ARTIFACTUAL LITERACIES, LEGACIES, AND LESSONS:

JOURNEYS THROUGH THE LOST AND FOUND

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ABSTRACT

ARTIFACTUAL LITERACIES, LEGACIES, AND LESSONS:

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The fundamental relationship between humans and objects is at the heart of this artifactual inquiry, which spans historical, literary, museum, and pedagogical studies. There has been a growing focus on the value of objects, and particularly on the mundane, in diverse scholarly fields, such as intergenerational memory, mass trauma, artifactual literacies, and exhibition curation. This creative dissertation is an exploration and exemplification of the emotive, expressive, and expansive nature of evocative objects within these disciplines and our individual and collective identities. Part memoir, part historization, and part pedagogy, it affirms objects' indispensable roles as companions to our lives and the cornerstone of our shared humanity.

Objects as bearers of witness and agents of empathetic connection abound Holocaust scholarship and literature and have protagonistic qualities to vivify and humanize the past, educate the present, and inform the future. Using the Holocaust as its primary historical lens, this multimodal composition questions and illustrates how meaning and memory are contained within objects, what stories objects tell, how they are transmitted, and why they are important. It amalgamates first- and third-person points of view and bends traditional scholarship and pedagogy by fusing personal narrative with academic writing, embedding objects as complementary texts to be read, interrogated,

and interpreted. Drawing upon the burgeoning body of post-Holocaust memoirs, anecdotal and empirical evidence, and increased attention to the concrete in scholarly and quotidian communities, it concludes that objects make us human, and we become *more* human by engaging with them.

DEDICATION

To the legacy I have yet to find and to the one I leave behind.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First and foremost, I am deeply indebted to my wonderful parents, who have unconditionally supported me in every way imaginable, perpetuated the meaning of Bubbie and Zaidie for the next generation, and who will eternally be "the wind beneath my wings." I love, respect, admire, and appreciate you more than words can say.

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INTRODUCTION

THE WONDERS OF TIME AND OBJECTS

Joseph Campbell describes the basic motif of the universal hero's journey as "leaving one condition and finding the source of life to bring you forth into a richer or mature condition" (Campbell 152). It is a circular structure, one of leaving and returning, of lost and found, of trials and tribulations, of silence and sound.

I was called to adventure at Drew University in the summer of 2007. Befitting - even *bashert* - that it was eighteen years ago, a meaningful number not only in secular culture but also in Jewish tradition. At eighteen, Americans are legally considered adults, a rite of passage into autonomy as a citizen - an appropriate distinction to mark my ascension to "Doctor" in my epithet. Much more notably, in Jewish life, eighteen is referred to as "chai," the Hebrew word for "life," and thus it carries associations with blessings of good luck and fortune in its original or multiplied form. When my Bubbie was alive, I remember telephoning her to "put in eighteen cents" any time I was pursuing an ambition. Thirty-six cents are always superstitiously safekept in my wallet, and recently, my mom handed me fifty-four cents to place in her *tzedakah* box when we got home from purchasing a dress for my second wedding. All in all, eighteen is in my blood, and it's a welcoming number at this long-awaited juncture.

And, with reflection, I realize that it is not the only one of current, notable significance. Ten represents a decade - a customary period of time to mark growth or to commemorate anniversaries. Ten years after I stepped foot onto Drew's campus for the first time, I partook in Dr. Liana Piehler's course, *The Joy of Scholarly Writing*, during which time the seeds of this project sprouted. Further, I ventured to Poland in April of

2015, nearly ten years to the month of defending my dissertation, and that indelible experience continues to inform my scholarship, pedagogy, and personal inheritance.

Needless to say, “It’s about time” could not be more apropos in all its connotations.

New journeys and generations have been founded since my eighteen-year odyssey at Drew University began, many of which are interwoven into the fabric of this project. Its origins date back to a time that preceded me, and its perpetuity, will, in its physical creation, outlive me. For, this creative dissertation is an artifact in and of itself - a material composition that gives shape to memories, substance for stories. It marks specific times, yet its reality is timeless. It is an object of personal import, a primary source, a human voice, an authentic text, and an irrefutable trace in a legacy whose origins were erased. It is talismanic and catalytic, life-affirming and analytic. It is a personification of me - my mind’s eye concretized in composition, my memories marked in things: photos, drawings, names, handwriting.

One of the greatest lessons I’ve learned is that the wonders of time and objects are analogous: they can heal, inspire introspection, provide perspective, and catalyze connection. With age, like us, they change. With change, like us, they age. Both can be read. Both have physical attributes. Both mark a moment and hold memories. Both are related to stories. Both are what make us *human*.

In the *Encyclopedia of Genocide*, David Krieger writes, “We are all born with the potential to become human. How we choose to live will be the measure of our humanness. Civilization does not assure our civility. Nor does being born into the human species assure our humanity. We must each find our own path to becoming human”

(Krieger). My intimate interactions with objects, those I've touched and those about which I've read, have been my directional guides on the path towards understanding and actualizing Krieger's assertion. They have led me to conclude that objects make us human, and we become *more* human by engaging with them.

As the title of this work suggests, *Artifactual Literacies, Legacies and Lessons: Journeys through the Lost and Found* chronicles multitudinous journeys through the "lost and found" - a deliberate nod to the ubiquitous place people go to recover their lost things, with the hope that others have found and graciously brought them there. Certainly, many have had a helping hand in curating the repository of artifacts and analyses inherent in this overarching hero's journey, during which time I have witnessed the scope of serious attention to objects exponentially expand. While Elizabeth Wood and Kiersten F. Latham acknowledge, "The study of human interactions with objects is not new; in fact, many fields of study have different opinions and perspectives on what objects mean to people" (Wood and Latham 10), Sherry Turkle notes, "only recently have objects begun to receive the attention they deserve…indeed there has been an increasing commitment to the story of the concrete in a range of scholarly communities" (Turkle 6-7). Their respective scholarship, which coalesced my pedagogical and academic inquiries into artifactual literacies, is respectively cited in Brenda Cowan et al.'s groundbreaking and influential work, *Museum Objects, Health, and Healing: The Relationship between Exhibitions and Wellness*, in which they contend, "There has been no single home field for study in objects and meaning-making but instead a myriad of lenses, means of examination, and findings" (Cowan et al. 22-23). Their theory, Psychotherapeutic Object Dynamics, underscores the "multidimensionality and interdisciplinary" nature of research

on material culture, further substantiated in the diverse repertoire of resources and bibliographic references contained herein (Cowan et al. 23). Yet, despite their disparate scopes of study and fields of interest, threaded amongst them is the fundamental connection between humans and material things. This bond is as certain as the seat on which you are currently sitting. And once you see it - once you *feel* it - objects' roles "as companions to our emotional lives or as provocations to thought" is powerfully pervasive (Turkle 5).

In *Evocative Objects: Things We Think With*, Sherry Turkle recognizes, "We live our lives in the middle of things" (Turkle 6). I have come to appreciate that our daily rituals are filled with them. Our feet walk in them. Our hands hold them. Our bodies touch them. Our livelihoods depend on them. Our houses are built by them. Our homes are filled with them. We carry them wherever we go, kept close to our hearts or to our hips, in our pockets or in our purses. We express our love and gratitude with them. We learn with them and from them, tell our stories through them, and remember thanks to them. Losing them can be unbearable, like a part of us is missing. Sometimes, we don't realize their importance until they are lost, or until they are found:

> The small and often quotidian object experiences…are fragments of an ever-evolving tale about what it means to grow, learn, and heal as a human. These stories embody that unfathomable narrative; they share its richness and warmth. They are whole and complete, yet also woven into the larger tales that connect us all. Endless interwoven stories. These are all aspects of the unfolding story of every human and of humanity itself. (Cowan et al. 13)

Museum Objects, Health and Healing sits atop towers of scholarship into which I've journeyed over the duration of this endeavor. My order history on Amazon marks the dates when the book came into my life and thus, when it became a pivotal piece of this puzzle. I initially purchased it five months after meeting Dr. Kristen Turner, the mentor who resuscitated this project after years of attempts, small victories, notable discoveries, stalls, and ultimate fails. I lost that copy of the book with my handwritten scribbles in the margins along the way; I'm sure it's buried in a box amongst a slew of disorganized articles, assignments, manilla folders, random thoughts on scraps of paper, and other artifacts I've created or hoarded for almost a decade - a meandering, multitudinous array of research and writing that I always thought I'd return to one day. Clearly, I gave up searching for the book, but thankfully, I did not give up seeking the dream…

Figure 1. A key piece. Screenshot taken by the author.

This multimodal composition is the story of how I have "grown, learned, and healed as a human," and it involves myriad "small and often quotidian object experiences" to narrate it (Cowan et al. 13). It fuses memoir, process narrative, artifacts, pedagogy, and critical reflections on research in the fields of memory, transgenerational trauma, material culture, museum studies, literature, and literacies. It amalgamates my identities as a teacher, Holocaust descendant, scholar, and writer in an interdisciplinary

approach that is the cornerstone of the Arts and Letters program at Drew University. It questions how history and legacy are contained within objects, what stories objects tell, how they are transmitted, and why they are important. It shows the emotive and expressive nature of objects and their expansive potential as vehicles of memory, storytelling, and critical inquiry. Using the Holocaust as the primary lens, it defines the metonymic and reificatory qualities of artifacts displayed within curatorial constructs and embedded in object-heavy literature. It features memoirs written by descendants of Holocaust survivors, including me, highlighting the quest narrative and more specifically, the influence of objects that serve as catalysts for their post-memory journeys. It includes students' voices and stories. It provides scholarly, intimate, and pedagogical perspectives, moves from theory to practice, from present to past, from museums and books to my classroom and to my homes.

Though every word is authentically penned, the joint narrators of this composition are the evocative objects. Placed as markers to be read, interrogated, and interpreted, these objects function as companions to this journey; much more than visual aids, the images and artifacts serve to illustrate that "objects have impactful phenomenological, evocative, and numinous characteristics as well as catalytic and protagonistic capabilities" (Cowan et al. 23). These objects tell their own stories, humanize and vivify those of mine and others embodied within them, and invite active participation on behalf of you, the reader.

In *Objects of Experience: Transforming Visitor-Object Encounters in Museums*, Elizabeth Wood and Kiersten F. Latham assert, "The many layers of a person's life and experience contribute to different ways of knowing and being in the world. The more

connections one has with objects, the more uniquely meaningful and important those layers of life become" (Wood and Latham 12). Time has granted me an understanding of the wonders of objects; they are the substance and sustenance not only for this hero's journey and those inherent within it but also for all of my stories yet to be lived and yet to be written.

Daniel Mendelsohn writes, "To be alive is to have a story to tell. To be alive is precisely to be the hero, the center of a life story" (Mendelsohn 550).

To life, to life…*L'chaim*.

CHAPTER ONE

OWNING THE "I"

I formally began my Doctor of Letters degree at Drew University in the summer of 2007. That spring, I went with my mom to an informational session on a certificate program for Holocaust and Genocide Studies offered by the Caspersen School of Graduate Studies. I remember wanting to include her, not so much because she would be interested in enrolling but more so because I wanted her to see that I was doing something "Jewish," doing something to honor our heritage. I remember schmoozing and name-dropping and by the end of the night, making the definitive decision to apply for the D. Litt program. I was twenty-seven years old and had been married to Adam for three years, during which time we had bought a house in Ringwood, endured my bouts of serious illness and subsequent Whipple surgery, and lived the careless lifestyle to which we had grown accustomed in our younger years. At the time, I was the sole advisor for the Class of 2007 at Pascack Hills High School, a few months shy of earning tenure, and likely trying to find a piece of myself that I had lost, or, more accurately, had been drained from me, after leaving academia behind for "adulthood."

My first course was *Introduction to Poetry* with Dr. Laura Winters in the basement of Mead Hall. What I recall most illustriously is the sense of confidence and autonomy I regained then, found not only in the verses of modern poets and energy of academic discourse but also in Dr. Winters's style of teaching, which, to this day, has significantly impacted my own. I adopted and flourished in her invitation to explore "what speaks to you," and found balance between personal reflection and analytical

commentary in my written work, enormously inspired by the permission to "own the I." These papers, quite possibly, exist in the plethora of nondescript flash drives stored in Ziploc bags stashed in boxes and drawers amidst other remnants from those years that have survived my moves and purges. But, born too early to live in the "Cloud," they're currently designated as missing or lost, save for the memories stored in my mind.

What I have recovered, however, are all of the digital files from another course I took with Dr. Winters, titled *The Literature of Grief*, in the spring of 2014. What they show is that seven years after finding my voice, it began to sing. The most notable example of this is my capstone project, *Then*, a piece of creative nonfiction that also resides in my email, in my heart, and on Dropbox and Google Drive (just to be safe). Most notably, *Then* upheld my identity as a writer, one I hadn't confidently felt or owned since college when I graduated from George Washington University with a double major in English and Creative Writing (what wonders must exist on those multicolored, unlabeled floppy disks!). I remember writing it. I remember crying, laughing, being surprised, feeling proud, and learning about my relationship with grief that, even while writing, I struggled to articulate. Because of its significance on this journey, and relevance to the tropes contained within it, *Then* is reprinted, in full, here:

Then

By Heather Lutz

It just didn't feel right to flush him down the toilet. After twelve years of incessant motion, he deserved a final resting spot. My dad dug a hole in the backyard, above the driveway and close to the rocks that divided our lawn from the neighbor's wooded

property. He emptied the water out of the hefty glass bowl, careful not to disrupt or to lose any of its contents, and carried it to the rest of us, who were already waiting by the same patch of land that sheltered prior pets. He poured the multi-colored rocks into the ground and gently placed my fish upon them. Before burying him, my dad asked me if I wanted to say a few words. I couldn't.

I want to say a few words now in case I am rendered speechless *then*. If I am being honest, it is more of a certainty and less of a postulation that when I am confronted with *then*, I will lose the ability to speak because the knob in my throat will thrust a choking sensation and turn my words into tears. I love too hard. I understand what it means to live life in the face of death, but I do not know how to face death itself. I fear when *then* comes – the uncertainty and pain it brings, the obligations it requires, the knowledge that after *then* you will never be the same. But I know that *then* is coming.

I am thirty-four years old and feel lucky that my parents still reside in my childhood home, my stuffed animals never moved from the attic, and my immediate family's seats at the kitchen table did not change until spouses and grandchildren joined it. I have pulled into the driveway on a Strawberry Shortcake bike with training wheels and on a purple ten-speed, in (at times, too many different) boys' cars and in the "Bluick" – a terrible metallic blue eyesore that I swore I would die before I was seen in public driving. I have walked up to the house carrying Girl Scout cookies, hampers of dirty laundry, happiness and heartache, and two beautiful children. The doorbell that my daughter, Maya, rang when she went trick-or-treating for the first time was the same one that Adam did when

he picked me up for prom and when he came to ask my father for my hand in marriage. My childhood bedroom has transformed into my dad's office, and my brother's is the kids' room. But even in those spaces, there are plenty of remnants of the past – the same peach or blue walls with matching window treatments and blinds, track lighting that was trendy in the nineties, and small traces of our teenage years like my rainbow candle holder atop a glass shelf and the bracket for my brother's guitar. Like us, they look and feel at home despite the changes around them. These rooms express love. Walls, dressers, and desks are adorned with smiling faces, warm embraces, and meaningful phrases. A Lionel train set that my father has always dreamed of buying for my son, Chad, sits distinctly in the office. Taped to the wall next to his desk is an "I love you" note from Maya. The closet floor in the kids' room is a small toy store, though every activity is labeled, contained and perfectly placed (why couldn't I inherit my mom's magical organizational skills?). I am hit with the smell of roasted chicken in the oven or sauce simmering on the stove as I walk through the front door and, no matter how many times I enter it, with newfound gratitude and immense comfort.

Bubbie died on our fifth anniversary. I had spent the latter weeks of January fretting the end of my maternity leave and trying to accept that a majority of my three-month old daughter's days would be spent without me. I took a few hours for myself on Saturday, January 31st to go to Barnes and Noble, somewhat hoping that surrounding myself with books would inspire me to want to go back into the classroom. I was still in the parking lot when my mom got in touch with me. She was quick on the phone. My aunt called. Bubbie wasn't "doing well." She was on her way up to Montreal. I could not hear her

urgency because a sinking thought dominated it; who would take care of Maya on Monday if my mom couldn't?

I wear a silver bangle that has the inscription:

Life is about not knowing, having to change, taking the moment and making the best of it	החיים הם לא לדעת, החיים הם להשתנות, לקחת את הרגע ולהנות

I remember my cell phone ringing. To this day, I credit my dad for keeping his promise and having the courage to call me. It was around 2 AM, and I remember pleading into the phone, "Why are you calling me? Why are you calling me?" as if there was some other reason. I was weeping uncontrollably. I remember Adam rubbing my back, silently speaking, it's okay and don't wake up Maya.

Adam has been spending the day working in the yard. At the moment, he is dismantling the old patio in the back, carrying blue stone and bricks from one side of the house to the other near the shed. As is customary with any project in this house, he has encountered another issue that typically starts with the proverbial question, "What the [insert expletive]?!" Adam has just realized that under bricks he's been lifting is yet another layer of bricks rather than dirt and sand. Grumbling, he resumes filling the wheelbarrow and says with a smirk, "I know why he did this too." That seems to be the reaction to a lot of the unwanted discoveries that he makes in this house, whether they deal with its electrical, plumbing or framing. But even though they make renovations a nightmare, they reflect the time and pride the previous owner put into his home.

When we first saw it in 2005, it was still furnished but uninhabited. The selling agent was the owner's daughter. She shared memories of helping her father build the front stoop, that her mother wasn't "doing well," and her father was going into a nursing home. Although we never met him, we got to know him through this house. He nailed pencil sharpeners to his work areas and hand drew the plans for an addition he put on in the seventies. He used recycled sheet metal with prints of old yearbooks and newspapers as the drop ceiling in the basement. He lit the wood burning stove in the den a total of fifteen times and systematically had it maintained every April. He made creative and resourceful storage space, lining the steps to the basement with closets and compartments. He was hardworking, proud, and meticulous. And, he really loved his wife.

Every June, Theunis Dey elementary school held a carnival. The pavement was bustling with elated children and watchful parents, games and prizes, screams and laughter. I was in kindergarten and staying close to my best friend, Sandi, and her older sister, Diana. I remember spotting the industrial size garbage can near a booth and peering inside: innumerable goldfish were swimming in water. This was the consummate prize. I do not remember what I had to do to win, but I remember running victoriously to my parents with many construction paper cutouts of fish, each one representing a real one that I could take home (I'm sure they were thrilled). Shortly after, I held a plastic bag of water and looked at my new pets; they varied in color from bright gold to dark gray. They swam speedily and sporadically in the small space, unemotional but expressive, some banging their noses against the sides of the bag.

Most died within a week. My parents recall that the others lasted at most a month, until I was left with what they referred to as "the ugly duckling" – the fish that was the darkest and least brilliant. He swam by himself in the round bowl in front of the mirror on my dresser, moving in circular motions along the perimeter, switching directions every few rotations and randomly bending down to pick up and spit out a colored rock from the bottom. Eventually he grew too large for his bowl and outgrew even a larger one after that. When my dad would change it, he had to add bigger, fresher rocks to the bottom. But he did so in small quantities, mixing a little in each time, mindful not to disturb its ecology. My fish always made the transition to his new habitat smoothly, resuming his regular path and routine, selecting the new rocks to suck, unifying them with those that were old.

When I was pregnant with Maya, I told every soon-to-be grandparent that I would support whatever he or she wanted my children to call him or her. Randi, Adam's mom, liked Grammy, and her husband was comfortable with Eddie. Adam's father and wife eventually chose Poppy and Gigi, titles that have since then represented them well. Bryant felt too cool to be Gramps, which was what we all called his father when he was alive. Denise was still in her forties with young children of her own, and Gigi seemed to reflect her desire to preserve her youthful status but still designate an affectionate name for her role in our kids' lives. My mom toyed with *Safta*, the Hebrew word for grandmother, but we all knew from the start that she would be Bubbie. I remember at dinner one night, my dad proudly told us that he had decided what he wanted to be called, *Grand-père François*, or "GPF" for short. We all joked and dismissed him, but at the

time, none of us felt it was instinctive that he would be Zaidie. I was the one who eventually encouraged it, though, thinking the symmetry of Bubbie and Zaidie made sense, and wanting my children to grow up with the same deep understanding of the love behind those names.

My maternal grandparents were Holocaust survivors. Most of their families were not. My bubbie was engaged to be married the day after the war broke out. Along with her fiancé, her mother, father, three sisters and one brother were killed. She and three brothers lived. I found out recently that my zaidie was very close to his grandparents, who were also called Bubbie and Zaidie. He used to run to their house when dusk approached after he realized that he had stayed out playing soccer with his friends past the strict curfew his Orthodox father enforced. They were also murdered. So were his parents, one sister, and two brothers. Only one brother survived. Uncle Rachmil lives in Israel now; I really need to speak to him before it is too late.

As the years passed, the color of my goldfish transformed from dark gray to brilliant gold. His size multiplied at an impressive rate and confounded many friends when they came over. It was early June, and I was nine, practicing my dance routine in the mirror. Jaws, as he came to be known, was performing his traditional task of swimming in circles and sucking up rocks when I noticed that one was lodged in his mouth. It was the first time I saw him still. I was frantic. Zaidie ran in and immediately performed fish CPR – grabbing my fish, dislodging the stone with a chop, and placing him back in the water, where he seamlessly resumed his circles.

From time to time, I get the nostalgic urge to watch our wedding video. When I do, I typically coerce Adam into sitting with me. Maya loves to watch it with us. She is mesmerized by my dress and pays me the compliment that I looked like a princess. She almost always comments on "Daddy's funny hair" and asks quizzically why she wasn't invited. The last time we watched it, Adam looked at me and said, "It gets a little sadder every time we see this. Each time we do, more people who were there aren't around anymore."

