RECONSTRUCTING MEMORIES THROUGH THE ARTS

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The arts have served many purposes over time and across history (Gombrich, 1950; Mondadori, 1988; Harrison & Wood, 1993). They can preserve the spirit of a particular era and reveal the strengths of a culture. The arts may illustrate the perceptions, emotions, and thoughts of an individual, and they can serve very positive roles to convey information about individuals, groups, and events. Furthermore, the arts can record atrocities such as the stories of martyrs, specific details about pogrom, and facts about genocide. They can make unforgettable those traits and events in the world that many might try to forget.

How do artists remember through art? And how do the arts serve to help individuals and societies reconstruct memories of the past? The current author would argue that nonlinguistic art forms can influence memory in fundamentally different ways than might linguistic forms, by enabling different types of encoding and, perhaps, more vivid sensory experiences than do written accounts. Research about human memory indicates that multiple encodings may ultimately lead one to better recall of information (e.g., Tulving & Thompson, 1973), and studies of human cognition and neurophysiology indicate that non-linguistic (e.g., pictorial) information is processed in different ways than linguistic information (e.g., Glaser & Glaser, 1989; Seifert, 1997; Kolb & Wishaw, 1985). Thus, multiple encodings through linguistic and nonlinguistic means might lead to more robust memories. What are the implications of those differences in processing between pictures and words for remembering through the arts? The current author will draw upon research in the fields of cognitive psychology and neuroscience to propose possible answers to that intriguing question.

LINGUISTIC AND NON-LINGUISTIC STIMULI CUE MEMORY DIFFERENTLY

On the basis of research about the different speeds for responding to linguistic and nonlinguistic stimuli, several researchers have argued that pictures cue semantic memories more directly than do words (e.g., Potter & Faulconer, 1975; Glaser & Glaser, 1989; Seifert; 1997). The past fifteen years have witnessed a heated debate about that very issue—with opponents manipulating such stimulus characteristics as spatial frequency, overall size, and number of visual features in visual presentations of pictures and their names (e.g., Theios & Amrhein, 1989; Arieh & Algom, 2002). It is notable that one can alter the sizes and perceptibility of words and pictures to find the fastest possible categorization speed for each. That optimal speed of categorization is an indicator of the fastest possible activation of its meaning in semantic memory.

A fundamental test of access to meanings in semantic memory is a comparison between categorization speeds for optimally-sized pictures and optimally-sized words. In 1997, Seifert published a set of studies to report results of that critical test. Her most important comparison was between trends in processing speeds for various sizes of pictures and various sizes of words. She demonstrated that the optimal size of word, with respect to processing speed, is different than the optimal size of picture. It was intriguing that—even at optimal sizes for speed in cognitive processing—words were categorized more slowly than pictures (i.e., 710ms v. 653ms). Later authors have attempted to refute claims of picture superiority (e.g., Arieh & Algom, 2002). However, they have often perpetuated the mistakes of mis-sizing stimuli in their comparisons and of making comparisons between pictures and words that are not optimally sized for speed of cognitive processing (e.g., using stimuli akin to half the size of Seifert’s size 1 for words and in-between her sizes 4 and 5 for pictures: tiny words and big pictures): in so doing, they have essentially compared “apples with oranges”, because stimuli that are not
optimally-sized for processing speed will necessarily yield artifactual results in a study of
cognitive processing speeds. Harmony et al., (2001) reported that their observations of EEG
changes during the categorization of pictures and words indicated a single, amodal memory
store for meanings to which neither words nor pictures have privileged access. Unfortunately,
they under-sized word displays and even failed to report sizes and visual angles for their picture
displays—rendering their results very difficult to interpret.

In 1994, Davidoff and Deblieser, reported data from the case of HG, who had experienced a
CVA (i.e., cerebrovascular accident) of the left hemisphere. The affected area was the
infracalcarine fissure. HG’s symptoms included a deficiency in picture naming, without
problems reading words. Even more interesting was the evidence that HG could eventually
derive the name of an object, if he could visually inspect it from various angles or touch it.
Thus, his failed recognition of pictures seemed to stem from a problem relating the two-
dimensional representation to the real-world object. The study of HG provided evidence for
dissociation between finding words in memory and finding pictures in memory, because HG
could do the former very easily, but had great difficulty with the latter. Functional dissociations
of this sort indicate that there are neurophysiological differences in processing between
pictures and words. If these are real differences in processing, then they may very well translate
into processing differences between text-based art forms (like poetry) and visual art forms (like
portraits).

In their study of picture and word processing with measurements of event-related electrical
potentials (ERP’s) as indicators of cortical activity, Federmeier and Kutas (2001) observed that
activation of fact-based semantic memories is not only different in speed, but different with
respect to the pattern of brain activation for processing pictures and words. Their results
suggest that meaning-based memories are not amodal—but may, instead, be subject to
privileged activation by pictures. It seems that semantic (or fact-based) memory may have
strong links to the sense modality of processing for non-linguistic stimuli and that those
modalities may provide faster (or at least different) routes to activation of semantic memories
than can be accomplished for language-based stimuli (which must always be processed in the
lexicon, i.e., as language, regardless of the sense modality that accomplishes the initial
encoding).

