

Wendy Doniger dinner conversation 15 Sept 1989. After Wendy's talk at Rice in Sewell 301, with a petty good turn-out of some 80 to 100 people, a small group went to Nit Noi Thai Restaurant in the village: Steve & Martha Tyler (Steve dressed in elegant black dinner jacket, with bold black striped shirt and black bow tie, Martha wearing her stunning silver necklace made by a Native American in Colorado (like a Tibetan necklace suffering from elephantitis) -- Wendy noted that Martha drinks a lot, plowing through the wine); Anne Klein & husband Harvey Aaronson; Meredith Skura and Marty Wiener; Wendy and myself (Wendy had been at a conference with Meredith a number of years back, at Emory, with also Steven Gould, Jim Boon, -- a Daedalus conference)--Wendy was delighted to discover that Meredith was married and had two kids: had thought of her as a lesbian, sexually withdrawn, or unpartnerable, albeit extraordinarily bright. Conversation was free-floating from Sanskritists and Wasson stories (he was a fastidious man, but once in Hong Kong was offered an adventurous meal: a live cobra was brought to the table held at the head by one man and by the tail by another, slit open and the heart and liver pulled out and handed pulsating to him with the encouragement, "it's good for virility." He ate it. Apparently he had also tried peyote. Wendy has a teenaged son, an Arabian horse, and 2 dogs; her boyfriend Brian Smith(?) teaches at Barnard, a distressing long-distance relation these past four years. Wendy's on a diet: has taken off 25 pounds in the past four months: last year was a bad year, she dropped out of a lot of things, gained some 15 lbs, the other ten had just crept up over the past decade. She's had a horse since 1960; the current one was the first she herself had broken, got him as a three year old, he's now 11; is in Chicago. The Tyler's left early.

Gradually the patter turned into Jewish Central European ancestor stories, a real swapping of tales. It began with the five of them talking about their Brooklyn or N.Y. childhoods, and how far out they moved. Wendy grew up where Radio Days is set, Meredith and Harvey not far away. Anne started in Manhattan, then Queens. Marty is also from around there. Anne and I had traded notes on California (whence they came this year) and Texas vs East Coast earlier (California first felt strange and only slowly beautiful and like home); she had moved as a child to Albany (her father, an architect, took a job with the state), but that never became the emotional focus of rooting. There was some mention of Polish roots (Aaronson, Wendy's father), and so I shifted the conversation: OK so where are people "really from". Aaronson's family was from Poland, but not a word of Polish was spoken at home, nor were stories ever told about Poland: there is absolutely no sense of the "good old days", or a sense of history there for him. Wendy recalled that when she was 7 she was out on the street and heard Polish jokes being told: she knew her father had been born in Poland, and wondered why her father did not seem to mind, tho she knew this was like calling blacks "nigger"; when they got home, she asked, and he said, "I'm not a Pole." "But you were born in Poland, so you must be a Pole," says 7 year old Wendy. "No, I am not a Pole, I am a Jew." Doubly confusing for a little girl, who because of WWII thought Germans were the enemy, to find out that her father had lost a leg in the first world war and nearly died because Polish doctors refused to treat him--he hated Poles for that-- and German doctors had saved his life. She then told wryly the black humor Jewish joke of survival: after World War II, Poles return to a village from which they had fled from the Nazis only to find a line of gallows with all the local Jews strung up. The Polish soldiers: "What bastards the Germans were: they did not leave any Jews for us to hang". This last was triggered by Meredith's memories of family members in Poland who had survived the Germans in the woods only to be killed by the Poles after the war. Wendy's father was Polish, he refused to speak that language, he spoke Yiddish; her mother was from Vienna, but from a family that considered itself non-Jewish, some had converted to Catholicism, a grandmother was an opera singer and had come to NY to be in a bit part in the 1930s, and "although not a bright woman" figured out what was happening in Europe and did not go back: most of the rest of the family thought they were safe, no longer Jews; the Nazis figured otherwise and they were "burned to a crisp". The family had owned the hotel in Marianbad, and Wendy's mother, after the war, wanted to go back to Vienna and especially to Marianbad to see the places of her youth. Marianbad hotel was now a workers resort; they'd been told how elegant the place was and especially about a mural in the dining room portraying the royalty walking along the boardwalk, and including portraits of Wendy's family.