It is shocking to me how Disney films make parents dying a commonplace theme. I remember my back tensing watching *The Lion King* unfold at Disney on Ice and looking at Maya to see how she'd respond to Mufasa lying motionless on the ice, eventually being dragged away by fellow lions. She asked if he was coming back, and I replied that he wasn't. She asked if he was dead, and I said yes. But the music quickly turned upbeat and the story continued, and when Maya commented on how funny Timon and Pumbaa looked, I knew that the moment had passed. Since then, she's come to love other Disney tales, many of which deal with death but not necessarily directly (except for *Bambi*, which I have thankfully avoided so far). Most of the classics involve an absent or a deceased parent, but attractive, vibrant protagonists and their humorous sidekicks typically divert this circumstance. Lately, Maya has fallen under the spell of Disney's newest blockbuster, *Frozen*, memorizing the songs and wanting every piece of merchandise that depicts Elsa or Anna. I admit that I am drawn to them as well and don't hesitate to belt out "Let it Go" with Maya in the car. But I cannot get past the untimely,

unexpected deaths of their parents, who are the victims of a terrible storm at sea when the girls are teenagers. Nor can I ignore Elsa continuing to shun Anna as she somberly, tenderly sings, “We only have each other, /It’s just you and me, /What are we gonna do?” But, Maya doesn’t seem disturbed by these details and brushes them off like she did when I got teary-eyed watching Rapunzel’s parents’ grief when they discovered she was kidnapped.

Any parent dreads having to explain death to a child. You are unsure of what to say and how your child will respond, so you teeter between vague statements and concrete facts. I was thirty-eight weeks pregnant with my second child, Chad, when Samson, our younger cat, started to act differently. His head was cocked to the side, he was walking robotically, and he was making a mess all over the house. Maybe I knew that it would be the last time I saw Samson when I left for work that morning, but getting the call from Adam stunned me. Samson had kidney disease. They were putting him down to end his suffering. Adam promised he’d stay with him the whole time, and he did.

We were unsure of how to handle telling Maya, for whom Samson was a constant companion. Randi suggested that we tell her that Samson went to live with his “cat family,” but it didn’t sit right with us because *we* were his family. We decided to tell Maya the blunt truth, that Samson was very sick and died. I remember Adam kneeling on the living room floor to look her in the eye. I remember wanting to do so as well, but I swallowed my voice, and I feared my irrepressible crying would scare her. Maya’s most pressing question regarded where Samson was, and she couldn’t quite comprehend that he was never coming back. She persistently asked about it for the rest of the night, and

Adam was the one who needed to console her. On our way out of the house the next morning, Maya hollered, “Bye Cornelius! Bye Samson, wherever you are!”

A customary tradition at Bar and Bat Mitzvah celebrations is a candle lighting ceremony. Oftentimes, the first candle is in memory of loved ones no longer with us. At my Bat Mitzvah, I lit it for my dad’s parents, Bubbie and Grandpa. At Eric’s Bar Mitzvah, Zaidie joined them. I fear one of my children will give Candle Number One to their Bubbie or Zaidie.

I think it was during my junior year of high school when Jaws started to slow. When you live with someone every day, you don’t tend to see the changes as they gradually occur. Until one day you do. The color of his skin had faded from gold to gray, but it was a different, duller shade than before. He still swam systematically, moving in circular motions along the perimeter, switching directions every few rotations and randomly bending down to pick up and spit out a colored rock from the bottom. But he was sluggish. Eventually he stopped eating. About a week later, it was the only other time I saw him still.

I like to show my children pictures from the past. It is hard for me to fathom how little they know about my life and those who impacted it. They are named after all four of my grandparents, people who they never met yet who shared an intimate connection with me. I think of them when I see Maya and Chad with their Bubbie, Zaidie, Grammy, Eddie, Poppy or Gigi, and wonder if this will be one of the times on which they look back and

remember. I am an observer from the outside looking in, witnessing their indelible moments being made.

Time stops *then*, but the memories are ceaseless. They swim in a circle, around and around, mingling the past with the present, the old with the new.

***

Even now, I have visceral responses when I read *Then*: my eyes water, body chuckles, mind remembers, heart aches. Though I see flaws in the narrative (I've never liked the title, and the use of *then* still feels awkward), there are parts of it of which I've always been quite proud. Yet beyond them and the signs they reveal about the writer into which I've grown, it's astonishing and validating to discern elements of it that speak to the studies on material culture and legacy, two of the cornerstones of this composition. First, the last line, suggesting memories "swim in a circle, around and around, mingling the past with the present, the old with the new," underscore the motif of time and the theme, *L'dor Vador*, from generation to generation, and literally and figuratively show the ways in which the past is intrinsically linked to the present and with the future - bound by stories, interwoven by objects. Secondly, the inclusion of a short snapshot on my family's persecution during the Holocaust implies an awareness of not only the transgenerational effects of trauma but also my impotency to tell their stories without testimonies or artifacts on which to rely. It is undoubtedly the vaguest of the vignettes, and since this composition was written, I've filled in some of the fragments, thanks, in large part, to the contents of Zaidie's satchel, which was simultaneously solicited by me and bequeathed by my mom in April of 2017. It also shows that my identity as the granddaughter of Holocaust survivors was, and certainly remains to be, innately

connected to my lifeworld, and its impact is powerful, pervasive, and profound (Wood and Latham 28). Lastly, and perhaps most notably and affirming, my references to "remnants of the past" in both my childhood and marital homes highlight the evocative roles that objects play in triggering memories, inspiring storytelling, instilling empathy, and even revivifying those who left them behind.

What prompts me to infer that the previous owner of my house was "hardworking, proud, and meticulous" and "really loved his wife?" It was the tangible traces - the handwritten notes left behind in cobwebbed cupboards, the materials and manner of his builds, and the stories he passed on to his daughter - that remained as bearers of witnesses to who he was and how he lived.

Over the course of my research on material culture and artifactual literacies, I have learned that some artifacts are fixed in a particular time and place; there can be addendums to them not but revisions (Wood and Latham 112; Pahl and Rowsell 26). *Then* is one of them. It belongs to who I was, how I lived, and what I saw and felt in 2014. Its object world is definite (Wood and Latham 35-36). Yet, my worldview is ever changing, and thus, my relationship with this artifact changes with time as well. I read this piece now, eleven years after its creation, and I certainly recognize myself in it: my writer's posture, my insatiable love for my parents and children, my fears, my childhood and marital homes, my tears. But I see it through such different eyes now, and it's poignant to reflect on what was lost and found during the years in between. I am an observer from the outside looking in, witnessing my past with no way to amend it.

I am forty-five years old and feel lucky that my parents still reside in my childhood home, and my stuffed animals still live in the attic. Like most of the house, the

kitchen has been renovated, but I still instinctually gravitate towards the same seat at the table, despite its unrecognizable, modern decor. I have pulled into the driveway with a valise, relief, trepidation, and promises of a brighter future. My childhood bedroom is still my dad's office, and my brother's is still the kids' room, which became Maya and Chad's bedroom when we moved in after my very contentious separation from Adam. (When you live with someone every day, you don't tend to see the changes as they gradually occur. Until one day you do.) At the time, living with my parents was the best stability and protection that I could give them, give us; more than a roof over our heads, we had a home again. With Bubbie and Zaidie.

The traces of my childhood continue to fade away. The wood paneled walls and shaggy brown and tan carpet downstairs. The "blue bathroom." The oval full-length mirror behind my bedroom door, on the top of which was a souvenir plaque from somewhere that read "Heather's Room" in pink and purple retro lettering. But walls, dressers, and desks are adorned with (even more) smiling faces, warm embraces, and meaningful phrases. These rooms express love. Like us, they look and feel at home despite the changes around them…

Adam and I sold our house on Bellot Road on July 31, 2019. I knew I was leaving a lot behind. All of the furniture. Pottery Barn shelves. Le Creuset cookware. My favorite JCPenney portraits of Maya and Chad. Fourteen years of my life. But I managed to safekeep our best-loved books I used to read to the kids before bed, their handprints and handwriting from early childhood, my camera, my dignity, and memories I captured in pictures of every inch of that house as it was - as we were…before we weren't.

Figure 2. At the threshold. Photograph taken by the author.

When I want to, I can zoom in to see the details. But, I've learned that some things are better viewed from a distance.

CHAPTER TWO

STANDING ON THE SOIL

In April of 2015, I went on March of the Living, a two-week trip to Poland and Israel that coincides with *Yom HaShoah* (Holocaust Remembrance Day) and *Yom Ha'atzmaut* (Israel Independence Day).

Reluctantly but supportively, my mom joined me. Despite her passion for travel, I keenly remember her saying that Poland - the country that bears her severed roots - was not on her "bucket list." I don't know if there were some underlying reasons lurking in my subconscious, but I decided at the onset that I was only going to participate in the first week of the program to Poland. The dates didn't align with my district's spring break, and I must've been hesitant to apply for two weeks of professional leave, albeit feeling confident that the week in Poland would enhance my relatively new course, *Literature of the Holocaust*, at Pascack Hills High School.

Figure 3. Holding On. Photograph of the author and her children.

Additionally, at the time, Maya was seven, and Chad had just turned three. The thought of being away from them must have been tortuous. I remember the quick bike ride we took before heading to the airport, wanting to hold on to the moment forever, fearing what I was leaving behind as much as what was ahead of me...

During that life-changing week, my camera became a defense mechanism, a literal and figurative barrier between the aura of my surroundings and the potency of my emotions,

the latter of which was undoubtedly magnified by being in Poland with my mom and my sensitivity to her own heart-rending responses. Thus, rather than focus on *what* I was seeing, I was driven by *how* I could capture it and revisit and revive it beyond the moment, a fixation that intensified as the week progressed. The result - now ten years later - still amazes me. The photos, videos, and artifacts that I brought home indelibly changed my curriculum and my students' responses to it. They have humanized and personalized the stories, awakened and heightened our senses, inspired astute readings of various texts, catalyzed inquiry and empathy, and turned an English course into a vivacious community of learners and humans.

Figure 4. Candid. Photograph of the author.

One of the most profound experiences happened for me in an exhibition housed in a barracks in Auschwitz I. This particular space is located towards the back of a row of brick buildings, systematically numbered in "blocks" - each one of which tells a story in structure and interior substance. Some explain the history; others narrate a particular aspect of it. Some fully expose, like the barracks that display the piles of property plundered from the victims; others impel yet defy imagination, like the Black Wall between Blocks 10 and 11 and its surroundings, signs of suffering and ghostly remnants that silently but resoundingly echo against the impenetrable doors and mortared brick barracks, blocked to public view.

Needless to say, I had been moving between buildings, tenses, and emotions for quite some time before entering this barracks and exhibition space, the first part of which stopped and contained all time for me. Upon entering the building and walking down a small corridor, on the wall directly in front of me were the words to "*Ani Ma'amin*" ("I Believe"), a song I recognized from my family's Passover seders. I followed the animated projection of lines flashing and fading to the somber sounds of its melody playing overhead, dually haunted by its melancholic repetition and my intimate recognition of it. At the time, I don't believe I knew its history and thus certainly not the significance of it being sung decades later by a family of Holocaust survivors and its descendants. Legend has it that this particular melody was composed in a cattle car on the way to Treblinka and, unlike its composer and first choir of Jews, who were unknowingly on their way to gas chambers, miraculously escaped and survived (Dorfman).

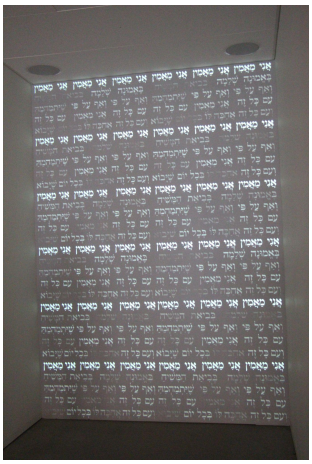

Figure 5. "I Believe." Photograph taken by the author.

I wonder who in my family knew the story of what we were singing sitting around the table in my grandparents' ornate dining room on Eldridge Road in Côte St. Luc in the eighties and nineties. Did my aunt or mom, whose grandparents, aunts, and uncles took that same death-fated ride to the extermination camp? Older cousins who understood Yiddish and were educated at private Jewish schools (and thus, I always deemed, were the "favorites")? Was I singing along - secretly proud to be able to catch on and pronounce the repetitive Hebrew chorus? Was Bubbie deep in thought, eyes inward and indistinct behind her thick lenses? Did Zaidie's voice lack its gusto, its usual emphatic

intonation when he *davened* in his native tongue? Was anyone crying? Unknowingly smiling?

Unlike most of my ancestral questions, these are actually ones I may be able to answer. My parents recorded our family's 1994 Passover seder after Zaidie had been diagnosed with pancreatic cancer. I remember him sitting at the head of the table in his *kittel*, his face gaunt-like, lacking color like his rabbinical robe and the white pillow on which he leaned. I recall my parents purchased the compact camcorder for the occasion, desirous to document the last Seder with the patriarch of our *mishpocha*. My dad, the commensurate commentator, put everyone on the spot in front of the camera - my aunt, I'm sure, loved the limelight, laughing off my dad's insults, as everyone else, including me, tried to ward off the camera's gaze by covering their faces or awkwardly answering my dad's silly inquiries as they tried to walk away. I was fourteen at the time, certainly not a pleasant age at which to revisit myself in actuality or evocation. It's hard to believe my mom was forty-one then…four years younger than I am now…and that twenty years later, she and I would be standing together on the soil saturated with the ashes of our ancestors...

Now I have crossed the threshold and am standing alone in a room in a barracks in Auschwitz, bearing witness to other families' personal archives of photos and home movies.

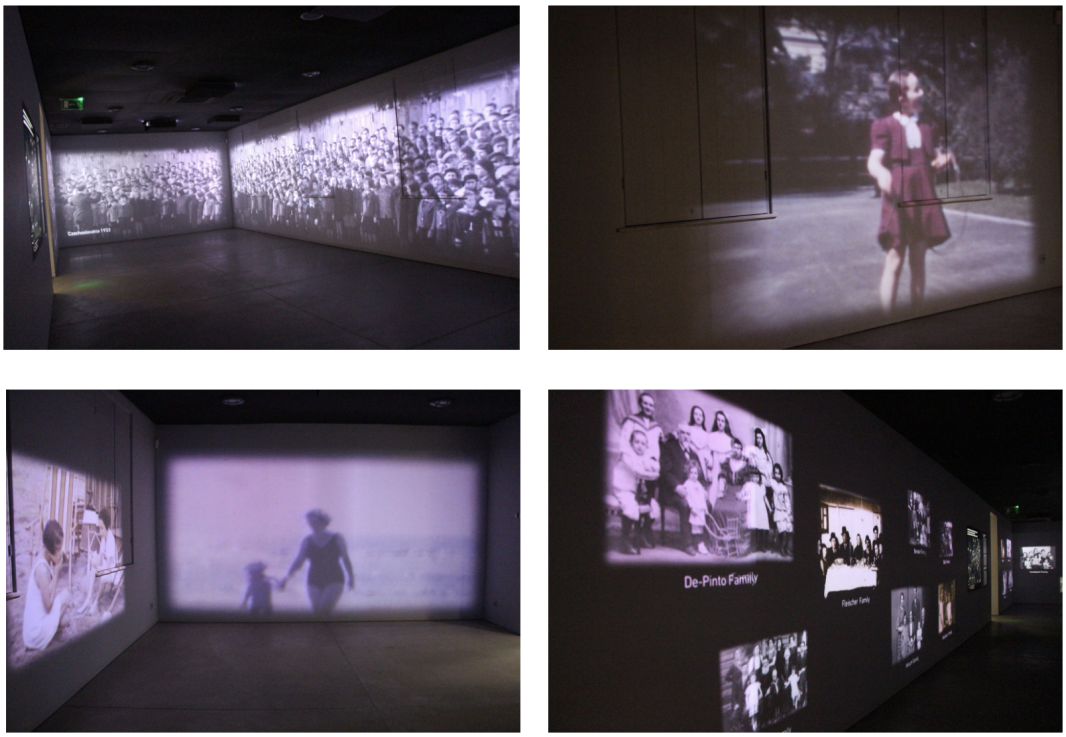

Figure 6. Life before. Photograph taken by the author.

The dark space is animated with large projections on every wall: mothers enjoying a day on the beach with their children, students singing at their school concert, a young child jump roping, men playing a friendly game of soccer. All around and within is their innocent laughter. Lively chatter. Unified melodies.

I was [am still] captivated.

Standing in this space, I began snapping pictures frantically, desperate to capture the images before they faded into darkness and were replaced by others. The room was pulsing, *breathing*. The images felt so close, so real that I could reach out and touch them.

I was immersed in these time capsules of lives that were just like mine - people wanting to preserve their cherished moments on film, moments to mark what was…

Before it wasn't.

Something sparked for me in that space full of life. And its resonance has been extensive and enduring.

Yaffa Eliach, archivist of Eishyshok, a former shtetl in Lithuania whose 900-year vibrant Jewish existence was obliterated by the Nazis and their collaborators, whose remarkable work is featured in the "Tower of Faces," a feature staple in Permanent Exhibition at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, maintains, "The best way to remember the dead is to honor the lives they lived." The experience I had in this exhibition space in Auschwitz materialized that lesson for me. Prior to possessing the scholarship to substantiate my claims, I came home from Poland in 2015 carrying the crux of my course and a catalyst to my quintessential quest:

What lives did they live?

How can I know?

Why does it matter?

Where does empathy reside?

I am grateful to other educators and scholars who have asked similar questions and have graciously shared their exceptional lessons and insights.

Aimee Young's assignment, *Pre-World War II European Jewish Life Photo Project*, part of the Arthur and Rochelle Belfer Exemplary Lessons Initiative at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, addresses some of these queries and actualizes a response to them. I've built off of this meaningful activity in my Literature of

the Holocaust classes and frequently use it near the onset of the school year. Upon watching testimonies that show life prior to Nazi occupation of European territories, I take students into the sacred space at Auschwitz, trying to find a balance between letting the photos speak for themselves and controlling my urges to narrate my visceral reactions as I experienced them in real time.

Then, we dive into the archives of people's personal photos and videos, chronicled in the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum extensive database. We filter the collections and conduct advanced searches, observing objects marked in a moment of time, ones stuck in a particular place - those which only we, the living, can now animate.

Echoing Young's assignment, I then give students their task: Parallel a photo in the archives with one from your own life. Present them professionally. And then write.

Tell your story. And in so doing, suppose theirs.

Every year, I am amazed by the results: the uncanny similarities between photos, student engagement throughout the project, and their insightful reflections. The visual components, which cover the walls of my classroom, speak for themselves, yet the wise, epiphanic perceptions in students' writing truly exemplifies their holistic and heartfelt understanding of the endeavor.

Some had profound thoughts as they inspected the images, observing not only minute details but also surmising insight contained within them, like one student who declared, "The twin-matching clothes, the extra toys within the picture, and the girls' facial expressions all brought me a wave of flashbacks. I am looking at a still picture, but I can see more than just the frame."

Many turned to family memories, like one who shared, “In the photograph I selected, snow is softly falling upon two young siblings on a normal winter day, just as it was for my brother and me while ice skating in New York City in 2016. This was a joyful memory of mine that was filled with a plethora of Christmas lights, hot chocolate, family, music and laughter.” And another, “This really hits home for me as I recently went on a trip with my godfather and all my cousins; we love the outdoors…”

Students scrolled their camera rolls in their phones and, those who were lucky, searched through tangible photo albums their parents safekept in their homes. They surmised the ways in which their photographs - these objects - were portals to their pasts. One said, “As I began digging through the endless pile of physical copies, I thought about how many memories they held. I unlocked memories that I had not lived in so long.”

Many observed how much had changed since those ephemeral moments were marked in time, commenting on their innocence, or even, their naivety, “back then:”

“This was before my mom got sick.”

“I had no idea my parents were planning to get divorced.”

“There I was, a clueless 6-year-old, riding her pink scooter, not realizing that hundreds of residents in New York City’s houses were torn to the ground from Hurricane Sandy.”

Last year, for some, the present collided with the past, adding notable weight to the assignment’s significance. One student shared:

“Thinking about this project made me realize how quickly things can change. Just 23 days ago, on October 6, 2023, in Israel, there were likely teenagers waiting to start healthy competitions between friends, maybe it was a soccer match or a sports day

celebration. Just a day later it was proven that everything can change. This photo project feels different this year. As I went to pick up the photos from Walgreens, the man who was working behind the counter printing the photos awkwardly asked me about them. I could tell he was uncomfortable and didn't really know what to say. He was shocked by the resemblance of the two photos. I explained about this project and explained to him that there was a happy life before WWII for the Jewish people of Europe. It made him really uneasy."

In their responses, many students used speculative, inquisitive verbs such as "I wonder," with one expressing, "The photographs I researched bring an intense curiosity out of me."

One questioned, "If my classmates and I were children during the Holocaust in Nazi-occupied territories, what would have become of them? What would have become of my friends who are Jewish and belong to minority groups?"

Another asserted, "The boy had a mother and a father, just like me. The boy played in the warm sand, just like me. He had a life just as rich and complex as mine."

One by one, they interrogated these evocative objects, mediating between their physical attributes and the personal connections my students associated with them. The stories had new narrators, but the particular melody could still be discerned.

I eventually left the sacred space full of life inside of Block 27 in Auschwitz. I found my mom, several rooms later, standing in a sea of Stzeins in the Book of Names, an overwhelming archive that lists the names, dates of birth, hometowns, and places of death [where known] of 4.8 million individuals whose stories and lives were stolen, just

because they were Jewish. In its entirety, the artifact takes up so much space that I couldn't properly position myself in the room to take a broader picture. Or maybe I didn't feel the need to.

In one of my photos, my mom's finger replicates a *yad* as it points to her namesake, Malka, my Bubbie's sister:

Figure 7. Malka. Photograph taken by the author.

I wonder what life Malka lived in Piotrikow between her birth in 1909 and untimely murder at a time unknown. Did she and her siblings bundle up to play in the snow? Visit their grandparents for birthday and holiday celebrations? Play "make believe," take walks on the beach, ride bikes, and dream of their futures yet to come?

To date, not one remnant remains of any of them, save for their names in the Book of Names…

My mom told me that she did not dream once while she was in either Poland or Israel. But, during her first night's sleep back at home, a redheaded woman visited her in a vivid dream.

