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Holocaust Mothers and Daughters

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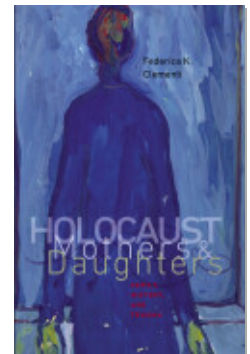
Published by Brandeis University Press

Clementi, K..

Holocaust Mothers and Daughters: Family, History, and Trauma.

Waltham: Brandeis University Press, 2013.

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CHAPTER 4

MATERIAL MOTHERS

Milena Roth and the Kindertransport's Legacy, *Objets de Mémoire*

Even Winston [Churchill] had a fault. He was too fond of Jews.

 GENERAL SIR EDWARD LOUIS SPEARS, quoted in

Martin Gilbert, *Churchill and the Jews*

A two-and-a-half-minute black-and-white film recorded by Julius Jonak immortalizes the departure from Prague of thirty Jewish children between the ages of two and eleven aboard two Dutch Douglas airplanes on January 11, 1939. The planes were headed to London, via Rotterdam. This group was only a portion of the approximately ten thousand Jewish children entering England as refugees before the war erupted, thanks to what is known as the Kindertransport Rescue Operation.¹ In this final farewell, we see children arriving with their families, and rescuers gently separating them from their parents. The adults maintain a dignified comportment, their emotions under control, but their faces are tense. The filmmaker must have cajoled some of the children to laugh and cheer, but when they are not consciously posing for the camera, no one smiles. Adults and children alike have ashen faces, almost deformed by anxiety. The camera sweeps a couple of times over the crowd of parents standing tightly packed on the tarmac, behind a small security fence to keep people at a safe distance from the runaway. Then the camera zeroes in on a few intimate scenes. It captures a mother leaning over the fence to reach for her daughter, who remains behind the group of children being taken aboard the aircraft; the woman kisses her little daughter's face frantically as if to imprint her love on it before letting her go. The skillful filmmaker also picks out from the crowd a distinguished couple, a husband and wife who are exquisitely attired. The mother wears her hat slanted to the side in the fashion of those days, while the father wears an elegant, large-brimmed fedora and a long, square-shouldered woolen coat. The mother's eyes are glued on the child the couple has released: we do not see the child, but it's clear from the mother's face that he or she is looking at them from the spot where the organizers are herding the children onto the plane. From the depths of her shattered being, the mother—visibly trying to control a rising tide

of horror—courageously produces something close to a smile aimed, presumably, at encouraging and reassuring the onlooking child. The father is petrified, his right arm slung around his wife's shoulders, possibly to prevent her—or himself—from collapsing. The woman lifts her right arm, and, with perceptible strain, waves it in the air in a last goodbye. Never did anonymity have a more identifiable face. This couple's naked pain is unbearable to watch. Were they among the few adults who eventually joined their children in safety? Were they murdered before they could escape? If so, are we witnessing two parents looking at their child for the last time?

Among the Kinder saved in the unique rescue operation was Milena Roth, born in Prague in October, 1932, the only daughter of Anna Rothová² (née Steinová) and Emil Roth. Thanks to her mother's prescience and indefatigable struggles with a labyrinthine bureaucracy, Milena had a berth on the last transport vessel out of Czechoslovakia; her train left for England on July 18, 1939. Four years later (also in July), a different train heading in the opposite direction carried Milena's parents and the other members of their families to Poland, where they were murdered. Nine out of ten children of the Kindertransport never saw their parents again.

One day long after the war, Milena was readying herself to leave the house of Doris Campbell, the Englishwoman who had rescued her many years earlier when, at the age of six, she had arrived in England alone and in tears on that transport from Prague. Doris handed her a large envelope, adding with her typically British "breviloquence": "You'd better have these." The envelope was stuffed with correspondence from before and during the war between Doris and Anna, Milena's mother. Out of this personal treasure, Roth eventually crafted her remarkable Kindertransport memoir, *Lifesaving Letters: A Child's Flight from the Holocaust*.³ Of the numerous Kindertransport memoirs available, I chose to focus on Roth's story because of the insight her book gives into the history of the rescue operation as witnessed by both the survivor narrator and the child's mother at the time of the events.⁴ Roth adds to this mixture of perspectives her own perceptions, childhood memories, and adult impressions and elaborations. Her book's title reflects the two parts of her memoir: the mother's story (emerging through her letters to Doris Campbell) and the daughter's story (Roth's own memories of growing up in England). Since all Roth was left with from her European past were these letters and a handful of objects her mother had stuffed in her suitcase, I was led to ponder the importance of objects in the reconstruction of Shoah memory. Therefore here I will highlight the way in which Roth's memoir forces us to interpret the historical experience of women

through their relationship to the material world that (symbolically, metonymically, and sometimes literally) reflects that experience.