Neuropsychological evidence for dissociations between semantic memories and lexical
memories is not scarce. In fact, there is a long history of literature on aphasic syndromes
(various difficulties recognizing or producing language in its written and/or spoken forms) and
onagnosic syndromes (various difficulties recognizing objects or discerning their meanings; see
McCarthy & Warrington, 1990). In cases of prosopagnosia, which involves an inability to
remember faces, individuals may function quite normally and may have normal language skills
but be unable to recognize faces they have previously seen—indicating a dissociation between
memories for faces and memories for words (Hecean & Angelergues, 1962). Faces seem to be
special, with respect to localization of memories in the brain (i.e., being localized in the right
hemisphere along the lingual, fusiform, and parahippocampal gyri—with prosopagnosia often
involving lesions of those areas and of the splenium of the corpus callosum). Visual memories
for other, non-physiognomic objects (like pictures of common objects) seem to involve left
hemisphere localization in the occipito-temporal regions (Lissauer, 1890; see McCarthy &
Warrington). Very often, adults who experience brain injuries that result in agnosia will remain
normal, with respect to their language functions, but will be unable to recognize common
objects or pictures of those objects.

Additional evidence for linking of visual recognition of non-linguistic stimuli with semantic
processing in memory can be found in various studies of fMRI and PET imaging of the brain.
In their study of brain activation during normal object recognition, Gerlach, Law, Gade, and
Paulson (2002) reported involvement of the fusiform gyrus in semantic judgments about visual
stimuli—further implicating that area in decisions requiring semantic memory. And in a more recent article, Adams and Janata (2002) reported fMRI imaging of active fusiform gyrus in the left hemisphere as research participants matched pictures with words that described them at various category levels (e.g., basic- or subordinate-level category).

IMPLICATIONS FOR A THEORY OF VISUAL ARTS AS CUES TO REMEMBERING

If previous authors are correct in their conclusion that non-linguistic stimuli (like pictures) cue memories for meaning more directly than do linguistic stimuli (like words), then there are some important implications for a theory of visual art as a cue to memory. For those visual stimuli that are fundamentally non-linguistic, one might expect faster, more direct activation of meanings in memory. Whether that faster, more direct access would be qualitatively different than the activation of memory for meanings via the mental lexicon (which is presumably the way words activate semantic memories) is very much open for debate. The current author would contend that non-linguistic stimuli have far greater possibilities for activating emotions and meanings in memory very quickly. After all, words—whether they are read or heard—must be processed as language before they can be processed for meaning. If that is true, then non-linguistic stimuli have far greater possibilities for very fast impacts on the psyche. That is not to say that words have more limited possibilities for impacting or making memories—only that one would expect slower activation of meaning-based memories, if indeed the works of Seifert (1997), of Federmeier and Kutas (2001), and of various neuropsychologists and aphasists are veridical representations of reality.

Even if Seifert (1997) and others are incorrect about the speed of activation of semantic memories by nonlinguistic stimuli, there is clear evidence of qualitatively different activation of semantic memories and other meaning-based memories with pictures than with words. That is, even if semantic memory is amodal, the paths to its activation via words and pictures are clearly different—as is indicated by copious studies of brain activation during picture and word processing (e.g., Adams & Janata, 2002; Gerlach et al., 2000). As McCarthy and Warrington (1990) have suggested, “[T]he neuropsychological evidence for independent (or at least partially independent) meaning systems is . . . ” that “impairment in visual knowledge is not necessarily paralleled by comparable impairment in the verbal domain. Conversely, severe impairment of verbal knowledge may occur without similar impairments in deriving meaning from visually presented material” (p.54). If then, one assumes that there are systems for activating meanings via pictorial and linguistic stimuli that are dissociable, it opens the possibilities for interpretations of visual arts that are not dependent upon language. For example, a painting representing a landscape may evoke emotions and thoughts that are not tied to language. One might even go so far as to suggest that linguistic interpretations can lead to confusions, rather than to clarifications, of an art object’s meaning. In this view, the role of language might be viewed as somewhat superfluous to the actual meaning of the work and language would not be assumed to be superior to the picture in its ability to communicate ideas or meaning. In such a view, language might be accused of confusing one about the meaning of the picture just as often as it might elucidate its meaning.

The current author is certainly not the first to see the possibilities for language as obfuscator. In the words of Bishop Richard Holloway, “our greatest gift, language, is also our greatest danger. We destroy ourselves by our words. The difficulty is that things are not what we say they are” (see Goldsmith, 2001, p.141). Previously, T.S. Eliot had similarly observed that “Words strain, Crack and sometimes break under the burden...” (see Goldsmith, p. 141). When one considers the value of non-linguistic representations, one must consider their abilities to cross lines of culture, gender, age, race, and more.

