# To Be, or Not to Be

**Masha Gessen**
FEBRUARY 8, 2018 ISSUE

*This essay was delivered in a slightly different form as the Robert B. Silvers Lecture at the New York Public Library on December 18, 2017.*

*Igor Stomakhin*

*Masha Gessen at her apartment in Moscow in the early 1990s, when she was in her mid-twenties*

## 1.

*Fetus*

The topic of my talk was determined by today's date. Thirty-nine years ago my parents took a package of documents to an office in Moscow. This was our application for an exit visa to leave the Soviet Union. More than two years would pass before the visa was granted, but from that day on I have felt a sense of precariousness wherever I have been, along with a sense of opportunity. They are a pair.

I have emigrated again as an adult. I was even named a "great immigrant" in 2016, which I took to be an affirmation of my skill, attained through practice—though this was hardly what the honor was meant to convey. I have also raised kids of my own. If anything, with every new step I have taken, I have marveled more at the courage it would have required for my parents to step into the abyss. I remember seeing them in the kitchen, poring over a copy of an atlas of the world. For them, America was an outline on a page, a web of thin purplish lines. They'd read a few American books, had seen a handful of Hollywood movies. A friend was fond of asking them, jokingly, whether they could really be sure that the West even existed.

Truthfully, they couldn't know. They did know that if they left the Soviet Union, they would never be able to return (like many things we accept as rare certainties, this one turned out to be wrong). They would have to make a home elsewhere. I think that worked for them: as Jews, they never felt at home in the Soviet Union—and when home is not where you are born, nothing is predetermined. Anything can be. So my parents always maintained that they viewed their leap into the unknown as an adventure.

I wasn't so sure. After all, no one had asked me.

## 2.

*Vulnerable*

As a thirteen-year-old, I found myself in a clearing in a wood outside of Moscow, at a secret—one might say underground, though it was out in the open—gathering of Jewish cultural activists. People went up in front of the crowd, one, two, or several at a time, with guitars and without, and sang from a limited repertoire of Hebrew and Yiddish songs. That is, they sang the same three or four songs over and over. The tunes scraped something inside of me, making an organ I didn't know I had—located just above the breastbone—tingle with a sense of belonging. I was surrounded by strangers, sitting, as we were, on logs laid across the grass, and I remember their faces to this day. I looked at them and thought, *This is who I am*. The "this" in this was "Jewish." From my perch thirty-seven years later, I'd add "in a secular cultural community" and "in the Soviet Union," but back then space was too small to require elaboration. Everything about it seemed self-evident—once I knew what I was, I would just be it. In fact, the people in front of me, singing those songs, were trying to figure out how to be Jewish in a country that had erased Jewishness. Now I'd like to think that it was watching people learning to inhabit an identity that made me tingle.

Some months later, we left the Soviet Union.

In autobiographical books written by exiles, the moment of emigration is often addressed in the first few pages—regardless of where it fell in a writer's life. I went to Vladimir Nabokov's *Speak, Memory* to look for the relevant quote in its

familiar place. This took a while because the phrase was actually on page 250 out of 310. Here it is: “The break in my own destiny affords me in retrospect a syncopal kick that I would not have missed for worlds.”

This is an often-quoted phrase in a book full of quotable sentences. The cultural critic and my late friend Svetlana Boym analyzed Nabokov’s application of the word “syncope,” which has three distinct uses: in linguistics it’s the shortening of a word by omission of a sound or syllable from its middle; in music it is a change of rhythm and shift of accent when a normally weak beat is stressed; and in medicine it is a brief loss of consciousness. “Syncope,” wrote Svetlana, “is the opposite of symbol and synthesis.”

Suketu Mehta, in his *Maximum City*, wrote:

> Each person’s life is dominated by a central event, which shapes and distorts everything that comes after it and, in retrospect, everything that came before. For me, it was going to live in America at the age of fourteen. It’s a difficult age at which to change countries. You haven’t quite finished growing up where you were and you’re never well in your skin in the one you’re moving to.

Mehta didn’t let me down: this assertion appears in the very first pages of his magnificent book; also, he moved to America at the same age that I did. And while I think he might be wrong about *everyone*, I am certain he is right about émigrés: the break colors everything that came before and after.

Svetlana Boym had a private theory: an émigré’s life continues in the land left behind. It’s a parallel story. In an unpublished piece, she tried to imagine the parallel lives her Soviet/Russian/Jewish left-behind self was leading. Toward the end of her life, this retracing and reimagining became something of an obsession. She also had a theory about me: that I had gone back to reclaim a life that had been interrupted. In any case, there are many stories to be told about a single life.