She said, "*Tank you* for coming."

My mom was confused.

The redheaded woman said, "Don't you know who I am? *Ich bin dayn Tante Malka*. *Tank you, Mamelah,*" and enveloped her in a warm, lasting embrace.

Last November, my mom was conferred an honorary Doctorate in Pedagogy from the Jewish Theological Seminary. We were all *kvelling* - glowing, in fact. And what I remember very vividly is the uncharacteristic physical closeness my son, Chad, exuded towards her that night. He kept on hugging her, caressing her…it was oddly nurturing, maternal even.

We obviously took many pictures to commemorate the occasion; some are displayed in a collage that adorns one of my parents' accessorized walls:

Figure 8. Touching. Photo collage made by the author.

Collectively, it's a beautiful, touching portrait of my family.

I'm especially drawn to everyone's body language. The tender placement of hands and arms, the leaning in be closer to each other.

But there's something even more distinct about my mom's and Chad's embraces.

In every picture, they are all-encompassing…circular…continuous…whole. An unbroken bond between generations, seen and unseen.

If you Zoom in, you can almost *feel* it.

Figure 9. The positivity of negative space. Photograph taken by the author.

CHAPTER THREE

MEETING THE MENTORS

The time was late April 1944.

Elie Wiesel's "native town" was "changed into a cemetery and its residents into gravediggers" (Wiesel 220). Hungary was under Nazi occupation, and prior to their deportation, Sighet's Jews were trying to protect the little over which they still had control. Wiesel begins his short story, *The Watch*, by remembering his most coveted possession: "a magnificent gold watch" that was gifted to him for his Bar Mitzvah (Wiesel 220). Its value was deepened not only because it was from his parents but also because it signified his entry into Jewish manhood and the duties associated with it. Yet, his prideful custody of this watch was fleeting. At age fifteen, Elie, along with his mother, father, sisters, and all the Jews of Sighet and its neighboring towns, were preparing to board trains bound for Auschwitz.

It was a scene akin to a funeral. Elie and his youngest sister, Tziporah, chose the garden to entomb their coveted possessions, as they and their parents anxiously sought to protect "whatever remained of the belongings accumulated by several generations, the sorrow and reward of long years of toil" (Wiesel 220). What did each person cherish? Elie possessed one object: his gold watch, "the first gift, also the last, [he] ever received from [his] parents" (Wiesel 221). His father "took charge of the jewelry and valuable papers" (Wiesel 220). His mother, "the silver candelabra she used only on Shabbat Eve" (Wiesel 220). Elie questions what valuables Tziporah held dear in her youthful existence, and his musings over "her toys" and "her school notebooks" vividly illuminate her

childlike innocence (Wiesel 220). The mundaneness of her materials juxtaposes the holiness of the family's candelabra and the items Wiesel envisions the Rebbe treasured: "his phylacteries, his prayer shawl, the holy scrolls inherited from his famous ancestor" (Wiesel 221). Each article was sacred to its proprietor, none of whom, other than Elie, ever returned.

Twenty years after liberation, Wiesel finds himself standing in the garden of his youth, feeling an insatiable yearning to know the fate of his gold watch that he safeguarded to the earth. Paradoxically, everything has changed for him, but the uncanny familiarity of the garden makes it seem as if "nothing has changed." Wiesel recognizes, "Once more I am the bar mitzvah child; here is the barn, the fence, the tree." He moves methodically and intuitively: "three steps to the right. Stop. Two forward" (Wiesel 221-222). Using his hands and nails to "feverishly, furiously claw the earth," he "was laboring to exhume not an object but time itself, the soul and memory of that time" (Wiesel 222). What he finds, however, is a "thing, [an] object," a "nameless, lifeless thing that had survived for the sole purpose of welcoming [him] on his return and providing an epilogue to [his] childhood" (Wiesel 223). He dreams of conversing with the watch, taking it to "the best jeweler in the world" to "recover its luster, its memory of the past" (Wiesel 223). Yet, no amount of repair could restore the life it once lived.

The gold watch survived. But, it had endured its own trauma. Like its owner, it "too lived through war and holocaust," being reduced to "a ghost infested with humiliating sores and obsolete memories" (Wiesel 223). When Wiesel unearths his prior prized possession, he finds it "covered with dirt and rust, crawling with worms…unrecognizable, revolting" (Wiesel 223). The sight freezes him, seeing its "body

debased," and he embraces, strokes, and kisses it, "as one might console a living being" (Wiesel 223). Wiesel sees himself in the watch and the watch in him, acknowledging, "defying all laws of probability, it has survived – like me – by accident, not knowing how or why" (Wiesel 223). Standing in the familiar, yet foreign, garden, Wiesel reunites with the only surviving remnant of his youth, "the only remaining symbol of everything [he] had loved, of everything [he] had been" (Wiesel 223). This telling recognition is a lamentation on all that has been indelibly lost – his "teachers," his "friends," his "guides," the "tick-tock of his watch," his childhood, his town. In the end, Wiesel reburies his gold watch in the sacred soil "in accordance with Jewish custom," not only to mourn the past but also to look towards the future (Wiesel 224).

The time was early April 2017.

My phone's camera roll stores and revivifies my memories:

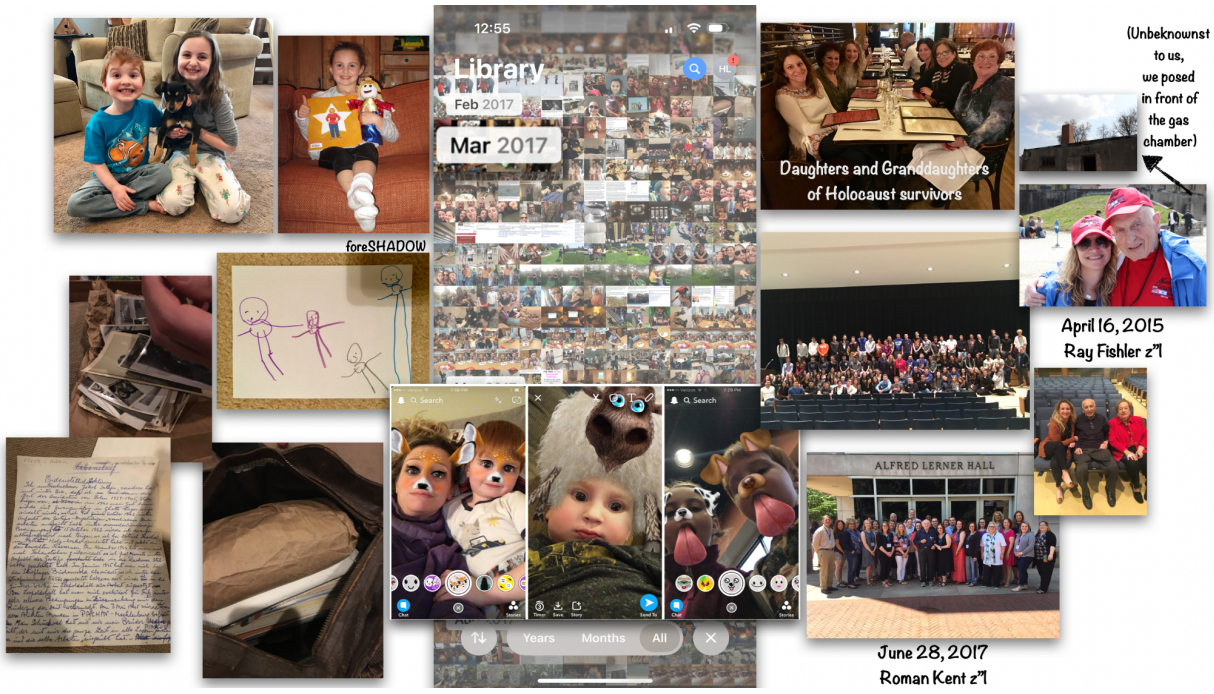

Figure 10. Photo reminiscence. Collage created by the author.

Maya and Grammy made a doll of Hillary Clinton for a school project in honor of Women's History Month.

I was applying to the Alfred Lerner Fellowship Program through the Jewish Foundation for the Righteous, which would become the first of several profound professional and personal experiences I've had in the fields of Holocaust education and scholarship.

We adopted Cody.

My mom and I surprised Auntie Annie in Montreal for her seventieth birthday.

Social media seemed harmless.

Ray Fishler, Wayne resident and Holocaust survivor, with whom I traveled to Poland, spoke to my students at Pascack Hills High School (May his memory be a blessing).

We were a family of four.

Zaidie's satchel became mine, too.

I was taking *Popular Culture and the Shaping of the Holocaust in American Memory* with Dr. Sloane Drayson-Knigge and *The Joy of Scholarly Writing* with Dr. Liana Piehler.

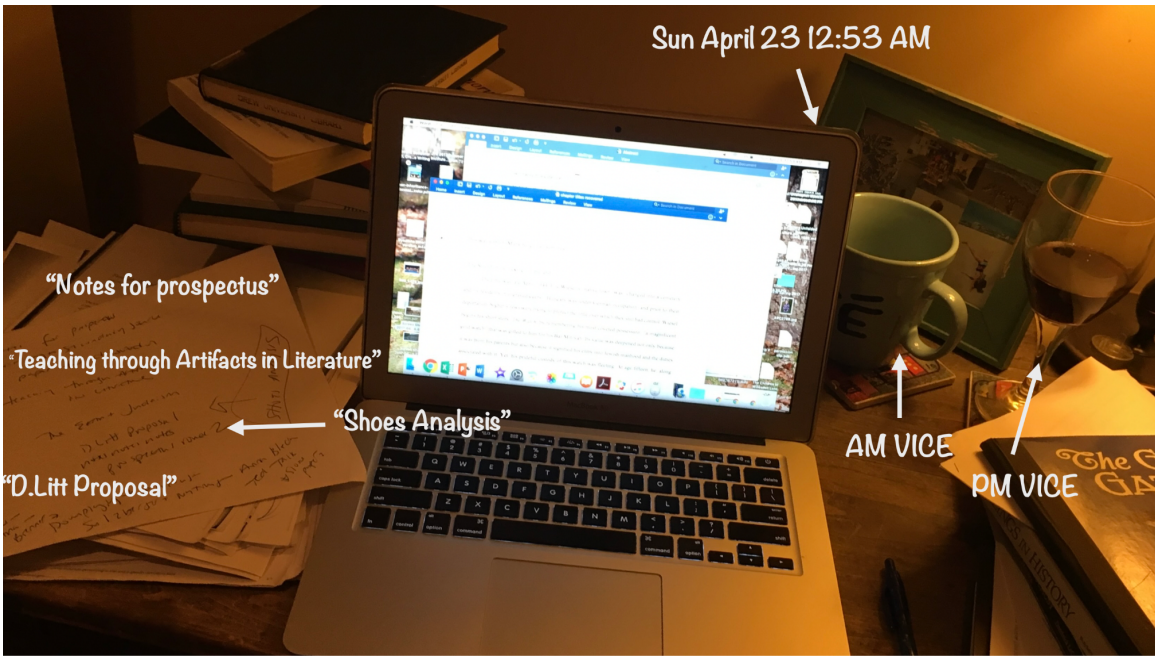

Figure 11. Self-portrait of my desk. Photograph taken by the author.

My papers from *Joy* reveal the ways in which I began to think about objects as the base of this project, incentivized by my trip to Poland, and, in particular, the indelible experience inside of Block 27 in Auschwitz I. I titled the first round of my Prospectus, *The Last Survivors: Harnessing the Energy of Holocaust Artifacts for Empathy, Humanization, and Remembrance*, and began it like this:

> In one room inside a barrack at the Auschwitz-Birkenau Memorial and Museum in Oświęcim, Poland, visitors are enveloped by signs of life. The

> dark space is animated with large, projected images on every wall: mothers enjoying a day on the beach with their children, students singing at their school concert, a young child jump roping, men playing a friendly game of soccer. As these familiar moments with which each of us can identify flash by, associated, authentic voices are heard. Innocent laughter. Lively chatter. Unified melodies. These ordinary occurrences, captured in snapshots and videos by Jewish families and individuals all around Europe prior to Nazi rule, were not meant to be preserved in a museum. They belonged to their subjects, the Jewish men, women, and children, who, like us today, wanted to capture the ephemeral events of their lives. Yet, the onus to remember now falls on us, and the narrators are the myriad photographs and mundane objects, which have morphed into unique types of cultural artifacts within museum and historical contexts. Away from people's pockets or closets, these personal, commonplace items offer a unique and intimate perspective into the ways in which Jews lived prior to Nazi persecution, and subsequently, how they were victimized and systematically annihilated during the Holocaust.

Though lofty, my subsequent thesis statement was laudable:

> Harnessing the energy of artifacts is a vital way to foster empathy and individualize victims of mass atrocity. In-depth examinations of European Jewry's material culture before Nazi persecution and of Holocaust remembrance offer singular glimpses into the lively Jewish communities

> that once existed and the ways in which they were deceived and systematically annihilated.

However, beyond it were wide-ranging rabbit holes on an unsteady surface. What did it mean to "harness the energy of artifacts?" How could I actually do that? What exactly was material culture, let alone "European Jewry's material culture before Nazi persecution [AND] of Holocaust remembrance?" How could I even find it? See it? Touch it? *Feel* it? I read and annotated fervently.

And though the research was fascinating, each text seemed to enlarge the puzzle rather than to solve it, making the inevitable endeavor of submitting a coherent piece by semester's end dubious and daunting, to say the least.

Coincidentally, or perhaps *bashert*, I attended the 5th Annual Collaborative Conference on Holocaust Education at the College of Saint Elizabeth in the midst of this meandering journey, at which Dr. Karen Shawn, Associate Professor of Jewish Education at Yeshiva University and Founding Editor of *Prism: An Interdisciplinary Journal for Holocaust Educators* delivered the keynote address. Remarkably, Shawn spoke of the empathetic and evocative power of artifactual literature and referred specifically to an Elie Wiesel short story, *The Watch*, as a quintessential example of it.

That night, I found *The Watch* and got lost in its possibilities.

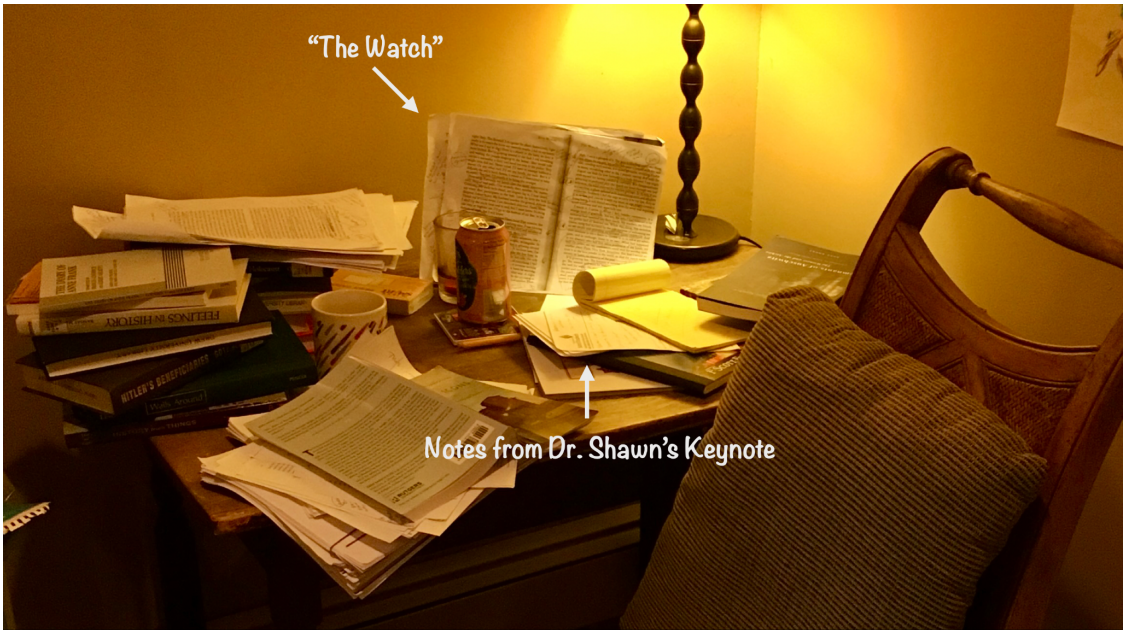

Figure 12. Another key piece. Photograph taken by the author.

Here was something I could see, touch, and feel; *The Watch* became a talismanic clue that offered me confidence, clarity, creativity, and comfort, at least during the waning weeks of the spring semester as deadlines for a Prospectus loomed. Wiesel's story, and in particular its spotlight on objects and his anthropomorphic watch, was the opening to a project that felt feasible and familiar, merging material culture and literature - the former this new, exciting field for me and the latter a safe space that spoke to my strengths as a reader and writer. I formed a material plan with *The Watch* as its foundation and proposed:

> At the core of my dissertation is the material culture of Holocaust remembrance, not only authentic, physical objects on display in museums and memorials, found at extermination sites, plundered by the Nazis and

> non-Jewish neighbors, and kept by Holocaust survivors or their descendants but also artifacts embedded in literature. In order to validate my assertion of the emotive power and authenticity and experience Holocaust literature can provide, I am using Elie Wiesel's short story, *The Watch*, to ground and introduce every chapter….

I can clearly see how far-reaching my ambitions still were at the close of the semester in the spring of 2017, which marked my formal completion of courses in the D. Litt program. However, this Proposal shows the wide-ranging ways in which I began to converse with objects - to question what they could testify and how I could discern responses from them in return. Two years later, I embarked on a quest to learn more, and I gained so much more than knowledge in return.

The time was early March 2019.

I was returning to the Annual Scholars' Conference on the Holocaust and the Churches at The University of Texas at Dallas to present a paper, *The Last Survivors: Harnessing the Energy of Holocaust Artifacts*. Coincidentally, or perhaps *bashert*, Victoria Aarons was on my panel. Dressed in my new suit, a material armament to hide

my fears of impostor syndrome amongst these distinguished scholars, this is a portion of what I presented:

Figure 13. Call to adventure. Photograph taken of the author.

the old survivors,
in their youth then
in their eighties now –
you've read their memoirs,
seen their Spielberg interviews –
in the schools, the churches, the synagogues,
you've heard their poignant voices –
voices of living history
that thrust us into the midst of things,
that give history a human face –
the voices fading, fading
like their blue tattoos –
as *never forget* grows more important with each passing year,
who will be left to deny the deniers?
who will be left to speak for the dead burnt bodies,
to carry on for every one of their lost ones'
unfinished lives?
who will be left
to rescue the dead from oblivion?

- Stephen Herz

We are at a seminal moment in Holocaust history. The small number of survivors, "the narrative storytellers [who] implore us to remember," continues to age and pass away, and as a result, "the burden of remembering the genocidal horrors of the Holocaust has assumed new urgency" (Aviv and Shneer 74-75). Efforts abound to ensure that our

human connection is not severed at this foreseeable juncture and that the authenticity of our experiences as they pertain to the Holocaust remains intact. As we brood over our imminent future deprived of direct survivors, we must look to innovative and established means that seek to perpetuate an alive, effective connection to the Holocaust. One such way is through giving voice to the last survivors, the objects, the traces of humanity, which quietly but clearly speak as bearers of witness. The notion of *living* is one that many Holocaust museums and memorials have adopted. The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum defines itself as "a living memorial, dedicated to remembering the victims, honoring the survivors, and ensuring that their history remains both a cautionary tale and a vital lesson to future generations" (Bloomfield xv). Notably, its architect, James Ingo Freed calls the building "a resonator of memory," simultaneously suggesting the substantial effects of the Holocaust ceaselessly with us and our inadequacy to fully absorb the experience survivors endured (Weinberg and Eliel 25). Freed's family fled Nazi Germany in 1939, and he admits that he was highly ignorant about the Holocaust prior to this project, and subsequently, to his emotional experience in Auschwitz. After that pilgrimage to Poland, Freed explained that those "emotions" became entrenched in his design of the building that would exist as "a monument [and a] container of a living organism" (Weinberg and Eliel 27).

Amongst the defined characteristics of organisms are two noteworthy qualities related to this concept:

1) they respond in some form to stimuli (by avoidance, growth, pursuit, etc.); and

2) they have the ability to maintain themselves, by taking matter and energy from outside themselves and using it to build and repair their bodily structure and to keep a series of chemical reactions going. (Ashworth and Little)

Expanding the scope of this biological definition to a museum gives viability not only to memory itself but also to the vessels of that memory. In this way, the authentic artifacts that comprise an exhibit may be seen as living entities, which personify their history and grow and adapt as the contemporary observer responds to them. The material culture of Holocaust remembrance exemplifies both of these traits, and because so often the physical remnants are the only remains of the victims, "many curators rely on objects to represent missing Jewish figures" (Hansen-Glucklich 120). Within these carefully constructed contexts, a Holocaust narrative is shaped and transmitted, and the artifacts themselves become the primary narrators. By presenting authentic artifacts as witnesses to atrocities, museums 'humanize' the artifacts within a 'rhetorical strategy' of exhibition and, in a sense, grant them their own 'lives'" (Hansen-Glucklich 120). Yet, their inherent "lives" gain further sustenance and meaning through the emotional energy of human connection, thereby enabling observers to become empathetically involved not only with the past but also in the present.

A powerful conduit for the living memory to which Freed refers is the authentic artifacts, which bring presence to the absence of their initial owners. These become what Oren Baruch Stier calls Holocaust icons, defined as:

> artifact[s] from that time and a type of representation of that era. What is unique about such icons is that they embody both the "then" and the

> "now" – that is, as symbols drawn from the Holocaust itself, they originate in an authentic aspect of the Holocaust, but as symbols whose power persists past the events of World War II, they also represent the Holocaust in its aftermath. (*Holocaust Icons* 6)

In addition to transcending time, another distinct aspect of many Holocaust icons is their inherent conflicting realities. What predominantly remains are not the articles of value, religion, or refinement that represented centuries of Jewish culture, but rather ordinary ones within everyday existence. Amid the chaos of suitcases, shoes and kitchen pots, one will not find many precious collectibles made of silver or gold. Instead of seeing canvases painted by renowned artists, one will find children's drawings and personal photographs.