When one considers possible roles of various types of non-linguistic communication, their value to patients with aphasia or Alzheimer’s disease seems evident. Pictures, touch, music and
movement can be seen to take on renewed significance for communicating. And one must call it “renewed”, because this is, after all, how humans begin: with communication that hinges upon the non-linguistic. And why? Because humans begin life without language, but with the sense modalities that make acquiring knowledge possible. If an individual suffers a stroke that robs him/her of speech, it does not logically follow that s/he has also ceased to think. On the contrary, clinical case evidence strongly indicates that meaningful thought continues (Seifert, 1999) and that patients may develop elaborate mechanisms for conveying ideas without words (Caplan, 1987).

Consider Willem DeKooning (after SFMOMA, 1995)—who communicated through non-linguistic images what he, presumably, could not communicate with words. Goldsmith (2001) has contended that the value of non-linguistic communication is amplified in diseases like Alzheimer’s, when memories are fading and language skills decline. The current author would argue that it is the value of non-linguistic modalities in these situations that provides strong evidence for their dissociability from language. There are documented cases of use of symbols and ritual to effect communications with individuals who have severe language deficits (e.g., Goldsmith, 2001; Seifert & Baker, 2002). And so then, for humans who have intact memory and language systems, what roles can non-linguistic modalities play? To provide alternate manner of representation to language that might sometimes supplement language-based communications and that might sometimes stand alone with no need for language-based interpretations. In order to accommodate this view of language as merely one possible way of representing and communicating ideas, one might re-conceptualize the adage “a picture paints a thousand words” to be “a picture paints a thousand ideas, and sometimes words are irrelevant”.

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The premise of my paper is to address the passage of hope, despair and the role that culture plays in transforming dystopian experiences into ones of meaning. One of the most powerful documents that, in the face of total annihilation and destruction, presents the strength culture can instill in people is The Ringelblum Archive. Emanuel Ringelblum was a historian, pedagogue and social activist who dedicated his knowledge and his life in the Warsaw Ghetto to this archival collection. Its purpose was to record all aspects of Ghetto life. Three caches of the archives were hidden in the Ghetto between 1942 and 1943. Two of them were recovered, the third was lost, most likely forever.

The German invasion of Poland on September 1, 1939 started a chapter of tragedy and horror, it also started a chapter of courage. In her book, The Rape of Europa, Lynn H. Nicholas points directly to how culture can become an endangered species and can be “captured” and destroyed together with the people responsible for creating it. The author, in her thorough investigation of the German invasion of Europe, concentrates on the systematic and deliberate actions of the Germans in destroying the cultures of the countries they violently conquered. Poland was the first to be invaded and the first to painfully witness the horrors of its cultural heritage being demolished:

For Poland was to become Germany’s creature totally. Its culture and peoples were to be eliminated and replaced by Hitler’s “New Order.” The Nazis were only too eager to put their racial theories into actual practice in a place where resistance could be countered with total brutality. They believed without any qualms that Slavs, Christian or otherwise, were so inferior that they could not be considered humans. They, along with Jews, were the “degenerate art” of the human race.¹

The “degenerate” races, Jews, Poles and others, cherished their “degenerate” culture and protected it with courage.

The strength of culture lies in its ability to maintain integrity and to become a source of inspirational energy in traumatic instances. We need this supply of inspiration for our lives to be meaningful and valuable. It is only too easy in tragic times filled with horror, of not knowing how to survive, to lose touch with one’s roots, to lose touch with one’s culture. The voice that tells us to maintain this contact can be just a whisper, but it elevates us beyond fear.

To flee dystopia with an authentic and conscious realization is not an act of escapism but, rather, a courageous gesture that transcends brutal reality.

At a conference of SS officers on September 21, 1939, before the surrender of Poland, Heydrich and Eichmann drew up instructions for their Einsatzgruppen (Special Forces), “to prepare a list of Polish . . . intellectuals of all types, for a fate as yet unclear,” and recommended that the Jews be concentrated in ghettos “for better control.”²

In November 1940 the Jewish Ghetto in German occupied Warsaw was sealed off. Three hundred thousand people, most of them displaced from their homes, crowded in to the caged quarters and were forbidden to go beyond the walls. How to live beyond surviving? One way is to avoid apathy, if that is at all possible in conditions in which a people’s life and culture is being degraded, demolished, shredded into pieces:
On November 22, 1940 during the week the Ghetto became sealed a small
group of Jewish intellectuals met in the home of Emanuel Ringelblum, at
Leszno Street. That meeting set the agenda for a cooperation project. Later on,
the Main Judaic Library (now the Jewish Historical Institute)—where official
Jewish charitable organizations had their offices until April 1942, was also used
as a meeting place. Meetings usually took place on Saturdays, hence the
group’s code name: Oyneg Shabbes—Joy of Shabbes Meeting. From the first meeting until the last horrific days of the Ghetto Uprising the Oyneg Shabbes
members would collect information not only about the fate of Jews in Poland but also about
every aspect of life in the Ghetto. The Hidden Archive of the Warsaw Ghetto would later
become the most poignant and powerful document of how human potential cannot be caged.

