that the Montreal Shtetl is now being developed as a play.

Allan Levine: Oh, that's great.

John Lynch: We've found that during the launches we had the experience of young people reading some of the various, you know, stories from the book, so we had the experience that Matti was trying to find where you have a young person reading about somebody's young life who is now a very old person so you had that generation mix, and it was very powerful, and we find that the oral history is very powerful if it's acted on, if it's performed, and it's a good way to keep the story going, keep the sort of Holocaust story going and, in our case, the post Holocaust story.

Allan Levine: Right, right. Matti, any, you must have something on the go?

Matti Friedman: I gotta make a living. I'm doing some journalism, of course, as I do. I wrote a piece that came out last week in Mosaic magazine about the Russian immigration to Israel, which is another story of identity and immigration that really changed this place. I have a book project, also, on the go, but it's a bit early to get into the details about it. It's about a very interesting cultural moment in the Yom Kippur War with strong Canadian content.

Allan Levine: Right. That's good. Alight. And Heidi?

Heidi JS Tworek: So, I started working a couple of years ago on the history of health communications, so some people joke I should stop picking new topics because the present keeps catching up with my history, so I've been spending the last few months doing a lot of more contemporary work on how is health communication functioning in a whole host of democracies around the world because it seems like a moment where if one can help one should, but there is also a long history as to why we're having some of the problems that we are today, including with the World Health Organization, why we've ignored the role of communications and trying to stem disease and why we've ended up with this sort of weird obsession with numbers when actually people are more moved by emotions in communication, so there's lots to do.

Allan Levine: Yes, yes. I know there's definitely this conflict between health and politics

and why politicians should be calling the shots and not doctors, and even in places that aren't, you know, even in places where scientists and doctors are respected you still get a, there's obviously a bit of tug of war going on, I guess, so that's what you can look at. You have lots of data now, I'm sure.

Heidi JS Tworek: Yes, but I will say only briefly there are also very optimistic stories about places that have reformed their public health after previous issues and who have done an incredible job, so I've also tried to, maybe in contrast to this story, which is a somewhat depressing one, also find some optimism in how we can do better during this pandemic and also the next one.

Allan Levine: Okay. There's a specific question for Zelda and John here. Holocaust Education Week just ended. As the last of the survivors get older and eventually will no longer be with us, what do you both feel is the most important thing for the continuation of their stories across the world?

Zelda Abramson: Well, in part, the book will keep memories alive, of course, and their voices will prevail, and for us, I think, the most important thing about the book is the larger arc, the stories of, you know, antisemitism, the story of racism, the story of hate and discrimination. Those are the stories that we want to prevail, and the, you know, the effect of it on individual lives but also on the lives of the state and the role of the state in determining, you know, immigration and refugee status, which I, you know, which is something we talked about earlier.

Allan Levine: Right. Okay. There's sort of a followup question from Ann Fort. She's curious about the gender roles that emerge in the oral histories and also in the other books, as well, so, Zelda, do you wanna just start with that?

Zelda Abramson: Yeah, gender was pivotal in the book. I mean, you know, the refugees were very poor, there was absolutely no daycare, like absolutely, so the women had to stay at home. For some of the women it was not something they wanted to do. The families were poor and they could not sustain themselves on one income, so there were all kinds of creative ways what the women did to economically contribute to the house. If the husband would bring home piecework she would end up sewing during the day to increase his earnings, which, in a way, was very creative because women did get paid less than men so this way the husband would get more and she would, you know, and the women would do the work. Women had to sustain, you know, the family emotionally, materially, so gender was riddled through the book, and, you know, part of what a lot of people didn't realize was how, although the work was plentiful, work was very, very precarious, so even though men got jobs fairly quickly, two weeks later they'd be laid off because it was what they called the slack season, then it would pick up again, and then they were laid off, and this would go on and on and on, and then women would have to somehow find ways to supplement the income.