The plundering of Jewish property has been well-documented and presented as a key instrument in this genocide (Levin). Because of the fervent theft that occurred throughout Nazi-occupied territories, the material aspects of the Holocaust speak much more to the physical and spiritual fatigue, torture, deception, and destruction of European Jews than to their individual and collective identities prior to their persecution and murder. In *The Holocaust Object in Polish and Polish-Jewish Culture,* Bozena Shallcross notes, "the now institutionalized display of these objects at sites of death clashes with both their initially intended use and the way in which they attest to the powerful human desire to live; after all, their owners carried these possessions to places of destination and destiny, as objects intended for use in a future life at these locations. Anyone who contemplates the material legacy of Auschwitz-Birkenau is struck first of all by both its

shabby everydayness and the simple utility of objects on display – a utility determined by the demands of survival" (Shallcross 1-2).

"Here, the artifact's historical testimony is, paradoxically, simultaneously reified and sacralized; the 'correct' version of history is not simply a plausible *interpretation* of the past, but is *empirically immanent* in the artifacts themselves, which become transcendent, ideologically charged witnesses" (Polzer 701). The ubiquity of personal artifacts elucidates tangible, personal stories; in fact, Jennifer Hansen-Glucklich argues that "above all…objects of personal or ritual nature…anthropomorphically symbolize Jewish victims" (Hansen-Glucklich 119).

One of the most powerful illustrations of this point is a shattered doll, resting behind glass inside a barrack in Auschwitz-Birkenau that houses the remnants of personal belongings – ones that were plundered by the Nazis, found near extermination sites, or provide material evidence of mass murder.

Figure 14. Shattered. Photograph taken by the author.

Her small hands still clutching her pleated skirt, she communicates the innocence and life her youthful owner once preserved. Her cracked, severed head and displaced hair lie lifelike next to her; her lips are partially parted, and her eye is staring intensely at the onlooker. The doll's own trauma symbolizes the brutal annihilation of children who were robbed of their futures, and "refer[s] metonymically to [her] absent owner – [a] victim of the latest round of deportations – and, at the same time, to [her] mortal remains" (Hansen-Glucklich 120). Where has that owner disappeared to? The answer hovers somewhere between normal life and abnormal death, and the spectator is invited to enter that shadowy area, a moment of nightmare in history, without the help of a favorite toy to comfort us.

In her book, *Holocaust Memory Reframed*, Jennifer Hansen-Glucklich coins the term, "witnessing vision," which she defines as "a way of seeing that responds to authentic artifacts within displays that are presented as witnesses to atrocities" (Hansen-Glucklich 120). The doll's "surrounding space, place, and emplacement" – adjacent to other children's and infants' personal objects that are meticulously laid out, contained in a larger exhibit of victims' remnants – serves to heighten her symbolic and emotive power. Within this barracks at Auschwitz, one is confronted not only with the enormity of destruction, but also with microscopic human touches that remind us these objects represented life. Amidst the massive pile of children's shoes, there is a single shoe where a small footprint can still be seen inside. This close-up shot of eyeglasses that I captured reminded me of the comments made by a conservator, who spent three months cleaning all of the eyeglasses in Auschwitz in a vitrine.

Figure 15. Contortion. Photograph taken by the author.

He said, “When I saw the eyeglasses in the exhibition, I saw it as one big pile. But in the lab, I began to examine them one by one. One had a screw replaced by a bent needle; another had a repaired temple. And then this enormous mass of glasses started becoming people” (Donadio).

The ubiquity of personal objects that have endured and survived the Holocaust are indispensable vehicles for translating statistics into individuals. In doing so, these authentic artifacts achieve what Ramsay MacMullen calls a “re-feeling” of history; as conduits of Holocaust memory, they “search out the emotions, and entering into them, ourselves,” we can come closer to connecting more deeply to it (MacMullen 135). Away from people’s pockets, pantries, or closets, they bring presence to the absence of their original owners and hold a unique type of emotive and narrative power. They testify to

the past, and we can come closer to that distant, vanished world through them as they quietly but clearly speak as bearers of witness.

With that said, seldom is it possible to return to museums regularly, possibly risking memory, impact, or empathy to fade with time. Nevertheless, literary and other scholarly journeys to analyze and contextualize these artifacts show, and tell, the human story of Jewish victims, and they can be reentered, shared, and intimately accessed at any time. The materiality of the Holocaust is ever-expansive here, showing not only systematic mass murder but also treasures that were the cornerstone of civilization prior to Nazi persecution, ones that were eventually hidden, buried, plundered, or destroyed. Object-heavy texts – literature, poetry, film, art – elucidate similar symbolic and emotive power as the physical remains themselves, commemorating and perpetuating the irrevocable loss of once thriving Jewish communities.

In his essay, *The Truth of Material Culture: History or Fiction?*, Jules Prown proposes that an artifact has value not only when studied as an historical event but also as a fictitious construction that expresses belief. In justifying that art and literature are appropriate for material cultural analysis, he asserts:

> History can never completely retrieve the past with all its rich complexity, not only of events but of emotions and sensations and spirit. We retrieve only the facts of what transpired; we do not retrieve the feel, the affective totality, of what it was like to be alive in the past….On the other hand, literature can weave small fictions into profound and true insights regarding the human condition. It can recreate the experience of deeply felt moments and move us profoundly. It can trace inexorable patterns of

> cause and effect in fiction and concentrate the largest universal truths into myth. (Prown 6)

Lawrence Langer confirms this capacity, which is inherent in Holocaust literature; "if reading about [the Holocaust] becomes a venture in strengthening consciousness rather than the ordeal of survival that [Holocaust survivors] endured, that venture nonetheless gives us access to the central event of our time, and perhaps of the modern era" (Langer 7). Literature humanizes and, as such, it is an essential vehicle to instill empathy, offering "[s]tories that help those who were not there enter imaginatively and vicariously into the experiences of those who were there" (Shawn xxi). This power parallels the fundamental missions of Holocaust museums, which use authentic relics to "carry and convey the material trace of authentic experience" (Stier 35). Therefore, literature embedded in artifacts can provide a similar emotive power and authenticity of experience. Stier claims:

> [W]henever authentic Holocaust symbols are embedded within narratives and other modes of representation, they can serve to authenticate that act of representation, just as material artifacts are incorporated into museum exhibitions. Holocaust icons as intensified symbols and as specific embodiments of the Holocaust embody as well this sense of, and process of, authentication in an even stronger way, because they themselves not only refer to the Holocaust but also stand in for it. (Stier, *Holocaust Icons* 5)

Holocaust poetry and stories narrated by survivors make the complex ideas and events of the Holocaust personally significant; through their intimacy, immediacy, and authenticity,

they spark empathy and identification. They "foster compassion and involvement that prompt readers to want to sense the feelings and understand the experiences of another person" (Shawn xxv). Likewise, so do exhibits in Holocaust museums and memorials, which "seek to transform passive spectators into involved and concerned witnesses" (Hansen-Glucklich 142). Both rely on authentic artifacts' symbolic and emotive power to offer a tangible and personal history to the reader or viewer, who in turn, takes an active part in inferring meaning. Thus, "through their responses to an object's aura, visitors [*and readers or viewers*] play an essential role in creating sacred meanings," becoming vicarious witnesses to the past and creating an emotional identification with the individuals from it (Hansen-Glucklich 143).

This is the great promise of material culture: we engage not only with our minds but also with our senses, our hearts. Figuratively speaking, we put ourselves inside the bodies of the individuals who made or used these objects; we see with their eyes and touch with their hands (Prown 17). This act of vicarious witnessing arguably brings the past to the present, prompting us to move beyond seeing and learning to responsibility and action. In all their simplicity, these everyday objects become "sacred" as the last tangible testaments to the identities of Holocaust victims. Yet, their stories, their passions, their families, their lives continue to live through their remnants, and consequently, through us.

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After our panel presentation at the Annual Scholars' Conference on the Holocaust and the Churches in early March of 2019, Dr. Victoria Aarons, affectionately known as Vicki, and I began to talk. At the time, much of her scholarship was focused on the third generation, and serendipitously, she was writing about how objects become gestures of memory, mediating the past and present and catalyzing quests for descendants to trace their vanquished familial origins. She directed me to recent books she had written or edited on third-generation literature, graphic novels about which she had recently begun to analyze, handshakes with fellow scholars, and graciously, to a seat at the table with them.

Figure 16. Coming of age. Photograph of the author and her mentors.

Each offered their own substance and sustenance - for subsequent directions for my dissertation, for future participation in scholarly endeavors, for insight into my identity as the granddaughter of Holocaust survivors, and for my confidence to cross the threshold into all of the journeys these experiences would invite.

CHAPTER FOUR

IT'S ABOUT TIME (AND TANGIBLE TRACES)

Anyone who knows me knows about my (dis)organizational and time (mis)management "skills." Queen of the all-nighters, I've been known to sprint to a professor's office to submit an essay as his door was closing for the semester, implore a concierge to print a paper minutes before I'm delivering it, travel to conferences with a small library in my luggage to finish a project, fall asleep with my fingers on the keyboard….all the while my desktop and workspaces to resemble a war zone of earmarked books and unnamed screenshots, handwritten scribbles and frustratingly labeled docs. But, at the eleventh hour, somehow, some way, I've always found my way and reached the destination.

It was May 19, 2021, when I sent an email to Dr. Victoria Aarons with the subject line, "Missing you, missing deadlines," after I realized I mistakenly misremembered the deadline for proposals for a collection of essays she was editing under contract with Wayne State University Press. I received her reply almost immediately, and while I was [am still] humbled by her response, it was too late.

I was devastated.

I let a dream slip through my fingers.

It was about time I got burned, but it burned me deeply nonetheless.

Anyone who knows me knows my insatiable desire to publish. I don't know why it beckons me so profoundly, but it does. Or why I see it as the apex of achievement, but I do.

Seven months later, on December 16, 2021, I received an email from Vicki under the same thread of former correspondences. One of the scheduled contributors had to withdraw from the project; their space in the book could be mine. She wrote, “I hope that this is not too late notice,” and I looked self-assuredly at the September 1, 2022 deadline as if it belonged to a future lifetime. My emails to Dr. Aarons and to my committee members at this time, excessively punctuated with exclamation points and signs of optimistic attention towards my dissertation, reflect my sincere belief that the validation and intended focus of the chapter would be a key piece in the completion of this project in a timely fashion. Four years and a half years later, *The Story’s Not Over: Jewish Women and Embodied Selfhood in Graphic Novels*, is coming out this May, and I am Chapter 12.

I have yet to hold the book in my hands - to embrace the physical manifestation, *the* trophy, of a four-year journey. I wonder what that moment will feel like when I see a padded envelope in the mailbox marking its arrival. Which pages I will turn to first. If the book will feel like the multitudinous others I’ve opened, touched, read, and marked. Or, if it will have an inexplicable aura that makes it feel magical and less mundane despite its utmost familiarity.

Time will tell.

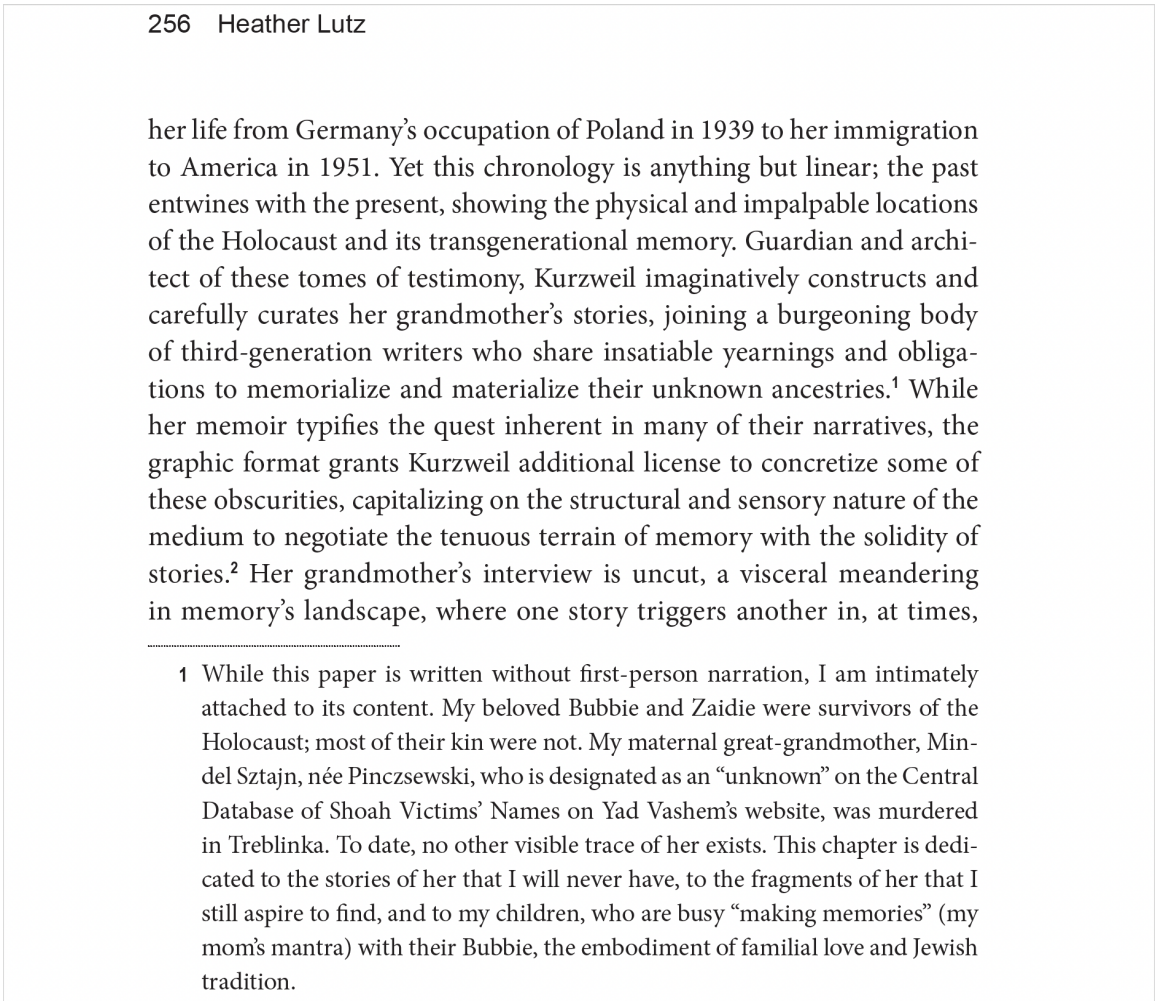
Like most hero’s journeys, this one was arduous, adventurous, and replete with ordeals that I had to weather on my own. But, as isolating as writing felt so much of the time, as much as I knew that this was my road to travel, my mountain to ascend, I could not have done it on my own.

Guides are invaluable assets on any journey. Vicki, Sandy, Danyel, Virena, Rabbi Mark, Ken - you were some of mine along the trials and tribulations of Chapter 12.

And now that I have stood on the summit, one of the wisdoms with which I've returned is an appreciation for the profound human need to leave a mark - an irrefutable trace of your existence to affirm your presence in the world. A tangible testimony that *you were here.*

I acquired this understanding as I wept through writing the first footnote of Chapter 12, knowingly etching my great-grandmother's name out of oblivion, setting it in stone on page 256, to be cited (sighted) forever more:

.



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her life from Germany's occupation of Poland in 1939 to her immigration to America in 1951. Yet this chronology is anything but linear; the past entwines with the present, showing the physical and impalpable locations of the Holocaust and its transgenerational memory. Guardian and architect of these tomes of testimony, Kurzweil imaginatively constructs and carefully curates her grandmother's stories, joining a burgeoning body of third-generation writers who share insatiable yearnings and obligations to memorialize and materialize their unknown ancestries.[1] While her memoir typifies the quest inherent in many of their narratives, the graphic format grants Kurzweil additional license to concretize some of these obscurities, capitalizing on the structural and sensory nature of the medium to negotiate the tenuous terrain of memory with the solidity of stories.[2] Her grandmother's interview is uncut, a visceral meandering in memory's landscape, where one story triggers another in, at times,

1 While this paper is written without first-person narration, I am intimately attached to its content. My beloved Bubbie and Zaidie were survivors of the Holocaust; most of their kin were not. My maternal great-grandmother, Mindel Sztajn, née Pinczsewski, who is designated as an "unknown" on the Central Database of Shoah Victims' Names on Yad Vashem's website, was murdered in Treblinka. To date, no other visible trace of her exists. This chapter is dedicated to the stories of her that I will never have, to the fragments of her that I still aspire to find, and to my children, who are busy "making memories" (my mom's mantra) with their Bubbie, the embodiment of familial love and Jewish tradition.

Figure 17. A surrogate tombstone. Screenshot taken by the author.

I remember struggling to determine where and how I could insert myself within the body of Holocaust descendants about whom I was writing, and placing a note at the end of the sentence when I first mentioned the third generation seemed fitting. The thought to name my great-grandmother affected me profoundly, and it underscored my own "insatiable yearning and obligation to memorialize and materialize [my] unknown legacy" (Lutz 256). I agreed with Reader #2 of my first draft, who touchingly commented that the note was "too important to be relegated in the margins, at the bottom, in the shadows," but I

knew my story was for another chapter. So was the next footnote that supplemented the abutting sentence, which now, two and a half years after its composition, belongs as more than an annotation, for it underscores the quest inherent in descendant narratives and the animate functions of objects that mythically guide and inform them.

In *Third-Generation Holocaust Representation: Trauma, History, and Memory*, Victoria Aarons and Alan Berger assert, "The growing body of literature by the third generation includes memoirs and fictional narratives spanning continents and languages and is characteristically shaped by the literary conceit of the quest, a pursuit beginning and ending with the intersection of history and personal stories" (Aarons and Berger 12). Highly metafictional and deeply personal, these narratives involve searches through things real and imagined, and thus the process of seeking and discovering is an integral part of their substance and structure. In the Foreword to Andrea Simon's memoir, *Bashert: A Granddaughter's Holocaust Quest*, Dr. Claire Le Foll describes this process as "the 'behind the scenes' aspects of this quest," stressing the inherent reflective and reflexive qualities of it (LeFoll xx). Le Foll's characterization of Simon's memoir as "half-way between a detective novel and the tale of a spiritual quest" echoes that of Daniel Mendelsohn's memoir, *The Lost: A Search for Six of the Six Million*, described as "a remarkably original epic - part memoir, part reportage, part mystery, and part scholarly detective work" (back cover). Their respective titles call attention to the "quest" or "search" characteristic of descendants' narratives, whose journeys vivify the stories of lives lost "in the ashes that lined village ditches, ashes that clung to crematoria walls, ashes that blanketed forest floors, ashes that have dissolved into nothingness" (Simon xxiii). Trailblazers into the abyss of their ancestry, they vicariously travel the fragmented

remains of their familial legacies, carrying what Marianne Hirsch calls "postmemories…experiences[s] of those who grow up dominated by narratives that preceded their birth" but that are nevertheless "shaped by traumatic events that can be neither understood nor recreated" (Hirsch 22). Hirsch speaks of photographs as "the leftovers, the fragmentary sources and the building blocks, shot through with holes, of the work of postmemory," yet those "ghostly revenants" are just one of the remnants on which descendants rely to guide their journeys (Hirsch 22). In *Unclaimed Experience*, Alan Berger observes, "Objects as sites of discovery and recognition recur throughout post-Holocaust narratives. Artifacts such as maps, photographs, diaries, letters, and other objects exist as material substance in the place of absence, providing clues to the past" (Berger 226). These objects, whether bestowed or hunted, uncovered or recovered, are the "building blocks" or "clues" that become directional cues for descendants of Holocaust survivors, who seek to make sense of how the past impacts their present – of what they have inherited, of who they are because of the history from which they came.

Post-Holocaust literature is singularly metanarrative. It is the descendant's quest through which one travels, yet it is one predicated upon a calling into which he or she was inescapably born. At times, there is a burning cognizance of this inheritance, an awareness of an elusive yet undeniable past that lurks in the shadows - in grayed photos, puzzling artifacts, subtle demeanors, or ambiguous allusions. At others, it reveals itself unexpectedly, found posthumously and left by purpose or accident by its deceased proprietor, serving as a summons for its discoverer to probe further into its story. In either case, the search upon which he or she embarks closely aligns with the quintessential narrative pattern of the hero's journey, and thus, I cautiously invite Joseph Campbell's

monomyth to post-Holocaust narratives and its literary conceit of the quest. Cautious because while his well-defined and verified stages are apparent in so many of these narratives, real life cannot be neatly analogous to fictive constructs, especially, as abundantly clear, in Holocaust literature. Though post-generational, descendants' stories bear the imprint of inherited and storied trauma, and as such, they should be held to Lawrence Langer's criterion that "the most compelling Holocaust writers reject the temptations to squeeze their themes into familiar premises" (Langer 6). Yet, even by their sheer existence, post-Holocaust narratives themselves substantiate a "durable affirmation lurking in the dusk of atrocity," offering signs of resilience for the survivors and their kin, who are called to venture into the depths of irreparable repair and despair (Langer 6).

Joseph Campbell's archetype begins in "the ordinary world," when the "hero" is "called to adventure," when something or someone "reveals an unsuspected world, and the individual is drawn into a relationship with forces that are not rightly understood" (Campbell 46). Ariana Neumann's "questions began with a photograph" when she was a child in *When Time Stopped: A Memoir of my Father's War and What Remain*s (Neumann 4). She recalls, "Finding that photograph in the box was the pivot. It marked the exact moment when the unfilled spaces, the cracks in the narrative, emerged. And slowly, very, very slowly, I realized that in those gaps, buried and interwoven within the silences and minute instances of discomposure, lay the real story" (Neumann 18). Decades later, upon her father's passing in 2001, Neumann rediscovers the photograph amongst a box of enigmatic documents her father left for her, which "held a jigsaw puzzle for [her] to reconstruct, with pieces just large enough to allow a sense a theme" (Neumann 32). Likewise, while cleaning out her father's things after his death in *What*

They Saved: Pieces of a Jewish Past, Nancy K. Miller finds "baffling items from a Jewish legacy" she knew almost nothing about (Miller 3). She notes, "The collection, however eclectic, pointed to a specific enough elsewhere, a map of meaning and relations that nonetheless eluded me. These strange things provided clues, almost an invitation, to follow where they led" (Miller 4). In both cases, the objects - the "pieces" and "remains" - serve as openings for intergenerational memory and stories, catalyzing searches through chronicles and continents to locate, find, and name them.