Emanuel Ringelblum’s interest in interdisciplinary studies, especially in synthesizing history
and sociology, was unprecedented and helpful in developing the archives. His involvement in
documenting the culture and life of the Jewish community in Poland helped him organize the
archives in a way that included not only universal experiences, but personal traumas. “Thus,
there were constant attempts to interview people from all walks of life: professors and
smugglers, rabbis and policemen . . .” One of the projects, in the form of a school assignment,
reached the official and clandestine schools in the Ghetto. Each child wrote about his life
there, his dreams for the future. Some children included small drawings and short poems.
From little drops of optimism to spasmodic screams, “Why do we suffer so much?” This, a
fragment of an anonymous child’s essay, is dated January 16, 1942. We might not know the
name of this child but his question reaches far beyond anonymity.

There were more and more painful realizations about the plans of total annihilation of the
Jewish population and its culture. The pace and effectiveness of the Germans in eliminating
millions of people made many Jews, particularly Jewish intellectuals, very much aware of their
destiny. There were many efforts to let the world know the fate of Jews during World War II.
Emanuel Ringelblum considered passing on this information an absolute necessity: he said the
archive’s aim was, “To alert the world to our pain and our torment.” Ringelblum was
surrounded by a team of exceptional people who dedicated their lives to the collection of
documentary material. Some of them lost their lives: Rabbi Szymon Huberband, Menachem
Linder, Izrael Lichtensztajn. Others survived: Rachela Auerbach, Bluma and Hersz Wasser.

The document they were responsible for is one of tragedy of paramount proportions that helps
us remember in a human way. Ringelblum and his colleagues did not finish their work. It was
interrupted in the spring of 1943. They managed, however, to hide their material. On August 3,
1942 “the first cache of research material was stuffed into ten metal boxes and placed inside a
specially built shelter . . .” “The second cache of documents—packed in two large metal cans” was hidden in 1943. The third cache was also hidden in 1943. In total there were more than
six thousands documents of archival material. The ambition of the Jewish Museum in Warsaw
is to publish every single document from The Ringelblum Archives that reached its collection.

Emanuel Ringelblum, his wife Judyta, their son Uriel, thirty other Jews and the two Poles,
Mieczysław Wolski and his nephew who hid them in their small bunker, were murdered by the
Germans. It was March, 1944. In 1999 UNESCO decided to place The Archive of the Warsaw
Ghetto in the “Memory of the World” Register.

December 1940: courses in Applied Arts and Drawing were offered in the Ghetto. A graphic
design student, Maria Berg, commented on the fast pace that made students in the program
work intensely with precise goals in mind. Every Friday Maria and her fellow students helped
in the Ghetto’s orphanages and children’s hospitals. The students created a mural around the children’s playground next to Janusz Korczak’s orphanage.

Janusz Korczak (Henryk Goldszmit): physician, pedagogue, writer, one of the most beautiful human beings who, in the midst of dystopian torment, was able to create, at least for some moments, a garden of eutopia. His orphanage was moved twice between 1940 and 1942 and, yet, each time Korczak and his colleagues were able to provide the children with motivation and belief in themselves. What a difficult task. Is it possible to instill self-respect and belief in self-value in horrific times that devalue everyone and everything? Korczak’s gentle, intelligently sharp sense of humour, his absolute dedication to the orphans and his strong belief in education helped to maintain a fragile sense of normalcy. The children sang, played music, drew and created theatre performances. There were posters advertising these extraordinary events and the children felt important and touched by the spontaneous applause of the audience. Fear was reduced to something small, almost non-existent. “The little girls gaze on catastrophe from a tower of smiles.”

To many children the structured day in school became vital and necessary in their lives. Izrael Lichtensztajn was a liaison between Oyneg Shabbes and the Ghetto’s clandestine and official schools. As a result of the materials he collected we know how special the efforts of Ghetto pedagogues were. Korczak’s orphanage was one of many pedagogical institutions within the walls of the Ghetto. Korczak was also the author of a book for children: King Matthew the Little. The book became very popular for its pedagogical and imaginative powers, optimism, far reaching sensitivity and belief in a world of happy people living their happy moments. It is a living piece of literature, a book of true beauty. As Christopher Hewat said, “. . . beauty is the perfect marriage of sadness and sweetness.”