## 3.

*Diversity*

On Valentine's Day in 1982—I was fifteen—I went to a gay dance at Yale. This was a great time for gay dances. It was no longer terrifying to be queer on campus, but gay life was still half-hidden in a way that was thrilling. I do not remember, in fact, dancing, and I don't even remember catching anyone's eye. In other words, I'm pretty sure that no one noticed me. Strangely, that wasn't crushing. Because what I do remember is standing somewhere dark, leaning against something, and feeling like I was surrounded by community. I remember thinking, *This is who I could be.*

What the syncope of emigration had meant for me was the difference between discovering who I was—the experience I had in the woods outside of Moscow—and discovering who I could be—the experience I had at that dance. It was a moment of choice and, thanks to the "break in my destiny," I was aware of it.

## 4.

*Entitlement*

In this sense my personal narrative splits from that of the American gay and lesbian movement. The latter was based on choicelessness. A choice may have to be defended—certainly, one has to be prepared to defend one's right to make a choice—while arguing that you were born this way appeals to people's sympathy or at least a sense of decency. It also serves to quell one's own doubts and to foreclose future options. We are, mostly, comfortable with less choice—much as I would have felt safer if my parents had not set out on their great emigration adventure.

After I left Moscow, one of my grandmothers was compelled to hide the fact of our emigration—we had committed an act of treason that could have threatened those left behind. So in the little town where she lived and where I had spent summers as a child, she continued to update my friends on the life I wasn't leading. In that Soviet life, I applied to colleges and failed to get in. In the end, I settled for some mediocre-sounding technical route.

I was hurt by the predictability of the story my grandmother chose for me. In the United States, I was living an imaginative and risky life—I dropped out of high

school, ran away from home, lived in the East Village, worked as a bicycle messenger, dropped out of college, worked in the gay press, became the editor of a magazine at twenty-one, got arrested at ACT UP protests, experimented sexually and romantically, behaved abhorrently, was a good friend, or tried to be—but in the mirror held up by my grandmother, it wasn't just my location that was different: it was the presence of choice in my life.

After ten years in this country, I went back to Moscow as a journalist, on assignment. I felt so unexpectedly comfortable in a country that I had expected to feel foreign—as though my body relaxed into a space that had stayed open for it—that I also felt resentful about not having had a choice in leaving. I kept going back and eventually stayed, refashioning myself as a Russian-language journalist. I pretended that this was the life I would have had if I had never left, but deep inside I believed that my grandmother had been right: there was some parallel me, toiling miserably on some dead-end engineering task. This made me a double impostor in the life I was living.

I'm not sure when I made the choice to stay in Russia, but I remember hearing the statement come out of my mouth, surprising me, as it sometimes happens when a decision makes itself known. I had been living there a year, and I was talking to a close friend, an American graduate student who had also been there a year and was now going back. "I think I'm going to stay," I said. "Of course you are," he responded, as though it weren't a choice at all.

Around the same time, I was interviewed by a young Russian journalist: having chosen to return to Russia made me exotic enough to be written about. He asked me which I liked better: being a Russian in America or an American in Russia. I was furious—I believed myself to be a Russian in Russia and an American in America. It took me many years to come around to liking being an outsider wherever I go.

I remet my two grandmothers, whom I hadn't seen since I was a teenager, and started interviewing them. This project became a book about the choices they had made. The one who disapproved of our emigration had become a censor, which, she told me, was a moral choice. She had been educated to be a history teacher, but by the time she had completed her studies she was convinced that becoming a

history teacher in the Soviet Union would require her to lie to children every day. Censoring, on the other hand, seemed to her a job that could have been done by a robot: any other person would have crossed out the same lines or confiscated the same mail (her first job was as a censor of printed material in incoming international mail), whereas every history teacher uses a different kind of charm and persuasion to distort children's understanding of the past.

My other grandmother I knew as a rebel and a dissident, someone who never compromised. But as I interviewed her I learned that when she was offered a job with the secret police (as a translator), she had agreed to take it. This was during Stalin's so-called anti-cosmopolitan campaign, when Jews were purged from all kinds of Soviet institutions. She could not get a job to save her life, or, more to the point, her toddler son's life. It had been no choice at all, she told me: she had to feed her child. She never started the job because she failed the medical exam.

The central figure in the book, however, was her father, who was killed in Majdanek. I had always known that he had participated in the rebellion in the Bialystok Ghetto. But then I also found out that he had served in the Judenrat (Jewish council) before choosing to help the rebels.