Within the "special worlds" of their ancestors' lives, descendants meet talismanic "mentors or guides" that "may be a physical person, or, an object," face "tests and tribulations," and eventually return to the place from which they came (Vogler). Neumann shares, "My questions sometimes led to answers and often also to further puzzles, to more documents, photographs, and objects stored in boxes, stowed away in cupboards and attics. And so was it that additional boxes filled with clues from the past began to appear – usually unannounced and unexpected, and always as if by magic" (Neumann 36). This spiritual, mythical quality of descendants' quests are recurrent; Andrea Simon notably admits, "A skeptic and nonbeliever, I nonetheless begin to see *bashert* everywhere" (Simon 28). As her journey nears its end in her memoir, she receives "a treasure," a meticulously detailed rendering of the once-thriving Volchin, her grandmother's vanquished village in present-day Belarus, hand-drawn by a local child-survivor, Shmuel, and accompanied by extensive written memories that were triggered by his drawing of this map. Simon handles the materials "carefully," "hungrily," "the weight of a lost world rest[ing] in [her] hands" (Simon 249). Shmuel's "rich anecdotes and cartographical identifications" resurrect Volchin, bringing to life in exquisite detail the

mundane communal and personal spaces of its former inhabitants, showing "where actual living souls shopped, studied, bathed, worshipped, ate, slept, played, made love" (Simon 256). Simon notes, "These are not the fragmented snatches of nostalgia. These are the painstaking replicas of humans and their artifacts, systematically pinpointed in geographical location and sociological import" (Simon 250). Shmuel's drawing of the map not only was mnemonic, prompting memories via tactile engagement that connected him with this past but also became signposts that lead to Andrea Simon's ability to humanize a history that had been obliterated by time and tragedy, offering a *living* portrait of the everyday experiences the citizens of Volchin and members of her family once had…before they were stripped of them, just for being Jewish.

Though "family stories aglow with the aura of myth" (Miller 7), post-Holocaust narratives also show the discrepancy between legend and life, of memory traveled, stories told, and experiences lived. In Campbell's archetype, "The true Hero returns with an Elixir to heal a wounded land," yet this is a land that can never be healed (Vogler). "The Elixir may bring closure to the Journey and restore balance to the Ordinary World," yet descendants' post-memory journeys leave loose and dead ends (Vogler). The "mythical holy grail," as David Slucki aptly calls it in *Sing This at My Funeral: A Memoir of Fathers and Sons*, can never be attained (Slucki xi). Regardless of the "ever-expanding possibility of the quest," Nancy K. Miller reflects, the "quest in the end will still yield only partial knowledge - and will never give me, return to me, those past lives" (Miller 225).

But, what does it give her and other inheritors of these postmemories? What can these quests recover? And, what are the means by which they do so?

A year after the sudden, untimely death of his father, David Slucki finds "the unassuming brown box that held the words of my Zaida, a material link I would be able to hold in my hand" (Slucki xii). He consciously conducts some "detective work" to find his grandfather's letters to his brother in the postwar years, which, Slucki says, "brought him alive, gave him a personality, a voice. I had something tangible to help me connect with him and make sense of him and my dad" (Slucki xii-xiii). Likewise, towards the end of her memoir, Ariana Neumann reflects, "I finally have the grandparents I secretly longed to meet…I have found them in the photographs, through the words of their letters and anecdotes that have emerged from the boxes and the research. I have retrieved an intimate sense of who they were, and I carry them in my heart. They are no longer distant figures in a picture of faded grays" (Neumann 287). Slucki's and Neumann's respective searches into their ancestral archives of enduring love, irrevocable loss, and inherited legacy humanize members of their families, taking some out of total anonymity and creating profound bonds with others through the mundane, intimate objects they left behind.

Near the close of *The Lost*, Daniel Mendelsohn ruminates on the impotencies, ironies, and possibilities of his quest, which took him to several countries and continents, leading him to Bolechow, a small town in pre-World Poland:

> We had gone to learn precisely how and where and when he [his great-uncle Shmiel Jager] had died, they [his great-aunt Ester, and their daughters Lorka, Frydka, Ruchele and Bronia] had died; and had, for the most part, failed. But in failing we'd realized, almost accidentally, that until then nobody had ever thought to ask about

> what can't be put on a chart: how they lived, who they were…I was aware of this irony – that in the end, we'd learned far more about what we hadn't been looking for than about what we'd set out to find. But of course, so much of our journeying had been like that. (Mendelsohn 554)

In each of these post-Holocaust narratives, the objects discovered along the quests on which these descendants embark offer clues to the puzzles of their pasts, and though they are destined to remain unresolved, the pictures become clearer, more complete, concretized within the spines of their books and stories they contain. The objects are the joint narrators of these journeys, but the "heroes" are the ones who live to tell them.

Addressing her role as the mediator between memories lived and stories traveled, Nancy K. Miller writes, "Despite my intense desire to know the truth, however partial or incomplete, I am forced to recognize that the process of finding the story continues to change the story. As I advance into the territory of recovery, I can't even trust myself. That may be the hardest lesson of all" (Miller 26). At the end of her quest, she concludes, "The past continues to reshape our ideas of who we are in the present. That's why we find it so difficult to stop our excavations: the archeology of ancestry reveals as much about us as it does about the beings lost to us in time" (Miller 229). Echoing her sentiments, in *I Want You to Know We're Still Here: A Post-Holocaust Memoir*, Esther Safron Foer reflects, "The search took me to places that allowed me to more deeply understand the Holocaust and how it continued to reverberate long past the liberation and into future generations. It was ultimately a search that took me to places inside myself

that scared me" (Foer 5), and Andrea Simon concludes, "What began as a search for missing facts, for missing relatives, ultimately became a search for myself" (Simon 258).

With objects in hand and heart, these writers show that, indeed, dead ends can be resurrected to form new beginnings.

CHAPTER FIVE

MY INHERITANCE

I wish I could remember more than I do from the time I was in Dr. Sloane Drayson-Knigge's course, *Beyond Words: The Graphic Novel and Its Representation of Mass Violence and Genocide*. In so many ways, 2014 feels like another lifetime. I wish I knew where the original files were from when I made the graphic novel with Zaidie's satchel, which, at the time, was not yet mine. I remember sitting crossed legged on the floor of my parents' bedroom closet, the smell of mothballs emanating from their meticulously hung clothes and the remains of Bubbie's things, which emigrated from Montreal to New Jersey after she passed away. I remember unzipping the bag for the first time, widening the opening and handling its contents with the care of a surgeon's hands, careful not to disrupt each article's precise placement as Bubbie or Zaidie had placed them. I was afraid to awaken them after such a long slumber - for their sake or for mine.

I wish I knew where the handwritten note was that I found behind my college graduation photo in one of Bubbie's albums. I wish I could ask her when and why she put it there.

I created *The Story Behind the Photo* as my capstone project for Dr. Drayson-Knigge's class. It was all hand drawn and handwritten and then scanned to the desktop we had in the spare bedroom on Bellot. I asked a student if she'd be interested in drawing some of the images for me, and she touchingly complied. It was difficult for either of us to imagine the filthy and terrible conditions Bubbie described in her brief and broken English on this scrap of paper, and both then and now, the illustrations of her experiences

don't feel right. Without standing on the soil of Piotrikow, Skarzysko-Kamienna, Leibzig or the fields of her death march, I know that it is impossible to imagine. But, time has taught me that many of Bubbie's memories will be untraversable on my eventual journey through Poland - a quest bestowed upon me, which, for the time being, takes place sitting at my desk, writing stories about the objects safekept in Zaidie's satchel, both of which I can now call my own.

I began literally and figuratively unpacking my legacy for the 25th Annual Jewish American and Holocaust Literature Symposium (JAHLit) in the fall of 2019. I titled my paper, *Not to Have and Yet to Hold: Heirlooms in the Hands of Holocaust Descendants*, referring to the presence of tangible objects and the absence of any understanding or memories their heirs have of them. I had been extensively reading second and third generation narratives and pinpointing the talismanic qualities of these artifacts, particularly as they became catalysts for descendants' quests and the basis for their stories. I don't remember the moment when my eyes met Zaidie's satchel, one of the only texts that rested dormantly on my bookshelf, but when they did, I instinctually moved towards it and placed it upon my workspace. As if under a spell, I apprehensively touched its tarnished zipper, and as I slowly unfurled its insides, what had been faint whispers to embark on my own journey began to resonate. The research and reading I had done to date became less of a thesis and more of a handbook, and rather than write about others' Holocaust descendants' quests, I decided to embark on my own.

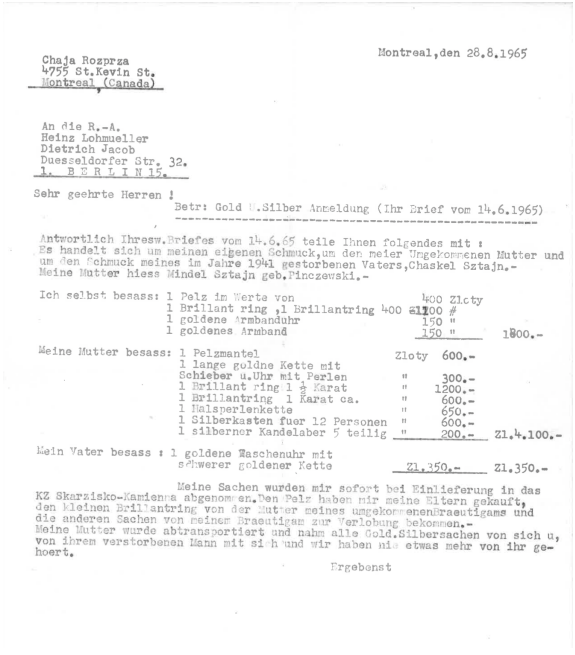
***

The unzipped sides of Zaidie's satchel form a mouth, I think, as I stare at some of its ineffable contents: layers of letters spoken in languages foreign yet familiar. About a

quarter of the pile lies open before me, forming a mosaic of discolored white tiles on the table. Like a climber, I firmly take hold of words that I can decipher: *Juden*, *Gestapo*, *Lager*, *befreit*. Dates I can place: 1939, 1942, 1945. Places I can recognize: Polen, Piotrikow, Buchenwald. Names with which I identify: Rozprza, Sztajn. They protrude from the pages of documents, a collection of handwritten notes and typed official paperwork written mostly in German and some in Yiddish. I know what they mean despite not knowing much of their meaning.

What a strange feeling. I am caught in a series of contradictions. Immobilized yet incentivized. Distant but never closer. Connected without any dots to connect.

I reach for another remnant. This one differs in size and texture; the boldfaced Courier bleeds through the translucent paper as I delicately unfold its creases. Montreal, August 8, 1965. Some kind of formal letter, from Chaja Rozprza – my Bubbie – to Heinz Lohmueller and Dietrich Jacob in Berlin. I'm intrigued by its layout. Two short paragraphs bookend a detailed list of what seems like valuables, adjacent to which are numbers in the hundreds and thousands with zloty at the end. I sense I'm holding some early correspondence for reparations my grandparents eventually receive from the German government, but I'll rely on Google Translate to confirm.



Chaja Rozprza
4755 St.Kevin St.
Montreal (Canada)

Montreal,den 28.8.1965

An die R.-A.
Heinz Lohmueller
Dietrich Jacob
Duesseldorfer Str. 32.
1. B E R L I N 15.

Sehr geehrte Herren !

Betr: Gold u.Silber Anmeldung (Ihr Brief vom 14.6.1965)

Antwortlich Ihresw.Briefes vom 14.6.65 teile Ihnen folgendes mit :
Es handelt sich um meinen eigenen Schmuck,um den meier Umgekommenen Mutter und um den Schmuck meines im Jahre 1941 gestorbenen Vaters,Chaskel Sztajn.-
Meine Mutter hiess Mindel Sztajn geb.Pinczewski.-

Ich selbst besass: 1 Pelz im Werte von 400 Zloty
1 Brillant ring ,1 Brillantring 400 zl 700 "
1 goldene Armbanduhr 150 "
1 goldenes Armband 150 " 1800.-

Meine Mutter besass: 1 Pelzmantel Zloty 600.-
1 lange goldne Kette mit
Schieber u.Uhr mit Perlen " 300.-
1 Brillant ring 1 ½ Karat " 1200.-
1 Brillantring 1 Karat ca. " 600.-
1 Halsperlenkette " 650.-
1 Silberkasten fuer 12 Personen " 600.-
1 silberner Kandelaber 5 teilig " 200.- Zl.4.100.-

Mein Vater besass : 1 goldene Taschenuhr mit
schwerer goldener Kette Zl.350.- Zl.350.-

Meine Sachen wurden mir sofort bei Einlieferung in das KZ Skarzisko-Kamienna abgenommen.Den Pelz haben mir meine Eltern gekauft, den kleinen Brillantring von der Mutter meines umgekommenen Braeutigams und die anderen Sachen von meiner Braeutigam zur Verlobung bekommen.-
Meine Mutter wurde abtransportiert und nahm alle Gold.Silbersachen von sich u, von ihrem verstorbenen Mann mit sich und wir haben nie etwas mehr von ihr gehoert.

Ergebenst

Figure 18. Plunder. Artifact property of the author.

I look up once or twice as I type the foreign phrases in the first paragraph – amazed, anxious, overwhelmed by the English words they're forming. I tell myself not to look again. Write it out entirely, and read it then:

Dear Sirs: Gold & Silver Registration (Your letter of 14.6.1965)

In reply to your letter of 14.6.65, you inform me of the following: my own jewelry, my mother's death and the adornment of my father, Chaskel Sztajn, who died in 1941. My mother's name was Mindel Sztajn née Pinczewski.

I owned:	1 fur in the value of	400 zloty
	1 brilliant ring	1000 zloty
	1 gold wristwatch	150 zloty
	1 gold bracelet	150 zloty
My mother owned:	1 fur coat	600 zloty
	1 long golden chain with slider (?) watch with pearls	300 zloty
	1 brilliant ring 1 ½ Karat	1200 zloty
	1 brilliant ring 1 Karat	600 zloty
	1 beaded (?) necklace	650 zloty
	1 silver case for 12 people	600 zloty
	1 silver candelabra 5 pieces	200 zloty
My father owned:	1 golden pocket watch with heavy gold chain	1,350 zloty

My belongings were taken from me immediately upon delivery to the Skarzisko-Kamienna concentration camp. My parents bought me the fur, got the little brilliant ring from the mother of my deceased groom and the other stuff from my groom for the engagement. My mother was taken away and took all gold and silver things from herself and from her deceased husband with her, and we have never heard anything more from her.

Humbly

My inheritance, copied and pasted from Google Translate to a Word document in (I swear) Inherit font. The irony is uncanny.

I read the letter over and over and over again, each time feeling the loss more acutely. How do you calculate compensation for your most cherished possessions? How can you subtract from them the memories they carried before they were stripped from

you? Do you divide the brilliance of your diamond ring by the amount of days it hid in darkness, buried in the lining of your fur coat, clasped to your chest inside the cattle car, thinking the worst, not the unthinkable?[1] Do you add to the amount of the candelabra your vanished mother's voice, never again to invoke the light from the flames of Shabbos candles?

Mindel Sztajn born as Pinczsewski. I vigilantly type in the information on the Central Database of Shoah Victims' Names on Yad Vashem's website. My great-grandmother's life, reduced to Last/Maiden Name. First Name. Place. Search.

This is what I find:

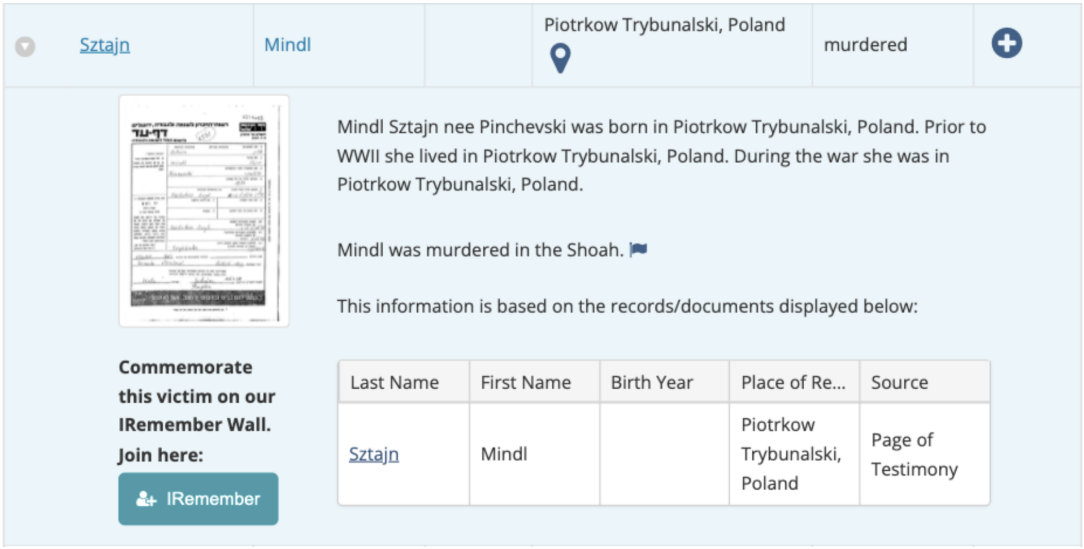
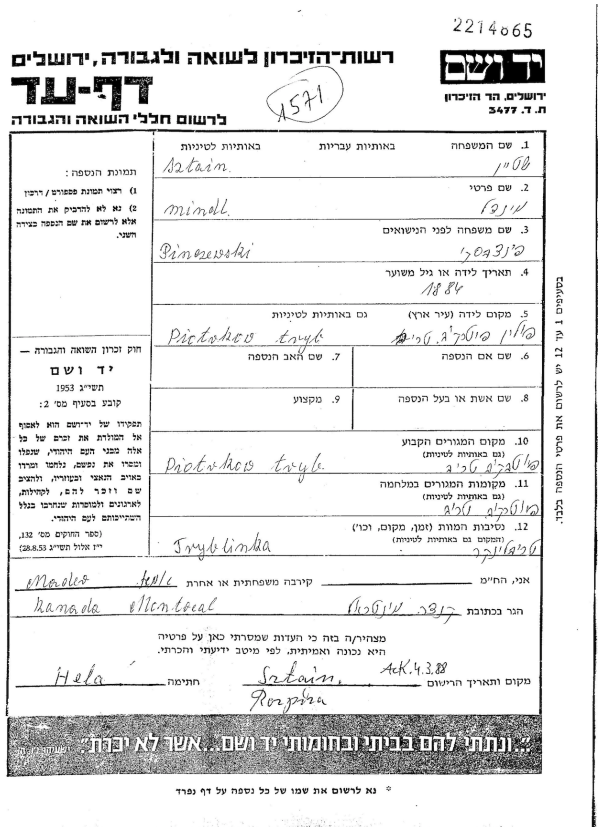


Figure 19. An unknown. Screenshot taken of Yad Vashem's website, 2022.

I look at the Page of Testimony scanned beneath this speck of information and recognize my Bubbie's handwriting – its fancy yet clumsy curves of letters, as if the English alphabet, too, speaks Yiddish as its first language. The document itself is in

[1] Charlotte Delbo, "Arrivals, Departures"

Hebrew, yet another tongue I am lacking, but I can navigate it enough to corroborate the text and to detect two more details about this woman, my great-grandmother, who as it states, "was an unknown." She was born in 1886 (no month) and her circumstance of death was Tryblinka (sp). No date at all.



2214065

רשות־הזיכרון לשואה ולגבורה, ירושלים

דף-עד

לרשום חללי השואה והגבורה

יד ושם

ירושלים, הר הזיכרון
ת. ד. 3477

A571

	באותיות לטיניות	באותיות עבריות
1. שם המשפחה	Sztajn	שטיין
2. שם פרטי	Mindl	מינדל
3. שם משפחה לפני הנישואים	Rozenzwajg	רוזנצוויג
4. תאריך לידה או גיל משוער	1884	
5. מקום לידה (עיר ארץ)	Piotrkow Tryb.	פיוטרקוב טריב.
6. שם אם הנספה		
7. שם האב הנספה		
8. שם אשת או בעל הנספה		
9. מקצוע		
10. מקום המגורים הקבוע (גם באותיות לטיניות)	Piotrkow Tryb.	פיוטרקוב טריב.
11. מקומות המגורים במלחמה (גם באותיות לטיניות)		פיוטרקוב טריב
12. נסיבות המוות (זמן, מקום, וכו') (המקום גם באותיות לטיניות)	Tryblinka	טריבלינקה

תמונות הנספה:
1) רצוי תמונת פספורט / דרכון
2) נא לא להדביק את התמונה אלא לרשום את שם הנספה בצידה השני.

חוק זכרון השואה והגבורה — יד ושם
תשי"ג 1953
קובע בסעיף מס' 2:
תפקידו של יד ושם הוא לאסוף אל המולדת את זכרם של כל אלה מבני העם היהודי, שנפלו ובטבו את נפשם, נלחמו ומרדו באויב הנאצי ובעוזריו, ולהנציח שם זיכר להם, לקהילות, לאירגונים ולמוסדות שנתרכזו בגלל השקיפותם לעם היהודי.
(ספר החוקים מס' 132, י"ז אלול תשי"ג 28.8.53)

אני, הח"מ _____ קירבה משפחתית או אחרת _____

הגר בכתובת Hamada Montreal

מצהיר/ה בזה כי העדות שמסרתי כאן על פרטיה היא נכונה ואמיתית, לפי מיטב ידיעתי והזכרתי.