Korczak contributed to the Ringelblum Archives with a four page letter-memoir. These four pages are written with dense clarity and wit, nothing pretentious, everything of its simplicity extraordinary. His vision of reality is not veiled by total optimism. In a photograph of Korczak taken during the war he wears glasses but his eyes are seen clearly through them. We see what he saw: the horrific decline of human values, and the brutal destruction of human life and dreams. His experience is magnified, his gaze narrates.

In 1996 Alfredo Jaar commemorated the horrific genocide in Rwanda. His work humanely and sensitively portrays the universal with the personal and the balance between them. While in Rwanda, Jaar met a 30 year old Rwandan woman, Gutete Emerita, whose husband and sons were slaughtered right in front of her. In his installation that commemorates and evokes Gutete’s personal loss and pain, Jaar was able to capture the universal feeling of personal tragedy. One million eyes, one million tragedies, each one of them personalized and lived: The Eyes of Gutete Emerita. The Eyes of Janusz Korczak. Our Eyes . . . The prologue of a catalogue on Alfredo Jaar’s work titled Lament of Images consists of a poem by Ben Okri of the same name. It transports readers to the core of horror, of tragedy, of destruction, while at the same time inviting them into the mind of the oppressor:

And they burned what
They could not
Understand.
They burned
All that frightened them . . .

When the orphans were being deported to Treblinka Janusz Korczak was offered the chance to stay behind; but the thought of abandoning the children was unbearable to him. He was murdered in Treblinka death camp with all the children from his orphanage in August 1942.
Every time I think about their last walk I am reminded of a proposal for Documenta in Kassel by Melvin Charney and Krzysztof Wodiczko. Charney and Wodiczko wanted to transform the railway station in Kassel into the gates of a death camp with a big sign reading: It is Better if They Think They are Going to a Farm. At first the proposal was accepted but, just a few weeks before the opening of Documenta, the artists received a letter informing them about the rejection. Krzysztof Wodiczko was born in April 1943, the month of the last desperate act of the people “behind the wall”: the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising.

Cultural life in the Ghetto was truly vibrant. Theatre productions united many professionals: actors, musicians, composers, designers and artists. Already in December 1940 the first professional theatre was opened in the Ghetto and a production of Molière’s L’Avare was presented to the audience. Because there were strict rules imposed by the Germans forbidding Jews to perform works by Aryan authors, the posters advertising the play gave the name of the translator rather than that of Molière. This would become common practice in the future. The Germans did not notice but, of course, everyone in the Ghetto knew who the author of L’Avare really was.

In the winter of 1942 a ticket to most of the theatres was 2 zloty, one kilogram of bread 13 zloty! Performances took place on weekends and week days. Weekend performances were usually sold out. On weekdays audiences reached no less than 80%. Nowy Teatr Kameralny started in July 1941. Its location was on Nowolipki 52. Rubin Szwarc, an architect, was responsible for adapting the space to its new function. In conditions where it was almost impossible to find any building materials, his simple ideas and effective solutions helped create an ideal performance space. Andrzej Marek (Marek Orsztajn) became the artistic director of the Kameralny. Before the war Marek was well respected in the cultural circles of Warsaw. His direction was always innovative, perceptive and imaginative. He consistently escaped stereotypical commercial success and searched for introspective and intellectual structure. His dream was for a “...cultural platform of systematic and valuable propagation of peace, tolerance and mutual respect...”11 His dream paralleled that of Emanuel Ringelblum who also tried to have theatre performances, concerts, poetry readings, art openings and discussion clubs at the Judaic Library. The archives started by Ringelblum were also housed in the Library. Thus, without a doubt, this building on 5 Tłomackie Street, became the heart and soul of the intellectual and cultural life of the Ghetto.

The Main Synagogue on Tłomackie Street opened its doors to the public with a series of religious concerts. One of the most talented kantors, Gerson Sirota, sang there. His voice had a magical power of transforming space. People who participated in his singing sessions felt enlightened.

The Great Symphonic Orchestra started to perform in the summer of 1941. The performances took place in many different locations throughout the Ghetto. Its program was a very ambitious and dangerous one that included Aryan composers such as Mozart, Schubert, Bach, Haendel and Brahms. The years 1942 and 1943 marked the tragic and cruel end of this talented and professional orchestra: almost all its members were brutally murdered in Treblinka.

Someone who performed almost to the degree of exhaustion was Marysia Ajzensztadt (Miriam Eisenstadt). Everyone in the Ghetto knew this talented young singer whose father was the conductor of the synagogue choir and a composer. Marysia’s voice was unique in its beauty, gentleness and strength. Her repertoire was amazingly flexible: from arias from Traviata and Madame Butterfly to popular folklore songs. Expressiveness and elegance were attributes of this young singer. Marysia was killed on Umschlagplatz in 1942 when she tried to get in to the same train wagon as her parents. The Ghetto lost its beloved robin.
A small man with glasses with a gentle gaze stands in the left corner of a photograph. He is holding a banjo. His name is Jakub Glatstein. He is a composer and conductor as well as a preserver of the songs and music of the Jewish proletariat. His life is embraced by music and embraces her. To his right there are children from one of the orphanages in the Ghetto. Their heads are shaved, their big eyes are directed straight at the photographer. Some children smile, others have a little serious post-performance look. They are hungry and some of them might be sick, but they would never have missed their concert. Their faces are brief as photos, but everything about them encourages remembrance. Jakub’s daily visits and classes, as well as his love of music, let his students find themselves in a world of floating dreams and allowed his students to even catch them sometimes. Jakub and his children were murdered in Treblinka death camp in 1942. His wife died of typhus in the Ghetto.