As I studied the archives—a remarkable number of documents from the Bialystok Ghetto have been preserved—I realized that my great-grandfather had been one of the de facto leaders of the Judenrat. He had been responsible for food deliveries to and garbage removal from the ghetto, and I saw strong evidence that he took part in putting together the lists of names for extermination. I also found a memoir written by a member of the resistance in which she recalled my great-grandfather's efforts to stop the resistance. Later he apparently changed his position and started helping the resistance to smuggle weapons into the ghetto. Before the war, he had been an elected official, a member of both the city council and the Jewish council, so it was clear to me that he had seen his duties in the Judenrat as the logical outgrowth of his elected service. I could see the trajectory of my great-grandfather's choices.

My grandmother didn't want me to publish the part about the Judenrat, and we had a protracted battle over whose story it was to tell—hers or mine, or both of ours. In the end, she had only one demand: that I omit a quote from Hannah Arendt's

*Eichmann in Jerusalem.* This is the infamous quote in which Arendt says that the Holocaust would not have been possible without the help of the Jewish councils.

I saw it as a story of impossible, anguished choices that he nonetheless insisted on making. Totalitarian regimes aim to make choice impossible, and this was what interested me at the time. I was awed by the gap between my capacity for judgment and the unbearably limited options faced by my grandparents. I fixated on the ideas of "impossible choice" and of having "no choice." But what interests me now is that I think resistance can take the shape of insisting on making a choice, even when the choice is framed as one between unacceptable options.

## 5.

*Science-Based*

Back in the United States, my parents' adventure came to a halt, eleven years after we landed in America. My mother died of cancer in the summer of 1992. Another eleven years later, I returned for a yearlong fellowship—to be a Russian in America for a year. During that year I took a test that showed I had the genetic mutation that had caused the cancer that killed my mother and her aunt before that. I was "born this way"—born to develop cancer of the breasts or ovaries, or both. The genetic counselors and doctors asked me what I wanted to do. It was a choice, framed as one between "aggressive monitoring"—for the first signs of cancer, which the doctors were certain would appear—and preventive surgery.

I ended up writing, first, a series of articles and then a book on making choices in the age of genetic testing. I talked to people who had faced far more drastic choices than the one before me. These people had chosen to live without such essential organs as the stomach or pancreas, whereas all the doctors were suggesting to me was the removal of breasts and ovaries. I chose to remove my breasts and reconstruct them. I was choosing my breast size and my fate!

The doctors, incidentally, didn't think this was the right choice: they advocated for the removal of the ovaries rather than, or more importantly than, the breasts. I found more compelling evidence in favor of keeping the ovaries for a while, but two and a half years ago I had those removed as well. Around that time, my doctor

was strongly suggesting I really no longer had a choice.

# 6.

*Transgender*

Two decades after moving back to Russia, I left again. It was one of those impossible choices that don't feel like much of a choice: I was one of many people pushed out of the country during the crackdown that followed the protests of 2011–2012. Some were given the choice between emigrating or going to prison. My options were emigrating or seeing social services go after my kids, on the grounds that I am queer.

What had happened to the life my discontinuous self was leading back in America while I was in Russia? My writing life had been proceeding apace, more or less—I was publishing in the United States while living in Russia. Socially, who was I? Who were my people? Where did I belong? I had lost some friends and gained others. Some friends had become couples, split up, recoupled, had children. I had coupled and recoupled and had children too.

Also, some of the women I had known had become men. That's not the way most transgender people phrase it; the default language is one of choicelessness: people say they have always been men or women and now their authentic selves are emerging. This is the same "born this way" approach that the gay and lesbian movement had put to such good political use in the time that I'd been gone: it had gotten queer people access to such institutions as the military and marriage.

The standard story goes something like this: as a child I always felt like a boy, or never felt like a girl, and then I tried to be a lesbian, but the issue wasn't sexual orientation—it was gender, specifically, "true gender," which could now be claimed through transitioning. I found myself feeling resentful at hearing these stories. I too had always felt like a boy! It had taken some work for me to enjoy being a woman (whatever that means)—I'd succeeded, I had learned *how to be* one. But still: here I was, faced with the possibility that in the parallel life that my left-behind self was leading in the United States while I was in Russia, I would have transitioned. True gender (whatever that means) didn't have much to do with

it, but choice did. Somehow, I'd missed the fact that it was there.