מקום ותאריך הרישום Montreal, 4.3.88

חתימה Hela Sztajn Rozprza

"...ונתתי להם בביתי ובחומותי יד ושם...אשר לא יכרת"

* נא לרשום את שמו של כל נספה על דף נפרד

בעמודים 1 עד 12 יש לרשום את פרטי הנספה בלבד.

Figure 20. Page of Testimony. Downloaded from Yad Vashem's website.

I was nine years old, my Bubbie's *mamaleh*, when she formally declared the murder of her mother.

Figure 21. May 1988. Photograph property of the author.

There is one more piece of evidence available in the far-right column of the search results page under the heading "Map." I click on the destination icon and travel to Poland. Two locations are marked – the journey between Mindel's life and her death. Approximately 250 kilometers from Piotrikow to Treblinka. Yet the distance between us is inestimable.

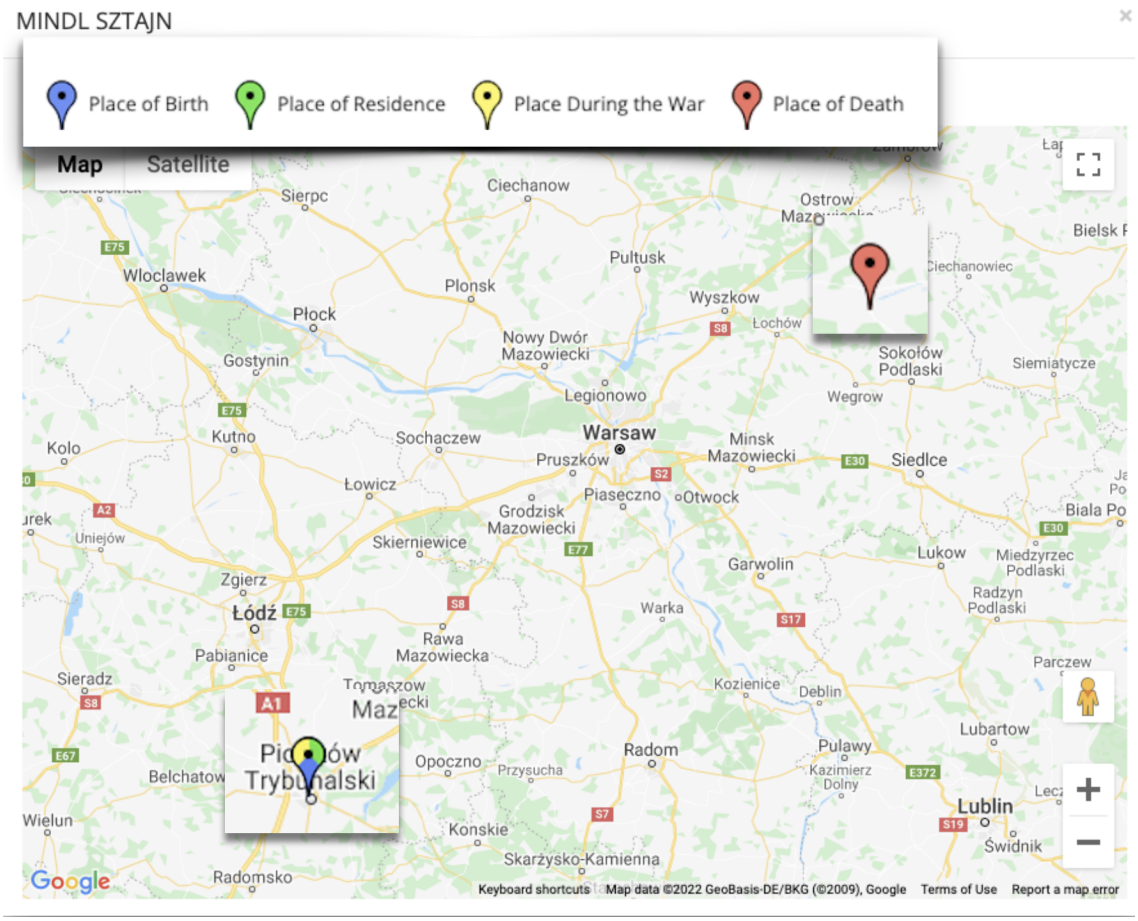
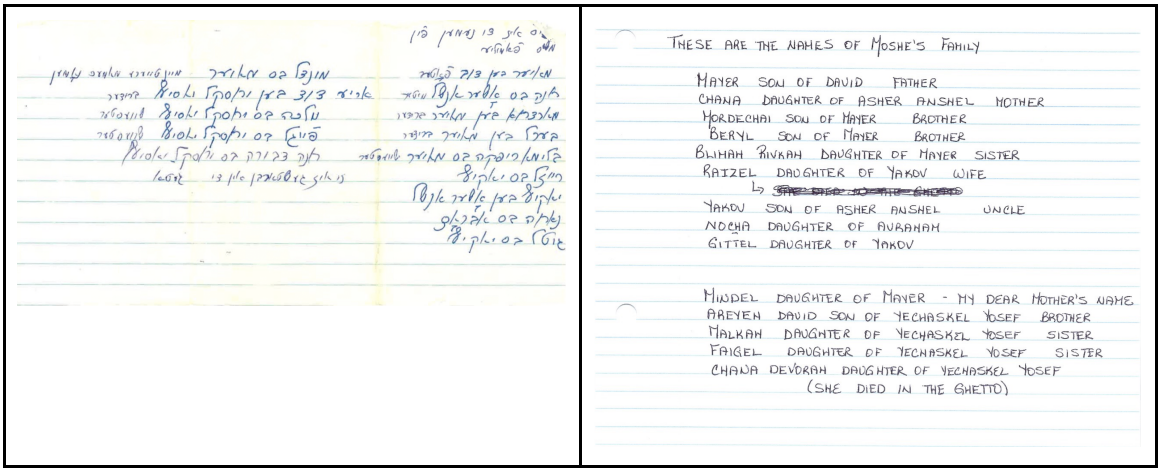


Figure 22. Distance. Screenshot taken from Yad Vashem's website, 2022.

I am not the first to claim that I am a foreigner in my own family history; in fact, it seems to be part of the identity bequeathed to grandchildren of Holocaust survivors. So is vociferousness in the face of the silence that suffocated much of our parents' generation. Acts both altruistic and egocentric, we seek not only to fill in the blanks of our ancestry but also to learn how the questions, fissures, and uncertainties give us a greater sense and understanding of ourselves. While the catalyst for these quests is an insatiable desire to concretize the unknown, an inherent byproduct – whether premeditated or consequential – is an ongoing journey towards self-discovery. Called to venture into our familial voids, writers of the third generation tenaciously take hold of

what we can grasp, fragments both bestowed and hunted, imperceptible and tangible, uncovered and recovered. With talismans in hand and hopeful, heavy hearts, we search and mourn for a legacy that we will never fully find or stop seeking. For in a quest, the questions are infinite.

Just recently, I unearthed a small, folded square of loose-leaf paper, which had been neatly cut at the bottom two lines down from where the last entry was made. The profound creases divided it evenly into three columns upon opening, revealing Bubbie's handwritten Yiddish running across them. I could not decipher a word. A dead end that begins with me.



THESE ARE THE NAMES OF MOSHE'S FAMILY

MAYER SON OF DAVID FATHER
CHANA DAUGHTER OF ASHER ANSHEL MOTHER
MORDECHAI SON OF MAYER BROTHER
BERYL SON OF MAYER BROTHER
BLIHAH AVKAH DAUGHTER OF MAYER SISTER
RAIZEL DAUGHTER OF YAKOV WIFE
[redacted]
YAKOV SON OF ASHER ANSHEL UNCLE
NOCHA DAUGHTER OF AVRAHAM
GITTEL DAUGHTER OF YAKOV

MINDEL DAUGHTER OF MAYER - MY DEAR MOTHER'S NAME
AREYEH DAVID SON OF YECHASKEL YOSEF BROTHER
MALKAH DAUGHTER OF YECHASKEL YOSEF SISTER
FAIGEL DAUGHTER OF YECHASKEL YOSEF SISTER
CHANA DEVORAH DAUGHTER OF YECHASKEL YOSEF
(SHE DIED IN THE GHETTO)

Figure 23. Anonymous ancestors. Artifacts property of the author.

My mother struggled with the page for a different reason. She sent its translation back to me in a PDF file entitled, "Names of Family Members." It was handwritten in her meticulous, immaculate all-caps calligraphy, on identical, blue-lined loose-leaf paper. This sheet wasn't cut though. She chose to write vertically – as if the text had the potential to grow off the page. This is what it said:

These are the names of Moshe's Family

Mayer	son of David	father
Chana	daughter of Asher Anshel	mother
Mordechai	son of Mayer	brother
Beryl	son of Mayer	brother
Blimah Rivkah	daughter of Mayer	sister
Raizel	daughter of Yakov	wife
Yakov	son of Asher Anshel	uncle
Nocha	daughter of Avraham	
Gittel	daughter of Yakov	

(and then, adjacent to those names, without a heading)

Mindel	daughter of Mayer – My dear mother's name	
Areyeh David	son of Yechaskel Yosef	brother
Malkah	daughter of Yechaskel Yosef	sister
Faigel	daughter of Yechaskel Yosef	sister
Chana Devorah	daughter of Yechaskel Yosef	sister (she died in the ghetto)

I repeat it aloud as gingerly as its cradled parentheses: *she died in the ghetto*.

Then, I utter her name: Chana Devorah.

My name.

I surrender to the haunting silences that reverberate within me. They vellicate my skin as sorrow and uncertainty settles in my chest. How could it be? How could it never be known that I inherited my Bubbie's dead sister's name? How could this detail be omitted when she cradled me in her arms, held me to her chest, gave me my first bath?

Figure 24. L'dor Vador. Photograph taken of the author.

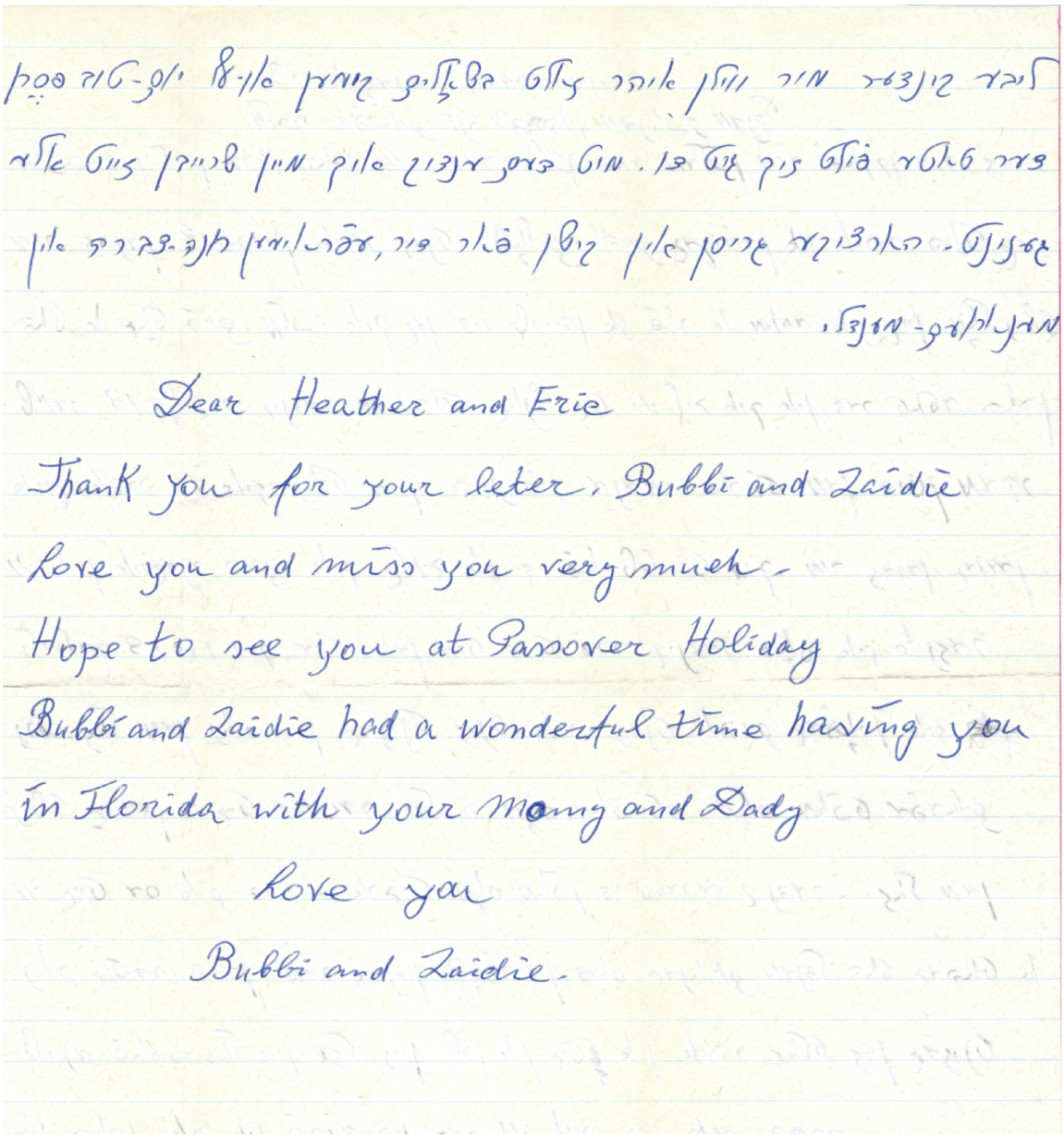
What else have I been bequeathed without knowing? What else is hidden in this list of faceless names? Can dead ends be resurrected to form new beginnings?

I no longer feel like I'm searching through something that doesn't belong to me when I search through Zaidie's satchel. I've rearranged the contents multiple times, have tried to organize them in an order that makes sense to me as I strive to make sense of my legacy. For the time being, I have kept intact the paper bag of photos, a stacked deck that contains many more questions than clues. Some have Yiddish writing on the back; most do not. Most capture the stares of unfamiliar faces – cheery children, posed portraits, suited men – all survivors of the Shoah; some, a few that I've found, offer me glimpses of recognition. They are pictures of my grandparents, captured in an unknown moment, a time and place I hope one day to name. In them, Zaidie is always smiling. I have yet to find one where Bubbie is.

Hung above my desk is an 8x10 black and white photo of Bubbie and Zaidie sitting on lounge chairs near the pool in Miami, taken some time in the late eighties.

Figure 25. Survivors. Photograph property of the author.

Its hues are more silver and less sepia than the shrouded ones of the past; here, my grandparents look healthy. Zaidie is wearing a gold watch, a gold tan, a brilliant ring, and his enduring grin with a tooth-sized gap at its center. Nothing in particular is shining on Bubbie, but she looks lovely. Light and bright, from her coiffed white hair to her well-tailored polka-dot button-down blouse. Her smile, a horizontal beam, is not forced; it looks at ease, poised, fluid. Taped to the back of the frame is this:



Dear Heather and Eric

Thank you for your leter. Bubbi and Zaidie

love you and miss you very much.

Hope to see you at Passover Holiday

Bubbi and Zaidie had a wonderful time having you

in Florida with your mamy and Dady

love you

Bubbi and Zaidie.

Figure 26. Love you. Artifact property of the author.

For a moment, I seek comfort in something that doesn't need translation.

***

On February 17, 2022, Alexandra Drakakis and I co-presented *Objects of Trauma: How the 9/11 Memorial Museum and Holocaust Museums Use Objects to Teach History*, in conjunction with the Maltz Museum of Jewish Heritage's special exhibition, *Stories of Survival* (many thanks to Emma Snape, Manager of Public Relations at the Maltz Museum, Dave Reckess, Executive Director of 3GNY, and Dina Bailey, founder of Mountain Top Vision, for their participation and work to make this program come to fruition). In my introduction and to provide context for sharing some of my inheritance, I explained:

…As conduits of memory and agents of storytelling, the everyday objects on display in the exhibition assume deeper meaning and create compassion and connection with contemporary viewers. One of the most impactful ways in which they do so is through the handwritten responses by survivors or their family members that accompany the artifacts and oversized photographs of them in the museum. When Emma, Alexandra, and I first met to discuss this endeavor, we quickly discovered a mutual thread amongst our respective ordinary – yet quite extraordinary – objects: their authenticity, humanity, and singularity. Their handwriting. Something so personal and commonplace is quite suggestive and special if you think about it. In fact, consider how much of our individual private archives travel with us throughout all stages of life. Buried in boxes, tucked away in drawers, kept as keepsakes, we save birthday and holiday cards, letters from old lovers, childhood diaries, college notebooks, autographs, our parents' handwritten address books, and our children's first scribble in a coloring book. These objects can neither be replicated nor replaced and mark a particular moment in time that make them key memory makers and storytellers. What makes them even more remarkable is their ability

to speak to all of us, regardless of their original recipient, and tonight, we have several to do just that.

In addition to being a Holocaust educator, I am also the granddaughter of Holocaust survivors. And not too long ago, I was bequeathed my Zaidie's satchel, which consists primarily of German typed or Yiddish handwritten documents on delicate paper and stacks of black and white photographs featuring unfamiliar faces with no identifying details. With it, I have begun to unpack my legacy – literally and figuratively – piece by delicate piece. I feel proud to be joining the growing body of literature written by descendants of the Holocaust, much of which can be characterized as quest narratives with objects as the catalysts for our post-memory journeys.

Though the remnants inside my Zaidie's satchel have not endured trauma, they certainly hold it tightly…

As I was preparing the visual component of my script, I noticed a small detail in Bubbie's note of names that I hadn't seen before:

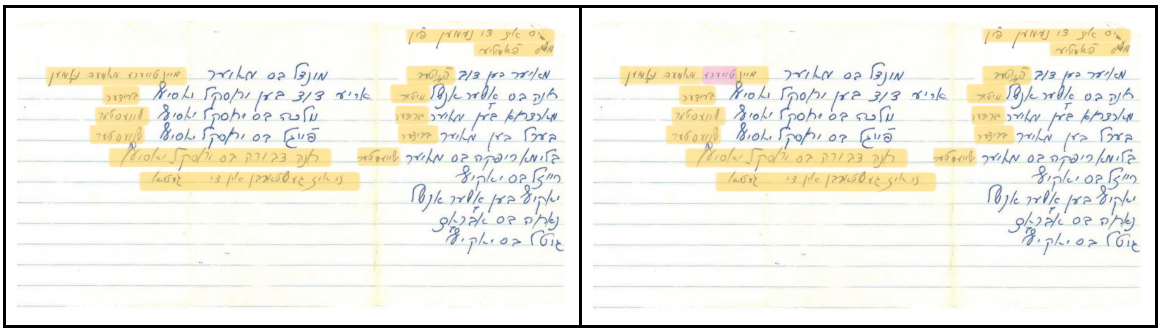


Figure 27. Artifactual inquiry. Artifact property of the author.

It appears to be written using two different pens with small changes in font size and character, thus suggesting my Bubbie wrote this at two distinct times. In the amended script, she defines the family members by relation and, notably, adds Chana Devorah, my namesake, to the list.

Why did she initially omit her sister's name? How old was Chana Devorah when she died in the ghetto? Did she perish of hunger? Of typhus? Was her body buried in an unmarked mass grave, the victim of a faceless fate before her sister spared her from total anonymity with a stroke of a pen? I do not believe she was an afterthought.

I wonder for whom Bubbie wrote this original and then revised note that has come into my care. It is just one of many questions that is met with haunting silence and thus my unsettlement. Yet, for all of my unknowing, this small, nondescript scrap of paper, severed just like my ancestral tree, offers a fuller picture, by means of one word…

Mindl was my Bubbie's "**dear** mother's name."

One adjective, and the picture is clearer. Now we sense a deep mother/daughter bond. We *feel* its embrace. We mourn its loss.

From a personal standpoint, it adds a little bit of substance to the void and clarity to my great-grandmother, of whom no known photograph exists. It incentivizes me to dig deeper, to hunt further, and to find the next piece of the puzzle to my unresolved legacy…

Within due time.

"My Inheritance" is deliberately placed at the spine of this story, for it is its backbone, holding all parts of this hero's journey together. Bound by objects, it is my past beckoning and my future calling.

It is my object of personal import.

The end of one chapter and the beginning of the next.

CHAPTER SIX

THE STUFF THAT COMPRISES US

I was initially introduced to the Artifact Exchange on the first day of the Drew Writing Project Summer Institute in 2021. Ironically (and a little embarrassingly), I don't remember the name of the colleague with whom I exchanged objects, but I still vividly recall her artifact – a tattered copy of *Charlotte's Web* with prominent, discolored smudges varying in size on the hard cover and yellowed pages marked with notes and small handwritten scribbles. The inside cover of the book revealed a series of names, clearly written by different hands at different times; some were in script, some printed, some marked in ink, some faded in pencil. I engaged in the series of prompts the exercise asked of me: describing with sensory observations, inferring meaning, asking questions, and eventually interviewing my partner.

Yes, this was hers as a child. *Yes*, it had also once belonged to other females in her family. *Yes*, the beloved story sparked her love of reading and teaching.

She continued, prompted by the invitation to tell her story.

This object, which once held for her nostalgia, now predominantly carried grief, reminding her of everything she had lost in a house fire. She told me that her home, which she shared with her husband, two children, and dog, had recently burned down. But the book, like them, survived.

We were told to introduce our partner to the group by name and object after several minutes of conversation and subsequent introspection. I remember feeling so connected to this woman with whom I had awkwardly exchanged artifacts just a few

minutes prior. And, as we went around the room, I could sense a similar camaraderie had developed amongst other pairs too. Bonds that were cultivated in minutes….sparked by mundane objects of personal import…igniting memories held within them…sowing the seeds of stories to be told and soon to be written...