Gela Seksztajn was trained as a painter before the war. In the Ghetto where she became a dedicated teacher, she taught art classes to many children at the clandestine school at 68 Nowolipki Street. She donated many of her works to Oyneg Shabbes and some of them were discovered with other hidden documents. In the Ghetto she worked mostly with watercolours, painting children and still lives. In a photograph of Gela taken before the war her face radiates with a smile, intelligent, bright eyes . . . Gela Seksztajn, her husband Izrael Lichtensztajn, and their 20-month old daughter Margalit, most likely died during the first night of the Ghetto Uprising in April, 1943. In August 1942 she wrote in her last will and testament, “Poised on the border between life and death, more certain that I won’t live than that I shall.” Seksztajn hoped that her artworks would become part of a collection of a “. . . Jewish museum that will be established in the future in order to recreate prewar Jewish cultural life.” She also wrote in her wish “that some trace (remain) of my name and the name of my daughter, the talented little girl Margalit Lichtensztajn”

Night falls.

In his book, Night, Elie Wiesel recalls talking to his friend after their torturous race from one concentration camp to another. The prisoners were forced to run for hours to reach their destination of horror:

“How do you feel, Juliek?” I asked, less to know the answer than to hear that he could speak, that he was alive.

“Allright, Elizer . . . I am getting on alright . . . hardly any air . . . worn out. My feet are swollen. It’s good to rest, but my violin . . . ”

“What, your violin?” He gasped, “I am afraid . . . I am afraid . . . that they’ll break my violin . . . I’ve brought it with me.”

I could not answer him. Someone was lying full length on top of me, covering my face. I was unable to breathe . . .

The journey into the night continues and Wiesel writes:

I heard the sound of a violin. The sound of a violin, in this dark shed, where the dead were heaped on the living. What madman could be playing violin here, at the brink of his own grave? Or was it really an hallucination?

It must have been Juliek. He played a fragment from Beethoven’s concerto. I had never heard sounds so pure. In such silence . . . He was playing his life. The whole of his life was gliding on the strings—his lost hopes, his charred past, his extinguished future. He played as he would never play again.
NOTES

2 Ibid., 62.
7 Ibid.
13 Ibid.
14 Ibid.
16 Ibid. 90.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

As I was working on my paper and determining the most effective way to begin I came across Trinh T. Minh-Ha’s essay entitled “Grandma’s Story.” I was immediately struck by the title of the work since my most recent photographic piece has to do with my own Grandmother’s stories. A line taken from the essay seemed like a suitting starting point. “My story, no doubt, is me but also, no doubt older than me”.

A story can be passed down through generations becoming an integral part of a personal history. My grandmother, Seweryna Szmaglewska, was 23 years old in 1939 when the German Army invaded Poland. A young polish girl studying Polish Literature at the University in Warsaw would not seem to be the most likely suspect to be arrested by the Gestapo. My father’s mother belonged to a scouting group of which most of the girls had known each other since childhood. Similar groups around the country began to form a resistance against the Nazi party, it is difficult to say how much these groups were able to achieve, yet they posed enough of a threat that some members where arrested. Apparently, a number of people within my grandmother’s scouting group were among those arrested and ordered to reveal the names and addresses of their friends. When interrogated and tortured by the Gestapo, some of the victims gave the Germans the information they were searching for.

The Gestapo found out my grandmother’s name and address and that she was active in the resistance. In 1942 while she was visiting her parents in the town of Piotrkow the Gestapo arrested her. She was transported to the concentration camp at Oswiecim; the Germans renamed the town Auschwitz. Later, she was moved to Brzezinka (Birkenau in German). This camp was regarded as Auschwitz II. There, the greatest number of people perished. My grandmother survived, most likely because she was not Jewish. Six months after the Second World War she wrote Smoke over Birkenau a book about her life at Auschwitz. The book was written as a record of her experiences. It is an account of her memories and of the traumatic events she witnessed and endured during her three years at the camp. Because of the documentary qualities of her book, she was called to testify as a witness at the Nuremberg Trials, where her work was admitted as evidence.

It is through her book that I have been able to hear and witness her story and it is her book that has directly influenced and inspired my work “Inscriptions”. I began by photographing a copy of my grandmother’s book as well as incorporating its text with objects that represented the macabre of Auschwitz. I then photographed the book alone, using it directly as a reference to history, the event and my grandmother’s story.