I had written an entire book on making choices that had to do with removing the parts of the body that would appear to have made me female: the breasts, the ovaries, the uterus. And I had not questioned the assumptions that after a mastectomy one considers one's options for reconstruction, and after a radical hysterectomy one considers whether to receive hormone "replacement" in the form of estrogen. Indeed, I had had reconstruction and was taking estrogen. I had failed, miserably, at seeing my choices, made as they were under some duress, as an opportunity for adventure. I had failed to think about inhabiting a different body the way one would think about inhabiting a different country. How do I invent the person I am now?

I quit estrogen and started testosterone. I had some trouble with the evidence part of the science, because, as I have found, all published papers on the use of testosterone in people who start out as women fall into one of two categories: articles that aim to show that people taking testosterone will experience all of the masculinizing changes that they wish for, and ones that aim to show that women will have none of the masculinizing changes that they fear. I am taking a low dose, and I have no idea how it's going to affect me. My voice has become lower. My body is changing.

But then again, bodies change all the time. In her book *The Argonauts* Maggie Nelson quotes her partner, the artist Harry Dodge, as saying that he is not going anywhere—not transitioning but being himself. I recognize the sentiment, though I'd probably say the opposite: for thirty-nine years, ever since my parents took those documents to the visa office, I have felt so precarious that I lay no claim to someone I "really am." That someone is a sequence of choices, and the question is: Will my next choice be conscious, and will my ability to make it be unfettered?

## 7.

*Evidence-Based*

It took little effort to organize the notes I jotted down for this talk around the seven words that the Trump administration was reported to have banned the Centers for

Disease Control from using. All seven words—from "fetus" to "evidence-based"—are words that reflect on our understanding of choice.

Choice is a great burden. The call to invent one's life, and to do it continuously, can sound unendurable. Totalitarian regimes aim to stamp out the possibility of choice, but what aspiring autocrats do is promise to relieve one of the need to choose. This is the promise of "Make America Great Again"—it conjures the allure of an imaginary past in which one was free not to choose.

I've been surprised, in the last year, that the resurgence of interest in some of the classic books on totalitarianism has not brought back Erich Fromm's wonderful *Escape from Freedom* (though Fromm, who was a psychoanalyst and social psychologist, has been rediscovered by many people in the mental health profession because he introduced the idea of "malignant narcissism"). In the introduction, Fromm apologizes for what he perceives as sloppiness, which he says stems from the need to write the book in a hurry: he felt that the world was on the verge of catastrophe. He was writing this in 1940.

In the book, Fromm proposes that there are two kinds of freedom: "freedom from," which we all want—we all want our parents to stop telling us what to do—and "freedom to," which can be difficult or even unbearable. This is the freedom to invent one's future, the freedom to choose. Fromm suggests that at certain times in human history the burden of "freedom to" becomes too painful for a critical mass of people to bear, and they take the opportunity to cede their agency—whether it's to Martin Luther, Adolf Hitler, or Donald Trump.

No wonder Trump appears to be obsessed with people who embody choice. Immigrants are his most frightening imaginary enemy, the ones who need to be "extremely vetted," blocked out with a wall, whose crimes need to be reported to a special hotline and whose families need to be kept out of this country. It puts me in mind of the "aggressive monitoring" for the cancer that's sure to come. Transgender people have been another target of Trump's apparently spontaneous lashing out—witness the transgender ban in the military, the rescinding of protections for transgender students, and now the ban on the very word "transgender."

But in speaking about immigrants we tend to privilege choicelessness much as we

do when we are speaking about queer people or transgender people. We focus on the distinction between refugees and "economic migrants," without asking why the fear of hunger and destitution qualifies as a lesser reason for migration than the fear of imprisonment or death by gunshot wound—and then only if that wound is inflicted for political or religious reasons. But even more than that, why do we assume that the more restricted a person's choices have been, the more qualified they are to enter a country that proclaims freedom of personal choice to be one of its ideals?

Immigrants make a choice. The valor is not in remaining at risk for catching a bullet but in making the choice to avoid it. In the Soviet Union, most dissidents believed that if one were faced with the impossible choice between leaving the country and going to prison, one ought to choose exile. Less dramatically, the valor is in being able to experience your move less as an escape and more as an adventure. It is in serving as living reminders of the choicefulness of life—something that immigrants and most trans people do, whether their personal narratives are ones of choice or not.

I wish I could finish on a hopeful note, by saying something like: If only we insist on making choices, we will succeed in keeping darkness at bay. I'm not convinced that that's the case. But I do think that making choices and, more important, imagining other, better choices, will give us the best chance possible of coming out of the darkness better than we were when we went in. It's a bit like emigrating that way: the choice to leave rarely feels free, but choices we make about inhabiting new landscapes (or changed bodies) demand an imagination.

---