The Artifact Exchange is adapted from Bonnie Sunstein's book, *Fieldworking: Reading and Writing Research* (4th edition), who was incentivized to teach the interview process to her 7th grade students in an authentic, inquiry-based way. She explains the purpose in her book:

> This exercise mirrors the process of conducting interviews over time with an informant. It emphasizes working with the informant's perspective, making extensive and accurate observations, speculating and theorizing, confirming and disconfirming ideas, writing up notes, listening well, sharing ideas collaboratively, and reflecting on your data. (Sunstein 222)

While these concrete skills are undoubtedly instilled in students during this activity, the intangible, invaluable benefits far surpass them. In fact, Sunstein asserts, "When we invite informants to tell stories about their artifacts, we learn about the artifacts themselves and, indirectly, about other aspects of their world that they might not think about. Artifacts, like stories, can mediate between individuals and their cultures" (Sunstein 225). In other words, artifacts can create common denominators amongst individuals from all backgrounds, underscoring, in vivid and visual ways, meaningful connections despite their differences.

I refer to *Fieldworking* in my Asynchronous Module, Artifactual Literacies, for DrewTEACH, which I created as part of its Building a More Perfect Union grant

(https://drewteach.org/more-perfect-union-grant/) during the summer of 2022. This is part of the script, which provides an overview of the steps and impact of the Artifact Exchange in my classroom:

> …Because the evocative objects of our lives are imbued with memory and meaning, they serve as powerful, tangible tools to inspire reflection and investigation.
>
> Students began by closely reading their classmate's object, first examining its material make-up prior to inferring it with anticipated meaning. Then, they generated inquiry-based questions to ask their classmate in order to test their assumptions. Upon the lively conversations that ensued, students took some time to write about what they learned about them, and what they wanted to know more about. The level of camaraderie and community was unparalleled. Many shared they wanted to know more. Some found commonalities that connected them in the most special ways. Two students happened to bring in heirlooms, bequeathed to them by their grandfathers, neither of whom they ever met. Their objects, from the sacred to the mundane, were imbued with their memories and identities, merging their home lives with their learning experiences. Each and every story at once celebrated their individuality and their diversity, and I'm proud to share that it immediately created a communal climate in the classroom that left an indelible mark throughout the entire year. (Lutz)

Like Sunstein et al. and as I experienced it during the Summer Institute, I conduct the Artifact Exchange with students very early in the school year. The handout I use most closely resembles the one adapted for the Institute, which provides clear instructions so that students are prompted to engage in the activity explicitly and asynchronously. And as I walk around to observe, I'm always amazed at the high level of engagement the activity invites from start to finish. First, the room is quiet as students inspect their peer's artifact and diligently write down their sensory observations of it. Some hold it in their hands; others seem afraid to touch it. Some want to immediately start to tell their story; others seem reluctant to share theirs. But eventually, the room is bustling with conversations, ones that leave many wanting them to continue, yearning to know more. And, as students begin to introduce their partner to the class by name and object, it's impossible not to sense the mutual respect and empathy behind their smiles and nervous laughter.

Teachable moments are the cornerstone of a vivacious classroom, and the Artifact Exchange presents many, especially within the context of my Literature of the Holocaust classes. In addition to students' own remarks of recognition ("OMG! My family collects snow globes too!"), I try to fill the space with commentary that not only threads some of their commonalities but also underscores some of the key concepts relevant to our course. We define *heirloom* and *bequeathed* and talk about descendant legacies. We talk about nostalgia and our childhoods, held in the stitches of beloved blankets and bears. We talk about how the most mundane objects can be invaluable. We talk about objects that ignited a passion and about poetry and art and creation. We talk about pictures – of us and of those who came before us. We talk about quests. We talk about how much we love our grandparents. We talk about authenticity and irreplaceability versus artificial and

symbolic and meet at their intersection: a love of a sport, a souvenir from a site. We talk about the beliefs we wear and bear. We talk about talismans and protected treasures. And, we summon our memories, sparked by our objects, to share our stories, our kinship, our shared humanity…

Figure 28. Evocative objects. Photographs taken by the author.

The crux of the Object Knowledge Framework that Elizabeth Wood and Kiersten F. Latham present in their book of the same name underscores how museums can harness the visceral connections people have with personal and mundane objects to create profound visitor experiences. In so doing, they propose the idea of the "networked museum…where experiences or ideas move back and forth in a system that lives and breathes through staff and visitor relationships that are developed across, around, and through objects" (Wood and Latham 18). This animated system of "sharing ideas, telling stories, making connections, and generating new content" positions objects as mediators

to facilitate collaborative, creative experiences of meaning-making and understanding (Wood and Latham 18). Notably, the same description can be said for the "networked [*classroom*]…where experiences or ideas move back and forth in a system that lives and breathes through [teacher] and [student] relationships that are developed across, around, and through objects" (Wood and Latham 18). In *Artifactual Literacies: Every Object Tells a Story*, Kate Paul and Jennifer Rowsell explain, "Artifactual literacy is about exchange; it is participatory and collaborative, visual and sensory. It is a radical understanding of meaning making in a human and embodied way" (Paul and Rowsell 134). Therefore, whether mediated curatorially or pedagogically, at the heart of this collaborative exchange is conversation, curiosity, and connection; a networked museum *and* classroom is "one that will translate, build, and create stories through meaningful experiences with objects" (Wood and Latham 18).

The anniversary of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks falls close to the onset of the school year, and thus, it gives me a great opportunity to harness this potential and cultivate this kind of community in my classroom, humanizing a history through which I lived, and yet during which none my current students were even born. We begin class with a simple prompt for a "Write" Now:

Look down at your shoes. Why did you choose to wear them today? What do they say about you?

Typical student responses consist of desiring comfort, being in a rush, wanting to match their outfit, or having a game later that day that requires particular footwear. Sometimes other observations arise: the ubiquity of some styles according to recent fads, the standout sneaker or shoelace with bright colors or handwritten scribbles, the cleanliness or wornness of soles. Students talk about how they like to look trendy, are athletes, teenagers, and take (or don't take) good care of their things.

Then, I project a picture of this high-heeled shoe without any context and ask them to make the same kind of observations, interrogations, and assumptions:

Figure 29. Michele Martocci's shoes. Property of the 9/11 Memorial and Museum.

Sometimes I'll ask the questions. *To whom do these shoes belong? What can we discern about their owner? What story do these shoes tell? How do you know?* But sometimes it's an even more fruitful experience when students' commentary guides the discussion. Though our method of arrival varies by group dynamic, in the end we come to similar conclusions and queries:

- They're black leather high-heeled shoes, likely worn by a businesswoman.
- They're very worn, but close examination reveals that parts of the shoe are confusingly clean, such as the top piece, strap, heel, and counter.

- The sole has many distinct markings: an original watermark in the leather and adornment near the top of the sole, possibly a distinguishable feature of a certain name brand. But, it is marred with gray, black, brown, and red stains that cover the entire outsole, even on the arch that leads to the heel. Why are they so worn and soiled? Is that blood? Ash? Was something on fire?

We share noteworthy observations and create plausible scenarios, and eventually, I ask students if there's any real way for us to know exactly who wore this pair of shoes or what happened to them. Guided by my deliberately ambivalent tone, most shrug their shoulders or sway their heads from side-to-side in doubt.

But, excitedly, I counter their claim as I distribute Alexandra Drakakis's essay, Michele Martocci's Shoes: Escape from the Towers, tell them we actually *can* know the story of these shoes, and echo her introductory hook: "A simple pair of shoes. What could they possibly tell us about 9/11" (Drakakis 100).

Students seem engaged - eager even - as I read the story aloud and they follow along, encouraged to annotate lines and images that speak to them. After we conclude, in addition to garnering their own responses, I share with them some of mine. In particular, I'm sure to bring up the employees of the "Foot Locker store [who] were handing out sneakers to panicked evacuees" rather than save themselves and evacuate the area, referring to the Universe of Obligation, a concept about which we will be discussing in a subsequent class. I bring up how shoes could help or hinder a person's survival - a recurring theme in Holocaust narratives - and note Drakakis's claim, "for women wearing high-heeled shoes, footwear proved to be a particularly significant impediment to escape

on that morning" (Drakakis 103). And, I ask students how they see these shoes differently now that they have their story.

Amongst the statistics and exposition, the chaos and fear and debris, they see a *human*: Michele Martocci, a brave, selfless survivor.

To conclude our conversation on this singular yet ubiquitous object, I highlight Drakakis's concluding lines, emphasizing the figurative meaning of shoes as symbols of empathy: "But her high-heeled shoes provide a tangible way for others to connect with her experience. Presented in the Museum's historical exhibition, these shoes enable visitors, quite literally, to imagine themselves in someone else's shoes on that unforgettable morning" (Drakakis 103). To further underscore the analogy, I refer to Harper Lee's classic, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, a novel with which most of my students are familiar, and excerpt Atticus's words of wisdom to his impressionable daughter, Scout, early in the story:

> "First of all," he said, "if you can learn a simple trick, you'll get along a lot better with all kinds of folks. You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view - until you climb into his skin and walk around in it" (Lee 39).

And then jumping to Scout's coming-of-age moment epiphany, I read:

> "Atticus was right. One time he said you never really know a man until you stand in his shoes and walk around in them. Just standing on the Radley porch was enough" (Lee 374).

The universal objects we wear and bear are the instruments to instill and teach empathy, and the ubiquity of shoes, coupled with their metaphorical meaning, make them the quintessential object to humanize history and to make personal connections.

Next, I project a picture of this shoe without any context and ask students to make the same kind of observations, interrogations, and assumptions:

Figure 30. Empathy. Photograph taken by the author.

Sometimes I'll ask the questions: *To whom does this shoe belong? What can we discern about its owner? What story does this shoe tell? With what questions or feelings are you left?* But often, I let the conversation ensue naturally, and I find most students feel more emboldened to interrogate the object without my prompting, incentivized by

their experiences with Martocci's high heels. Though our method of arrival varies by group dynamic, in the end we come to similar conclusions and queries:

- The leather shoe is very worn, dirty, and cracked, and its red hue is faded. How old is it? Was the owner poor?
- It looks like it's a child's shoe. We know because:
    - Its smaller size
    - The heel counter and collar are the most worn; kids rarely buckle or tie their shoes when they put them on and instead just slide their feet in, wearing the backs of the shoes.
    - It looks like there's a girl's curly hair to the right of the shoe.
    - It's an iconic style for girls' shoes (Mary Janes).
- What are the other objects in the image? Clothes?
- Where's the other shoe???

The sole survivor is always asked the latter question, and it is met with the haunting unanswerability that often speaks to Holocaust remnants, so many of which were destined for anonymity after being stripped from their owners. Unlike Michele Martocci's shoes, I explain, this shoe has been robbed of its story. But, its absence underscores the active roles we can play in revivifying the presence of its previous possessor: What was her name? What were her hobbies? How old was she? What was she like? Was she as playful and vivacious as her colorful shoes? Our questions try to conjure up an image, an identity, a *human*.

Oren Stier asserts, the most powerful and "common symbols of the devastation and loss of the Holocaust" are shoes (Stier 15). Immense mounds of them are displayed

in various rooms in a barracks in Auschwitz; immediately, the quantity and smell of them is overwhelming. Many of the shoes have begun to deteriorate in color and condition, so that the few that differ in hue or style really stand out from the rest. Some are more intentionally segregated – a woman's clean, fashionable high heel, this child's red leather shoe. Collectively and individually, the curatorial choices on how they are displayed epitomize what are two central, coexisting functions of these ubiquitous objects: to confront the insurmountable, devastating scale of mass atrocity and to humanize it to the most personal level in order to encourage empathy and not reduce the Holocaust merely to statistics.

One of the foundational lessons that inaugurated the Museum Teacher Fellowship Program at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum of which I was privileged to be a part during the summers of 2018 and 2019 was unpacking its Guidelines to teaching about the Holocaust. One of them is *Translate Statistics Into People*, explaining:

> In any study of the Holocaust, the sheer number of victims challenges comprehension. Show that individual people - grandparents, parents, and children - are behind the statistics and emphasize the diversity of personal experiences within the larger historical narrative. Precisely because they portray people in the fullness of their lives and not just as victims, first-person accounts and memoir literature add individual voices to a collective experience and help students make meaning out of the statistics. (USHMM)

Abounding these "first-person accounts" and "memoir literature," museum exhibitions and descendant stories, are the mundane objects that serve as companions to the

extraordinary and everyday experiences that narrate our lives. Profoundly, they speak a universal language that transcends time and place, inviting inquiry and reflection, uniting “then” and “now,” and summoning empathy and our shared humanity.

CHAPTER SEVEN

THE MAGIC OF MUNDANE MATTER

A senior student came to see me at the onset of the school year and asked me to read her college essay. Typical of too many teens, she opened her laptop with defensive trepidation and said, "I'm not a good writer." I lightheartedly dismissed her self-criticism and thanked her in advance for sharing her story with me. It began like this:

> What little girl doesn't long for their first American Girl doll? So, at the age of five, when I received my first beautiful doll, *Saige*, my heart leaped with joy. In that moment, life was perfect. Through the years, I continued to collect American Girls, each of whom added to my journey of self-discovery. My mom and I carefully read each doll's description; everyone I chose had traits I admired and wanted to emulate. Grace showcased determination and teamwork. Julie, the spirited, energetic freethinker, boldly followed her own path. And then came the "Just Like Me" doll, Jessie, made to be my twin. The profile I created for her embodied the qualities of all my dolls into one. She was who I longed to be…

After I read Jessie's essay, I asked her to elaborate on why this topic was important to her. She revealed that she loved these dolls when she was younger and thought that writing about how each one exemplified a personality trait would allow her to show different facets of her identity, which, she was told, would appeal to colleges. I probed a little deeper, curious about the doll that bore her name. Jessie lit up when she began to reminisce about her former favorite friend, smiling through stories as she mined

memories from her childhood, saying she literally came with her everywhere. She recalled trips to the American Girl store in Manhattan, where her mom would treat both Jessies to matching outfits and hairstyles, family vacations on which Jessie joined, and imaginative games she played with her dolls as her companions. I was warmed by the conversation, inspired by Jessie's truthful and trustful tales. Eventually, I asked her when "life" stopped being "perfect" for her. With calm and candid reflection, she confessed that she struggled with mental health issues at the onset of her teenage years, which she's worked hard to overcome. I asked her how the dolls, and Jessie in particular, symbolized her "journey of self-discovery," and she said they gave her comfort and confidence, which she lost for years but has thankfully found again. I asked her where her dolls were now and when she saw them last. She knew where they were; it had been a long time. It was evidently time for her to reunite with them.

Inspired by my studies on material culture, artifactual literacies, and Holocaust descendant literature, I've become keenly aware of how the *process* of searching and unearthing objects is an integral part of object narratives. Objects possess an alive and affective presence, paradoxically serving as time capsules, marking a particular time and place, and time travelers, transporting their bearers back to the point of origin. When objects have not been seen or touched in years, then their owners are simultaneously summoned to the past and positioned in the present, at once raising awareness of no time and all time that has passed since they last held them. Likewise, when the object's original owner has bequeathed it to (or has been found by) an heir, then the process narrative gives autonomy and authenticity to new memories and stories the objects evoke, serving as the conduit between past and present. In Jessie's case, I believed that having

her think about her childhood prior to getting the doll and sharing any anticipatory feelings she had would be fruitful. Furthermore, I encouraged her to explain the process, in real time, of seeking and exhuming her doll, describing her, and recording any thoughts and emotions the experience provoked. This is what she produced:

> Before I went to get my doll, I tried to remember everything I could about her, the way she felt and the way she smelt. I walked through my bathroom to the connecting room. I open the closet door. The closet is filled with old sweatshirts, a ladder, old backpacks, ski clothing, etc. On a high shelf above some of my mom's clothes that don't fit in her closet are 3 plastic containers. The first two bins are full of ski clothes- helmets, gloves, beanies, thermals. The one all the way in the back is where my Jessie doll is stored along with Saige and the dress I had to match hers. On my tippy toes I move the two other bins to the side and grab the bin with my doll in it. The top of the bin is dusty, but I open it up with butterflies in my stomach. There is also a white baby blanket inside and two loose turquoise heart American Girl doll earrings. I haven't seen this doll for as long as I can remember. I grabbed her. As I held her, I remembered that sweet cinnamony plastic smell like it was yesterday. She was lighter than I remembered. I run my fingers on her hands and arms and legs. The smooth plastic is the exact same. Her ears are pierced with silver star earrings, I remember begging my mom to let me get her ears pierced so that we could be matching. Her blonde knotted hair has a braided half up half down hairstyle. She is wearing the dress. The pink floral dress that I

bought to match with her. This makes me feel so nostalgic. I used to do everything with this doll. The dress is pink with green and orange flowers, it's down to her knees. She's not wearing shoes. No mark is to be found, she is just as perfect as I remembered. Her two front teeth showing reminds me of mine. Her lips are so pink. Her fingers and toes are light pink. She's a little tanner than I am. I placed her in front of me propped up on the table under the TV. We stare at each other like long lost sisters. After a few minutes of staring at every inch of her, I placed the white blanket first into the bin, then my dress, which at the time was big on me now it looks more like a tank top, and then my doll on top. I closed the box and she was still staring at me. Maybe I should visit her more often, I thought to myself. I miss her smell already, I forgot how much I loved that smell. That was a magical experience.

I looked at Jessie with a glisten in my eyes, mouth agape in awe, even myself a little astonished by the disparities between her drafts. She cautiously asked, “Is this good?” I asked her what she thought. She said it felt great to write, and I told her that sentiment was clearly communicated (I also asserted that she can never again say she’s not a good writer, to which she smiled). Juxtaposing the two narratives reveal not only more descriptive, sensory language but also an intimate, authentic voice and perspective that only Jessie could create. She was already well beyond writing a mere college essay; she was authoring a meaningful piece of writing that was, well…

Just like Jessie.

Figure 31. Just like me Jessie. Photograph property of the author.

In their groundbreaking work, *Museum Objects Health and Healing: The Relationships between Exhibitions and Wellness*, Brenda Cowan, Ross Laird, and Jason McKeown use this apt simile to describe the epiphanic, meaningful moments inspired by casual conversations about personal objects:

> Talking with people about objects can be like pulling on a tiny thread: one inquiring tug and the story comes free. The thread might slowly un-knit, cautiously, carefully, mindfully, so as not to hit the floor or damage the cloth, and sometimes the thread flows so freely and loosely that you find yourself flat on the ground in a heap and a tangle. And the dynamic is the

> same at a dinner party or airport lounge as it is in the formal research setting. (Cowan et al. 14)

My milieu is my classroom or the Media Center at school and the occasional kitchen or dining room table in a student's home. Every application season, which seems to be getting earlier and increasingly anxious, I spend exhaustive, intimate time working with students on their college essays and supplements. My standard has pretty much always been the same: *I want you to write something of which you're super proud. Something you want to hold to your chest and hug*. If paper is in front of me, then I instinctively pick it up and emulate the action and emotion, emphasizing its importance. Even before I had the understanding and language provided by the research I've done on objects, I believe I was intuitively drawn to prompting students to describe concrete materials associated with their memories; the age-old English teacher adage to "show, don't tell" in creative writing would come out in my inquiries about specific sayings or smells, rituals or rooms, tastes or touches, pictures or people that surfaced while students shared their stories. I wanted to be immersed in their moments, in their minds - to see what they saw and feel what they felt as they crafted a narrative that only their voices could produce. Our conversations would often lead to a more robust use of descriptive diction and vivid imagery in their essays and signs of ownership in their writing, almost always achieving the sense of accomplishment I aspired to cultivate at the outset of our sessions. It would be alleviating and celebratory for both of us, and I've always thoroughly enjoyed being a part of these intimate experiences. Truly, as a teacher and a writer, there's nothing much greater than pointing out to an impressionable young adult, "Look what you created!" and feeling their self-pride emanate in return; it really is something to hold.

In *Write Your Way In: Crafting an Unforgettable College Admissions Essay*, Rachel Toor asserts, “writing, for most of us, is bound up with anxiety,” undoubtedly accentuated by the stressors (from students and their parents) that accompanies anything that has to do with the college application process (Toor 6). And, since “the essay is the one part of the application that is completely within [students’] control,” its weight is substantial (Toor 15). Unfortunately, I’ve seen a couple of disconcerting trends as a result of that, one of which I call the “interview” essay, whereby a “college advisor” interviews a teenager and writes the essay for them based upon the exchange. Its markers - from the absurd to the amusing - are so apparent: meticulous metaphors, sagacious statements, perfect punctuation. Earlier this year, after reading a student’s essay, I couldn’t help but laugh at his response when I asked him if he wrote it, and he answered, “Yeah, but no.” He, like some other students, just wanted validation that “it’s good,” and while I yearn to encourage them to abandon ship, open a blank document, and tell me a story, I sense when it’s asking too much (especially if I suspect there’s a hefty price tag associated with it). Other times, students are upfront about the “help” they’ve received from college advisors, sharing sentiments like the essay “doesn’t sound like” them, or they “just don’t like how it came out.” They, like the ones who come to me from scratch, offer opportunities for meaningful engagement and pathways to transform the weight of the college essay from burdensome to uplifting. For one, a self-reflective, well-crafted composition can provide a level of autonomy and a source of comfort in a seemingly arbitrary process of acceptances, deferrals, and rejections (Toor 15). It becomes something concrete of which students can be proud, something to which they can return for reassurance in the dreaded months of awaiting decisions. Additionally, since students

have a vested interest in their college applications, they are most attentive and engaged during conferences about these essays; they *want* to write something "good," and thus, are open to learning the process of *how* to do it.

In her introduction to *Evocative Objects: The Thing We Think With*, Sherry Turkle asserts, "We think with the objects we love; we love with the objects we think with" (Turkle 5). Extendedly, "we [*write*] with the objects we love; we love with the objects we [*write*] with." I was initially inspired to have students compose object narratives after we read Elie Wiesel's powerful and provocative short story, *The Watch*, which illuminates how an object evokes memories of a particular time, space, and place. Using the "then" and "now" model, I prompted students to become time travelers into their memories as they revisited an object from their childhood to tell their story (see assignment here). During the writing process, we unpacked selected excerpts from Sherry Turkle's anthology, using them as mentor texts to examine effective storytelling elements such as exposition, structure, tone, and imagery. When students were ready to submit their narratives, I asked them to write me a handwritten letter in class, encouraging them not only to talk about the process of writing their stories but also to share what the experience was like for them. In turn, upon reading each one, I replied with my own handwritten letter to each of them, which became yet another artifact of participatory and collaborative exchange in and of itself.