My photographs intertwine qualities of the personal and the historical. They are about relationship of a personal story to history and how the story transforms through time. I am interested in how my grandmother’s experiences affected her and how they were passed down through a generation to me. What type of impact do these floating memories carry two generations and a continent removed from the event? How do these memories relate to a ubiquitous understanding of the historic event that surrounds them? And most importantly, how am I to represent an experience so real yet so impossible through the use of photography? In the book Becoulded Visions—Hiroshima and the Art of Witness Kyo Maclear refers to the film “Hiroshima Mon Amour.” In the beginning scenes the character of the French actress proclaims to her lover, a Japanese architect, that she saw everything that happened in Hiroshima. Yet her memory of the event is constructed purely of photographic footage and reportage seen after the atomic bombings. The French actress’s statement emphasizes that
photographs have helped us to grasp historical atrocities in a way that was never before possible, transposing themselves onto our own memory and understanding of an event.

With the liberation of the concentration camps in 1945, photographers from all over the world were sent to document what the world was unable to see, unable to witness and even unwilling to believe. The first images of the camps introduced the world to images of atrocities, starved figures, piles of corpses, death. Today, we are exposed to an innumerable amount of these images, past and present. Our senses are numbed by the layers of images that separate us from the catastrophic events, wars, and revolutions in the world. Not only has the volume of media representation desensitized us towards atrocities, so has the language used to describe these events. The words themselves are overused; their meaning lessened; Holocaust, genocide, death camps, ethnic cleansing. These words dislocate us from the occurrence; they recall another time, another country.

Photographs, television and even the web have allowed us a connection into the past but “as more and more information comes to us via new media, less and less seems to come via direct bodily or sensory experience.” This further alienates us from history. Our dislocation is augmented by our inability to sense the past. We can never truly understand it because we are physically removed, unable to touch it. My work “Inscriptions” is an attempt to reclaim a certain physical and personal sense to a historical moment.

I am fascinated by how the event of the Holocaust is represented, preserved and memorialized in history and in museums. The Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington D.C. uses a myriad of photographs in its exhibitions most of which are documentary in nature. As I walked through the exhibit I felt as if I had seen all of the images before in books and films, I was overwhelmed, my senses paralyzed. It wasn’t until after I reached the small plaque that read “end of exhibition” that I noticed something that reached me on a personal and intimate level. I was able to enter into a world of imagination and emotion.

I turned to see a room that was warmly lit with natural light coming in from the windows and candles that were placed around the room. Above the rows of candles where inscribed the names of the concentration camps. The candles symbolize those who had suffered, it was this metaphor that touched me when I was least expecting it. The Hall of Remembrance, its emptiness and silence, illuminated my senses and emotions. Coming out of the dark crowded exhibition space this room felt like a release and, in a sense, a freedom.

I was struck how a room that was empty and quiet could evoke feelings that the images and direct representations could not. Could it be that the images of the Holocaust left no room for interpretation, we know that these images are horrible and atrocious yet we have no further connection to them. We cannot believe that such things happened, they are beyond our knowledge and emotional understanding of the world, we are left feeling disconnected. The Memorial Hall provoked a personal reaction, each museum visitor would see this encounter in a different way. There were no explicit details and graphic images, rather room for the mind to wander through its emotions.

I have always felt a strong connection to my grandmother even though I was not physically close to her. I never had the chance to speak to my grandmother about what she endured and what she witnessed, her book is my strongest connection to her story and her memories of the Holocaust. I have always approached her book as a cherished object; there remain only two copies in my family. The book that I have been working from was my grandmother’s own copy, the first pages inscribed with her name and her address in Warsaw.
A book, for me is a physical and personal object, an article that requires touch and a response. “Inscriptions” takes its form as an artist book, an emotional exploration and discovery. This book refers back to my original inspiration, Smoke Over Birkenau.

The size of my book (7.5” by 9”) allows for a personal experience and interaction with the work. It is placed on a small wooden table. How is one meant to approach it? Is it an artifact, can it be touched? The viewer does not encounter the white cotton gloves typically placed near an artist’s book or a work of this nature. I did not want there to be a layer removing the viewers touch from the book, it is meant to be a sensual experience. Only one viewer at a time can turn the pages and have a conversation with the past.

I draw on the tactile and physical attributes of the book to evoke a sense of intimacy. The books and its images are representations of a disjointed past. The images convey a sense of loss, fragmented by the passing of time and generations. The cover is worn and stained, beckoning to be opened to reveal its story.

We enter the first pages of the book through a black and white image of barbed wire, horizontal lines that extend the full length of the page. These lines take the place of text, words that will never be fully articulated or understood. They also mirror the lines inscribed on the following image.

