5. RESEARCHING HISTORY

5.1. OBJECTIVITY, SUBJECTIVITY & THE TRUTH

Even if we can agree that certain events happened, how do we interpret them? What do they mean? Can our interpretations ever be free from the many lenses through which we perceive things? Each of us comes from a certain time, a certain culture, a certain community and a certain family. All of them influence our willingness to see and the ways in which we see the same things.

With all of these considerations overlaid on the truth, the question is whether we can ever really see it. Sometimes during my journey, I doubted the truth existed. It seemed so elusive – either incomplete, or having to be deduced by listening to and reading many perspectives. Are we doomed to always hover above the truth in a haze of subjectivity, and can we ever really be objective about things?

When I look back, I realize that no matter how difficult it is, we do the best we can to take responsibility for the truth. This means not forming the facts to what we want to believe, but seeing them for what they are and what they tell us. It also means being able to separate fact from perception, and being able to decipher when facts have been selectively omitted in order to create a picture that leads us away from the truth.

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My grandfather was a farmer who only wanted the best, was hard working and orderly. How dearly I wanted to believe that, and only that, but hard evidence gathered over many years showed that this benign picture, although not entirely false, was still quite far from the truth. Much had been omitted and the picture had been placed in a false context. Occupied Poland wasn't improved by the Nazis, as I was told - it was devastated by them, and became the site of an unprecedented genocide.

5.1.1 Identify and discuss episodes in the book where personal pasts influence perceptions of the truth.

5.1.2 Consider ways in which your interpretation of history might be influenced by your personal or cultural background. Are there certain things you don't question? If so, why?