I say without hyperbole that their essays were exemplary. Their voices were authentic and candid. Their writing was mature and elaborate. Many students called the experience "cathartic" and "emotional," one that "pushed [them] out of [their] comfort zone(s)," but "in a good way." Here are just a few of their comments:

> "While writing I connected to memories I didn't even intend on including in the essay." MB
>
> "Looking at the rips and tears and stains, I realized how much of a story one object could tell - or rather how many stories." MA
>
> "Now that I resurfaced these memories, I don't think I want them to leave." IL
>
> "This assignment opened up a lot of memories for me, and it helped me realize the true meanings that are within everyday objects." CM
>
> "I love how the heirloom has made me feel connected to each person it has been with, even if I never met them, and that I will be able to pass it down to continue the story." KS
>
> "I never thought I would have a chance to reveal my hidden emotions that I kept inside for a long time, but I am so very grateful and glad to remember the individuals who supported and guided me through it." DS

I was blown away by their genuine responses and dedication to this activity, which in the end, was about so much more than a writing assignment for English class.

Sherry Turkle describes evocative objects "as companions to our emotional lives or as provocations to thought" (Turkle 5). Imbued with meaning, these mostly mundane objects spark self-reflection, concretizing memories and affirming not only who we once were but also who we have become. Thus, they serve not only as exemplary vehicles for college essays but also for *all* budding writers to instill in them confidence; since object narratives start with "casual, concrete prompts: describe it - tell me about your object," they inherently foster detailed and expressive observations, characteristics at the core of

quality writing (Cowan et al. 14). Yet, the potential of these everyday objects spans well beyond what can be captured on the page; merely talking about them with another person inspires a meaningful exchange of speaking and listening, fostering interpersonal skills and creating meaningful interactions - awakening empathy and building bonds between people:

> There is a moment - you can practically count on it - when the person telling you about an important object in their lives is suddenly struck by the weight of its meaning. They entered into the conversation knowing it was important to them in some way or another; they could associate it with meaningful people, places, or events in their lives; they kept it and cared for it or gifted it or destroyed it. The object equals intent. Nevertheless…as you listen to them talk about their object and what it means, and why they do with it whatever it is that they do, you can see the point at which they realize their story is suddenly not quite as silly, or ordinary, or superficial as they had thought. Or had hoped. There is usually a pause: the person's eyes might look down at the table, or they might cock their head slightly, their voice becoming softer. Suddenly they recognize a purpose or a preciousness that they had not been aware of before. And, in turn, perhaps they too, in themselves, something purposeful that they had not seen before. (Cowan et al. 13-14)

Conversations about objects are reflective and reflexive, with the heart and at the heart of what it means to be human. I have witnessed this magic in all contexts, and each

underscores the evocative narratives and empathetic potentials of the things we all wear and bear, uniting us in time and its transcendence.

CHAPTER EIGHT

PLEASE TOUCH

Just a third of a mile southeast of the sacred ground of the 9/11 Memorial and Museum housed the Nova Music Festival Exhibition in the spring of 2024. Their situational proximities were palpable: locationally, rhetorically, and soon, I would come to see, representationally – for both immerse their visitors in sensory, "unified experiences," wherein the primary narrators are not only eyewitnesses but also the ordinary objects they once bore (Wood and Latham 54). These collective testimonies capture the terror. The trauma. The person. The pain. The memories. The mundane.

In *Objects of Experience: Transforming Visitor-Object Encounters in Museums*, Elizabeth Wood and Kiersten F. Latham contend, "active learning situations, wherein the visitor joins the process through their senses, their intellect, and their emotions, all aid in the development of unified experiences…exceptional moments that can result in heightened sensory-based encounters with objects" (Wood and Latham 148). Their theory places "the union between people's experiences and the unique characteristics of objects" at the heart of what they call the Object Knowledge Framework (Wood and Latham 9) – an interdisciplinary and holistic approach to museum curation that underscores the fundamental relationships humans have with objects. It relies on the premise "that encounters that people have with everyday objects can be exceptional avenues to deep meaning making and thinking about the world" (Wood and Latham 13). These "evocative objects," as social scientist Sherry Turkle terms them, are "companions to our emotional lives" and "provocations to thought" (Turkle 5), which fuse emotion and

intellect to form a "memory-embodying dimension" that catalyzes empathy and understanding (Cowan et al. 30). Eloquently stated in *Museum Objects, Health and Healing*, these objects "have impactful phenomenological, evocative, and numinous characteristics as well as catalytic and protagonist capabilities," and thus have the capacity to forge deeply personal, profound, and human connections (Cowan et al. 23). In museum settings, and especially those associated with stories and sites of trauma, this "symbiotic relationship between present physicality and the immaterial past of memory transform[s] private wounding into public pain" (Arel xxxix). Thus, in the words of Stephanie Arel in *Bearing Witness: The Wounds of Mass Trauma in Memorial Museums*, "the arduous journey of contending with trauma's effects comes to the fore, emphasizing a reflective process that invites a connection to meaning" (Arel 14-15).

These were the first two paragraphs I presented at the 30th Annual Jewish American and Holocaust Literature Symposium (JAHLit) in the fall of 2024. I was vacillating on whether or not I would attend it and knowingly missed the deadline for proposals, but when I received word that the deadline had been extended, I considered it a calling. Since October 7, 2023, I have not only become increasingly attuned to the prevalence and normalization of antisemitism but also disillusioned by the silence in response to it, particularly amongst Holocaust scholars on college campuses. I saw this forum as an opportunity to raise awareness to some of them, in addition to advancing my own scholarship on new directions memorial museums and exhibitions are taking to provide more evocative and participatory object experiences for visitors. In addition to deepening this understanding and bearing witness (and thus paying homage) to the

traumatic events as they unfolded at the Nova Music Festival near Kibbutz Re'im the morning of October 7th, this endeavor challenged me to consider how to simulate the sensory, tactile immersion into the terror for you, the reader. While 6:29 am is coined the "moment when music stood still," time is anything but unmoving inside the dark halls of the exhibition, where mundane objects narrate the visceral and authentic experiences of its victims and survivors. Thus, please journey into the multimodal texts contained herein, which not only allow the objects themselves to speak but also show my pedagogical growth as a writer in this expansive, exciting field of multimodal and artifactual literacies.

{Please click HERE for a multimodal composition of the italicized text}

We are met with life inside the first room of the Nova Music Festival Exhibition, a moderately small space in relation to the screen that shows an eight-minute video contextualizing the origins of the festival, its appeal, community, and meaning. The images are light and bright, warmed by the aura of the sun; it is a revelry of hope and humanity pulsating to the rhythm "of the heartbeat" (Ilan Faktor, Nova survivor). Abruptly, at the epitome of ecstasy at sunrise on October 7th, 2023, we bear witness to the "moment when the music stops," sharply replaced by red alerts of approaching rocket fire. The images on the screen and all sounds fade. "The remains of the joy," now remnants of the atrocity, are left to concretize the memory and to tell the story. But they cannot do it alone. Visitors are guided to participate in the exchange, invited "to walk together with us along the winding path from the depths of pain and loss to the threshold of the action, healing and hope of community." Juxtaposed as sequential sentences, the prepositional phrase, "with us," places the modification of "us" clear within its context,

further underscored by the subsequent, final proclamation; the personified objects will speak as bearers of witness, and through their tactile, immersive engagement with them, visitors will have a hand in their translation.

And suddenly the bright space feels darker. One's gaze broadens. We look up to see the bullet-pierced parachute tents above us. To the left to see the timetable of bands that were scheduled to perform. And to the right to see a sign ushering us "to The Event," a jarring reminder that past and present have already converged, the objects unifying and transcending time, at once representing the past and ushering the present. We are observers of life turned to participants of terror, and the onus to remember – to tell the tale with resurgence and to heed its implications – now falls on us, surrogate festivalgoers, immersed in "what was, and what should never have been."

Cell phones, perhaps the most ubiquitous object of the 21st century, feel familiar in our hands; we at once recognize their material dimensions and their functions. Our intimate sensory contact with them alone creates physical and emotional connections to the victims and survivors, representing them not only in real life but also in real time as we participate in the events at Nova as they unfold.

We are amongst the crowd whose hearts are beating and feet are dancing in trance.

Frozen in time "when the music stood still."

Stupefied as we try to make sense of what is happening and what to do. Running from rocket fire, staying together, screaming, crying, and fleeing and filming in fear.

Hiding alone in dread.

And seeking comfort with family and in selfies, preserving the memory, and saying goodbye.

In her chapter, "Objects and Wellbeing," Elizabeth Pye contends, "Sometimes the story is literally written into the object" (Pye 165), and the pictures preserved on cell phones scattered amongst the exhibition capture the visceral, authentic moments of terror as they unfold. Prior to entering "The Event" space, we are told to pick them up – to hold them in our hands. This act alone at once reduces the physical distance between the past and the present and heightens our sensory experience as literal bearers of witness; deepened by "the intimate exploration afforded by touch and handling, objects seem to come alive in our hands and reveal their character" (Pye 172). The "character" of these personal yet universal objects reveals not only the terror and trauma but also the humanity – the desire to safeguard the story, the will to persevere, and the comfort we seek to provide or to give ourselves or to loved ones in the most vulnerable moments of ultimate despair.

Steph Ceraso's essay, "(Re)educating the Senses: Multimodal Learning, Bodily Learning, and the Composition of Sonic Experiences," raises the idea of "*touching sound*" (Ceraso 107), stressing the "vibratory, tactile experiences of sound" (Ceraso 108), which enable visitors to "achieve expansive sonic experiences that can lead to rich, meaningful sensory encounters" (Ceraso 109). Ironically, "what was" the Nova Music Festival embodied this theory – trance speaks to the soul; Nova survivor Ayala Avraham stresses, "really good music isn't for the ears, it's for here (as she points to her heart)." Yet, within this space of what "should have never been," music is replaced by a bombardment of booming brutality, which *also* speaks to our hearts. Wood and Latham

explain, “sensory experiences…can even go beyond the classic five senses: building relationships with objects can provide sensations of healing and pain, time and spatial relations, movement and direction…empathy, connection, love, pain, hope, healing” (Wood and Latham 150). In this immersive space, all of these senses are simultaneously assaulted, and the privileged consent visitors have to somatically and haptically engage with personal belongings – crawling into littered tents, rummaging through people’s stuff – creates “abiding affective engagement [which] reside[s] in these tattered objects” (Levitt 6).

One of the videos embedded in the exhibition features Ravit Naor, Head of the Volunteer Unit to Restore Belongings to Festival Participants, who recalls telling her workers in the on-site storage units to “treat every item as if it was the last item from that person.” She explains, “your hands tremble, everything is covered in dust…and you’re doing what we’ve been taught not to, you’re snooping through someone’s life, you’re snooping through their bag, you’re snooping in their makeup case, you’re snooping in wallets. You’re touching people’s insides, and then you suddenly realize that this makeup case will never be used again, and this dress will never be worn again.” To the extent possible, visitors in this exhibition simulate these experiences of “snooping” and thus are impelled to arrive at similar understandings. The sense of invading someone’s privacy proliferates. It feels scandalous – foreign, forbidden to intrude on spaces that demarcate privacy. Yet, it also feels so familiar and common that the meaning and impact of doing so is exceptional.

{Please click HERE for a multimodal composition of the italicized text}

I encroach a group's campsite, unzip a closed bag, remove the insides, kneel on the rug and probe further, curious about a person's penmanship and for what academic endeavor they were written. Each object feels familiar in its mundaneness, material, and my manipulation of it.

I crawl inside an unzipped tent and smell its mustiness.

In typical fashion, I choose a piece of jewelry to "buy" at the merch market.

And pick up a drink at the bar.

And find insatiable loss near the Lost and Found, an expansive area of thoughtfully hung and folded clothes, heaps of everyday items common amongst festivalgoers, and a sea of shoes – some united, some missing their counterpart.

In The Objects that Remain, Laura Levitt elucidates, "An aura emanates from intimate articles of clothing. Once abiding presence in the lives of those who wore them, these garments carry the traces of now absent bodies. Such haptic connections…transmit a semblance of what happened to the ghostly figures whose shapes come back to us in the form of hanging effigies. These modern relics carry a kind of living presence. They continue to bristle with meaning" (Levitt 3). This meaning is at the heart of Wood and Latham's visitor-object framework, where "the connection of things - the relationship to the use and purpose of objects, the personal meaning of the objects, and the meaningful experiences with the objects" catalyzes the unified experiences for visitors that museums strive to create.

In discussing the "memorial museum structure," Stephanie Arel asserts, "Visitors follow a trajectory of trauma, its effects, and its responses, always on a pathway toward a transformation that falls within the realm of the sacred. The arduous journey of

contending with trauma's effects comes to the fore, emphasizing a reflective process that invites a connection to meaning" (Arel 14-15). Her comprehensive study and groundbreaking work on museum memorialization and the indelible mark it leaves on those who are entrusted to its care offers significant insight not only to trauma's arch but also to its reach well beyond those who bear witness to it. Though not housed in a permanent place, the space of the Nova Music Festival Exhibition follows the route akin to memorial museums that Arel describes. Plaques "in memory of" victims and carved commemoratives into personified objects serve as elegies and final resting places. The concretization of memory and mourning abounds, extending its reach from past trauma to present tragedy, elucidating and encouraging visitors to take part in its commemoration. Now intimately acquainted with the objects that once touched victims' hands and now touch their own, visitors are invited to become a part of the exhibition.

Near the end of the exhibition space where objects narrate the story of October 7th, we reach a sign, which reads, "In memory of loved ones whose lives were tragically taken, we invite each and every one of you to keep their spirit alive through your words and thoughts. Please, leave your postcard anywhere you choose throughout the exhibition. "In her introduction, Stephanie Arel affirms, "you do leave things at a memorial. That tells me that people are being touched by it, and they're using it in the way that you would use a memorial. [The space should be] useful for people in their own healing process" (Arel xxxiii). These memorials left behind by visitors abound the exhibition space and become literal touchstones, fusing the past with the present. Laura Levitt asserts, "Objects make the past tangible, but they cannot erase the break. There is no going back to what had been. But we need to keep telling stories. Objects hold out the

promise of finding something of ourselves. And, if we are lucky, we may find our voices in the narratives of others, making all of us less lonely and the world, perhaps, more beautiful" (Levitt 52).

Trauma cannot be erased, but it can be assuaged. It can also be transmitted and transformed through stories and the objects that mediate them.

In the video at the onset of the exhibit, we are invited to walk together with the objects "along the winding path from the depths of pain and loss to the threshold of the action, healing, and hope of community." They lead visitors to the last room, which is notably light and bright, not only aesthetically but also curatively, containing areas for conversation, coloring, and contemplation. It literally and figuratively exemplifies Brenda Cowan et al.'s claim that "Object experiences and encounters are direct pathways to our fundamental human concepts of self and identity; our feelings of hope, empathy, and power; our memories of the past; and our connections with others. To our humanness" (Cowan et al. 196). The psychological significance of objects plays a dynamic role in individual well-being, emerging through the interplay of sensory engagement, personal associations, and the evocative qualities of the object itself. This interaction fosters meaningful experiences that can contribute positively to emotional and psychological health and healing. Cowan et al. call this a "dynamic primal dance" - a fitting metaphor for an ongoing tragedy, a spark of hope for the future in a present still full of darkness (Cowan et al.).

Figure 32. Hope. Photograph taken by the author.

POSTLUDE

THEN AND NOW

It was too late for me to talk to Uncle Rachmil in Israel. He died of heart failure about six months after I wrote *Then* as my capstone project for Dr. Winters's *Literature of Grief* course in 2014. He was survived by his only son, Reuven Rospsha, who shares a birthday with his first cousin, Mary Sheydwasser née Rozprza, my mom. He also died of heart failure, in May of 2023. His three sons, who must be loosely around my age, all live in Israel, and they have either served, or are currently enlisted, in the IDF (Israel Defense Forces). Why haven't I reached out to them - they - the sole carriers of my Zaidie's family name? I really need to speak to them before it is too late.

My parents did get Candle Number One at my daughter's Bat Mitzvah on March 26, 2022, but I am proud and relieved that they were the ones to light it.

Figure 33. Tradition. Photograph property of the author.

Thankfully, some traditions haven't been passed down to me just yet…

My son's Bar Mitzvah is this May - the same weekend as Drew's 2025 Commencement. A mother's eighteen-year journey culminates on the *Shabbos* of her son's coming-of-age ceremony into Jewish adulthood. "*Bashert*? Bashert. 'It's a Yiddish word. How can I translate it?'...'coincidence,' 'more like destiny,' 'fated, fate" (Simon 25).

Time has been an adversary and an ally along my hero's journey towards these concluding pages. It has forced me to accept defeat, struggle with my inner demons, instilled in me regret and wishful thinking. It has impelled me to confront the reality of its passing, aging, and irretrievability. But, it has also taught me about its reparability, recursiveness, and retrospection. Seen in hindsight, almost two decades worth of personal and scholarly experiences now coalesce in one remarkable conclusion: objects are the cornerstone of our humanity; they are our real-life elixirs that can heal, enlighten, unify, and teach us.

Since the onset of creating and implementing my Literature of the Holocaust course at Pascack Hills High School over a decade ago, I've made it a tradition to write a letter to my students on the first day of school. Embedded in it is always another letter, which a (to date, anonymous) Holocaust survivor wrote to an educator. It reads:

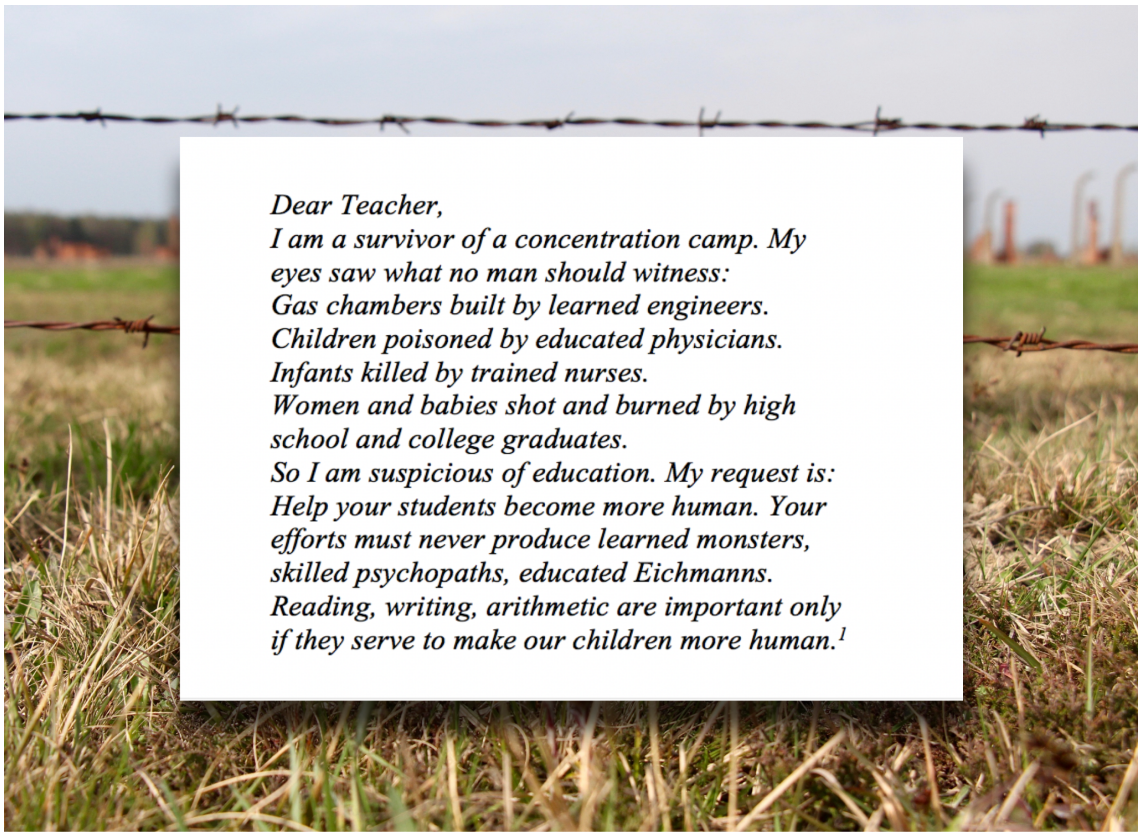


Figure 34. Become more human. In Parent and Child by Hiam Ginot.

What do the perpetrators have in common? Why is education targeted? What does it mean to be human? How do we become *more* human?

I often tell my students that the Holocaust asks more questions than it answers, and the questions this letter poses on becoming human have always felt more inexplicable than answerable...

Until now.

Coincidentally, when I was a child, I tended to start at the finish line of most mazes I'd complete on placemats at diners or in the activity books my brother and I would get to amuse us during the long drives to Montreal to visit family. From this perspective, I could see the course more clearly and solve a puzzle without hitting many

detours or dead ends. In many ways, now that I am positioned near this journey's end, I see this dissertation as a metaphorical maze, and my vantage point underscores our primal reliance on objects, not only to live and learn but also to narrate and navigate our lives and those that came before ours.

According to Peter Turchi, "the earliest maps are thought to have been created to help people find their way and reduce their fear of the unknown" (Turchi 11). This implies that we find comfort in the known, in what we can locate, place, name, and explain. In being able to identify where we are and where we are headed, all the while being able to spot landmarks so that we know we're going in the right direction. Objects have been my navigational guides through the multitudinous searches I've taken through the lost and found, and they have taught me just as much about the world around me as the one within me.

Some of my mentors have become my colleagues, my friends. Their stories and scholarship are no longer delegated to their books with which I've conversed in annotations; now, some of their names are stored in my contacts, some of my memories with them saved in photos on my phone.

Figure 35. Belonging. Photographs property of the author.

For now, it seems, I have arrived at the end. But, of course, the end of one journey often marks the beginning of the next. I may not know what I'm looking for, but I know I know when I find it.

Figure 36. Rebirth. Artifact property of the author.

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