laryngitis

So they go to the hotel. It is, says Wendy, dreary, nothing to eat, uncomfortable. So Ma where's this dining room. There. And Lo and behold, the mural is still there with the royalty and with Wendy's aunts as little girls. Either that trip or another, Wendy's father decided to go to Germany to buy a Mercedes. They arrive in "Frankfurt or Hamburg, one of those ugly German big cities" and --talk about repression --Wendy's mother suddenly develops laryngitis! (The lead in: my family is loud, compared to them I talk in a whisper, shades of my operatic grandmother, I mean, we're the kind of family that clears out restaurants); Wendy's mother can't speak German, her native tongue. You'll have to do the talking she rasps to Wendy's father. I don't speak German, he protests, only Yiddish. It's all the same, Wendy's mother rasps. So they go thru Germany with him speaking Yiddish (How did the Germans receive it? I asked, remembering that someone had remarked recently that Yiddish speakers were received by young Austrians as merely another odd form of German from somewhere else, they no longer had any sense of what it was, of a cultural place for it. Wendy's father is from Roshk, a village of 150 people, very near ~~Kern~~, Konigsberg. So I told the story of my mother's aunt who was married to a man from Konigsberg and it was so far from Vienna that she got double dowry.

Know the great story about Shawn Fergusson of Brooklyn? A Jewish guy, what kind of name is that? [I caught on the logic immediately: Shawn must be shon ...]. So how do you get this name. Well on the boat I decided I'd take an American name and I selected Philip Jones; and I practiced all the way across, but when the immigration asked me at

Ellis Island, I was so nervous I clapped my head and said Shon vergessen."

Meredith told another story of this sort (I'd been telling stories about not only my Viennese family and experiences this summer, but about the reassertion of Jewish identity of the Christians in south India and Brazil, and the Marrannos in San Antonio. Meredith: there was this Jewish guy who lived in the suburbs amidst Catholics. Every Friday he grilled a stake in his backyard. The Catholics got upset after a while and decided to convert him. So they talked to him, and talked to him, till he yielded: he took classes, and finally there was a ceremony in which the priest declared, Hymie Cohen, you were born and bred a Jew, but today you've become a Catholic. So they go home. Next Friday comes. Everyone is alert. The Jew takes out a ~~stake~~ ^{stake} and puts it on the grill, then takes it off. Everyone comes to see what's going on and overhear him saying to the ~~stake~~ ^{stake}: you were born and bred a cow, but tonight you are a fish.

[I told of the Iranian Muslim saying that you can't tell if a Jew has really converted until the 7th generation. Later in the evening I called mother, she laughed delightedly at the shoen vergessen story, but immediately saw the logic of Meredith's story half way thru; she got really excited about Wendy's Viennese mother and wanted to know where she'd gone to school; Marienbad, of course, I spent summers there; the hotel was owned by the Rosenbergs, my mother's first cousin's husband (their granddaughter is the one who lives in Chile).]

Wendy also told of the Russian lullaby her father sung to her as a child: he did not know any Russian, but memorized this tune and what he thought were the words. Many, many years later, long after his death, Wendy was in Moscow, and learned it was a Lermontov poem, and that they had made all the wrong syllable breaks.

Shades of last night's dinner with Sharon. I she mentioned Oklahoma, and I recalled the way in which Shank and Willard Dillon had reminisced about Oklahoma, the fine grained knowledge of place. Sharon's folks are from Oklahoma: they went as teenagers in the depression to California, abandoning the family that was losing all in order to save it: her mother with 3 or 4 cousins; her father similarly by himself. Pride in being on the road pride in relation to the land. Extreme irritation at east coast assertions that California has no history, are lazy/shiftless/leisure-seeking folk. East coast does not appreciate the long hispanic history; but more important yet, the sense of place is just quite different: a sense of the land. Parents also never wanted to return to Oklahoma, tho now as elderly do miss it, but are unwilling still to fully admit to this. Ambivalence about Sharon "going back". Family began in Va; then Tenn; then E. Texas, then the land rush in Okla.; then the depression.