With the turn of the page we witness a palm with all of its crevices open to us inviting us to read its history. Extending from the fingers is written “In 1939, when the German’s invaded Poland, grandma was 23 years old, a year younger than I am today.” This line of text brings the viewer from the past into the present, from a collective memory into an individual personal story that has been transported through time. This text serves as an introduction to the subject, it also implies a connection between my grandmother and I.

We enter into a physical sequence of hands searching through fabric. The life-size shots of my hands unraveling the material envelope the viewer into the process of discovering what is underneath the cloth. Where are we and what is it that we are searching for? The viewer becomes a privileged witness and shares in the experience by physically touching and holding this action in their own hands, mirroring the emotional layers of my own interaction with my grandmother’s story. In the right corner we begin to see some letters, we have unwrapped a book. This evocative sequence leads the viewer into the depths of my work, which we enter through a reproduction of the original cover of my grandmother’s book into a darkened sequence of images.

As we approach this section I feel that it is important to mention the physical quality of the pages of this artist book and once again emphasize the importance of the viewers touch. The page is noticeably thicker to the touch, we can feel that it is a much heavier and thicker paper emphasizing that we are entering into a book. A book within a book, a history wrapped and absorbed by another.

When we open the cover we notice the inside flap of the book. Just as with any book the reader can choose to read this text to gain more information about the author.

It reads: “This is a full-length and no holds barred, description of life in a German death factory, Oswiencim II, known as Birkenau and feared as one of the most dreaded of the horror-camps set up by the Nazis. The author is a Polish girl who lived inside Birkenau, as one of its women prisoners, from 1942 when the Gestapo arrested her, until the liberation in 1945. Within that period she saw a parade of thousands of prisoners, old, young, frightened, proud of all nationalities and all strata of society—political prisoners, prisoners of war and just prisoners on suspicion. There was a succession of barrack and camp overseers—all Aryan and differing
only in the degree of ingenious severity with which they ruled. Here in this book which had a overwhelming success in Poland, is the whole story. The first sight through the bars of…” The text is cut here with a note (continued on back flap). Read in part or in its entirety, this text helps to contextualize the work.

The paper on the opposite side is opaque, smoother and lighter to the touch. We are brought back to another movement, the act of turning a page. The physical act of turning the pages is what brought the viewer into the world of the book, allowing him to travel from past to present, from my grandmother’s story to my own. In this next sequence the viewer directly mirrors the action that is taking place in the images by the simple act of turning the pages. The repetitive quality of the actions leads the viewer into the first pages of my grandmother’s book, we entering into her text, her words, her experience. The text draws us into a night at the camp.

“Dark night. More than a thousand women are asleep on strange scaffoldings, in one great room. A thick darkness, filled with breathing and exhalations. Even the blankets which you never see by day light seem a part of the darkness…And while you lie immovably in the dark cavern of your bed you must throw off the weariness…”

SILENCE

The SS were leading the surviving prisoners in a long column, headed for Germany, Grandma was among them. One of the women she knew stole a sheet. They lay on the ground and covered themselves with it. In the falling snow, no one noticed…

Her eyes looking directly at us, the dots of her dress, my grandmother’s concentration camp photograph. She and the viewer exchange looks, the viewer is placed in a strange position, in the footsteps of the person who took the photograph, possibly an SS officer. This is the only artifact I use from the event, it begs for a respectful distance on the part of the viewer making my grandmother’s forward glance all the more salient.

There is a voice which leads us to the last section of “Inscriptions.” “I tired to find grandma in the fields of Birkenau. I knew that she walked in those fields and that her footsteps were once imprinted in the mud. The fields are like a graveyard, the chimneys stand alone, emaciated figures that have stayed here, ghosts resembling tombstones.” My grandmothers memories have been transposed to her book, this segment is composed of book after book in her memory.

It was not until after I finished this piece that I learned about the Jewish tradition of the yisker biher, which translates literally into “Tombstones of Paper”. These books were made by survivors to commemorate those who had perished, they are a collection of photographs and stories, an attempt to remember and preserve what once was.

When I had finished this book, I began caring it with me often. When I met with the artist Krzysztof Wodiczko he was intrigued by how this book travels with me in a simple box, a token and fragment that I carry with me like an immigrant would carry his most cherished belongings.

I see this book as a fingerprint that refers to a specific experience and event. It serves as a link to my grandmother’s experiences and memories. Her text placed within the framework of my photographs are personal traces and to use her words “drops in the vast immeasurable ocean”. The images are artifacts of an emotional experience, which have been embossed on my identity.

My work is a trace, a residue of a time still remembered. We have reached the twilight of Auschwitz as living memory. It still lingers in the memories of the few survivors living today. It has slowly begun to reside in a world removed from the personal, becoming a part of written
history. For me, the events of the Second World War abide on a psychological island between the personal and the historical, the ineffable and the tangible. “History, and particularly history after Auschwitz, can be encountered, grasped, and understood only through the acknowledgement of the very inaccessibility of its original occurrence and experience.”

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