Allan Levine: Right. Do either of Heidi or Matti, do you wanna add anything in your own perspective on this? Okay. Matti, actually, there's a specific question from Terry Williams for you. In telling the story, it seems a bit like the real life prequel to Eli Cohen saga, which I watched also on Netflix, a decade

or so later, especially given that he was born in Egypt. I'm quite curious whether that is something that came up with any of your interviews. He says I'm also looking forward to reading your book, so I apologize if you've covered this already, but I don't think you have.

Matti Friedman:

Yeah, the Eli Cohen story is an amazing one, a tragic one, of course. He's probably Israel's best known spy in part because of the way that story ended where he's caught by the Syrians in the early 60s and is hung in Damascus in 1965. Eli Cohen is a descendant of the men of the Arab Section, one of the main characters in my book. In fact, the man who was the brain behind the Arab Section, an Iraqi Jew named Shimon Somech, he went by an Arabic name, and Shimon both really invented the Arab Section and was the main handler of Eli Cohen, so the same people are involved in these stories. The Arab Section is an early version of an intelligence tactic that's later used in a more sophisticated way in the case of Eli Cohen, so my spies are really kind of straight level spies and when they're in Lebanon they have no access to any high level information. That's part of the irony of their story. They're running a kiosk near an elementary school and they're selling sandwiches and one of them drives a taxi, and the Israelis realize that this really isn't gonna get them very much so they call the Arab Section back to Israel in 1950 and then reboot the system with a guy like Eli Cohen who is also from the Arab world, a Jew from the Arab world, who was given a cover identity but one that allows him to penetrate the highest levels of the Syrian regime, and that ends tragically, but before it ends tragically he does manage to deliver interesting and important information to Israel in the early 60s, so the stories are closely linked, and that story of identity was told in the Netflix series I think remarkably well. I wasn't expecting to see that complexity of the Israeli society brought to the fore in kind of a popular show on Netflix starring Sasha Baron Cohen, who did, I think a remarkably good job playing Eli Cohen. That identity conflict where his Arab identity is a disadvantage in Israel unless he becomes a spy, and the series makes that explicit, that's very much, that's very prominent today in Israeli popular culture and other TV shows. If you saw Tehran, which was recently broadcast on Apple TV and I think has done quite well, the main character, Tehran, is an Israeli spy in Iran, but she's Iranian, she's Persian, and she has family there, so her identity is much more complicated than just the identity of a spy in an enemy country. She is the enemy, and that's a big part of what Israel is in another series that just got picked up by HBO about the Yom Kippur War. One of the main plot lines involves soldiers in an armored unit who are from North Africa and speak Arabic with each other and are mistreated by their officers because they're kind of seen with disdain, and that's a series about the Yom Kippur War. You won't really encounter a treatment of Israeli today in local popular culture that doesn't address this issue of identity specifically.

Allan Levine:

Right. Terry Williams also had asked do you think the recent TV series about them has helped foster additional interest in the story that you're telling in this book?

Matti Friedman: I think so. I think so. A lot of people saw that series and I can reference it easily, and I say, you know, when I'm speaking to a room of people, I'll say did anyone see the Eli Cohen series, and I've noticed that a lot of people did, and it really, it's simplistic, it's TV, it's not 100% true, but it does bring those issues to the floor and allows you to start thinking about it, which I think is very important for people outside Israel trying to think about Israel. This issue is maybe the most important to think about today, and I was very grateful to the Netflix series for putting it in front of people in a way that was also quite entertaining.

Allan Levine: Right. Okay. So I think that is all the questions we have. I just wanna make a point of mentioning your books again, and I appreciate you taking the time to speak with us. Interesting conversation. I don't get to do this kind of thing very often, so I appreciate it. It was lots of fun. So, we have Zelda, and then so we will find out Zelda Abramson and John Lynch, The Montreal Shtetl: Making Home After the Holocaust, Matti Friedman, Spies of No Country, and Heidi JS Tworek, News From Germany: The Competition to Control World Communication, 1900-1945, and, again, it's a pleasure talking to you all, and good luck, and I will see you, I guess, next week, and we'll find out who the grand winner is here, although I sort of know, I suppose, but I'm not talking.