I will also devote part of this chapter to putting the Kindertransport in historical context. An in-depth discussion of Great Britain's historical attitudes toward the Jews (or one of other free Western nations' political stances vis-à-vis Hitler's open aggression against the Jews) falls beyond the scope of this book, but it will be productive to briefly examine the culture into which the child refugees were transplanted and that affected how they reshaped their identities, understood their role in Holocaust history, and both remembered and memorialized their past. Moreover, since *Holocaust Mothers and Daughters* aims to demonstrate the broader oppression and injustice surrounding Jewish women (as women and as Jews), outside of the geographical and chronological boundaries of the genocide, this chapter affords a glimpse of that oppression in a national context unpolluted by the direct threat of Nazism—England was at war with, but not invaded by, Germany. Strictly speaking, the Kindertransport remains outside of the war's chronology because the operation ended the day the war began. The reactions to the Jewish emergency by the non-Fascist world, specifically regarding the fate of Jewish children, illuminate a telling aspect of the world in which the Jews lived that is often underplayed or brushed away from popular memory. Despite the large body of academic work on American and British reactions to Hitler before the war, outside the scholarly world these unflattering aspects of America's and England's national pasts are not well known. With this study, I wish to offer a possible answer to the question of why the story of the Kindertransport rescue operation has gained so little visibility in the Western consciousness. Why, despite much important scholarly work devoted to it, has this aspect of the Holocaust failed to catch on in the public imagination? I suggest that the answer lies in the female inflection of the Kindertransport story. That story is strongly marked by the presence and action of women—a presence, as we have seen, that has traditionally struggled to gain visibility in its own right. Since the story of female-inflected experiences is underrepresented (or even irrepresentable in patriarchal society), it is not surprising that the same fate applies to the story of the Kindertransport, which is rooted in the private domestic realm and the enterprise of mothers. Consequently, this study raises some questions regarding how the Kindertransport tragedy has been memorialized and explores whether the public modes adopted to remember it (mainly local statues at train stations or displays of artifacts in various Holocaust museums) adequately reproduce the feminine character of the event.

1938 — THE LIST

In 1938 the Anschluss, Germany's annexation of Austria and the Sudetenland; the German invasion of Czechoslovakia; the implementation of "Aryanization" policies in these regions and the increasing restrictions over all aspects of life for Jews wherever the Nazis came to power (imitated by Hitler's ally Benito Mussolini in Italy); and the ghastly riots known as *Kristallnacht* in November of that year were all signals that "life for Jews in Europe, particularly in Central Europe, was becoming more and more difficult."⁵ Furthermore, the mounting wave of aggression that characterized 1938 was a symptom of Hitler's growing threat, which only a stronger international pressure could halt.⁶ Judging from the way foreign leaders were appeasing the German chancellor while turning a blind eye to his criminal acts, such intervention did not seem to be in the cards, and thus some farsighted anti-Nazi activists thought it wise to help at least a portion of the European Jewish population get out of harm's way. Children, naturally, were a humanitarian priority. In particular, the Quakers were greatly alarmed by the Nazi government's increasing violations of human rights and, in collaboration with some Jewish organizations abroad, they began to mobilize. All eyes turned toward America, Canada, and England, whose outstanding democratic records qualified them as the likely candidates to organize a rescue operation for the Jews under Nazi totalitarianism. All of these nations, however, had just undergone the calamitous economic crash of the late 1920s and 1930s that, among other factors, had increased the opposition of the public and politicians toward interventionism and immigration. The overt antisemitism of some key political players in these countries did not help the Jewish cause.

Canada's immigration laws had always been based on race, and Jews did not qualify as one of Canada's preferred races. In 1938, as the persecution of the Jews in Europe took an unambiguous turn for the worse, Fredrick Blair, Canada's assistant deputy minister of immigration, wrote his counterpart in London: "I suggested recently to three Jewish gentlemen with whom I am well acquainted, that it might be a very good thing if they would call a conference and have a day of humiliation and prayer which might profitably be extended for a week or more where they would honestly try to answer the question of why they are so unpopular almost everywhere . . . If they would divest themselves of certain of their habits I am sure they could be just as popular in Canada as our Scandinavians."⁷ Canada also distinguished itself for its callousness in 1939 when—together with Argentina, Cuba, Panama, Paraguay, Uruguay, and, most noticeably, Franklin D. Roosevelt's United States—it refused admission to the 930 Jewish refugees on the *St. Louis* cruise ship, forcing it to return to Europe.⁸

The megalomaniac and politically maladroit US ambassador to England,

Joseph P. Kennedy, at best misunderstood the threat Germany represented to the world and at worst simply approved of the Nazis' *Weltanschauung*. He seemed to have indicated this approval to Herbert von Dirksen, Germany's ambassador to England. After meeting the American, von Dirksen reported to Hitler in 1938 that Kennedy "understood our Jewish policy completely," and, referring to Kennedy's mild criticism of *Kristallnacht*, noted that "it was not so much the fact that we wanted to get rid of the Jews that was so harmful to us but rather the loud clamor with which we accompanied this purpose."⁹ Blinded by his well-documented antisemitism, Kennedy once commented to Harvey Klemmer, an aide, that "individual Jews are all right, Harvey, but as a race they stink. They spoil everything they touch. Look what they did to the movies."¹⁰

Remarkably, Senator Robert F. Wagner (a Democrat from New York) and Representative Edith Rogers (a Republican from Massachusetts) sponsored legislation to increase immigration quotas for Jewish children living in Nazi Germany, allowing more of them to enter the United States. But Congress responded to the Wagner-Rogers Bill and the pressure of prominent political, religious, and intellectual lobbyists with the utmost obstructionism and bigotry. In 1939, the American Legion joined forces with the vociferous Senator Robert Reynolds, a North Carolina Democrat who was fiercely opposed to all immigration, to kill the Wagner-Rogers bill (despite Eleanor Roosevelt's sympathy and support for this cause), "arguing that . . . the admission of 20,000 children without their parents was against the laws of God."¹¹

Great Britain, not a prosemitic country by any historical standard, distinguished itself in this case through an enormously ethical act. On the one hand, on a different geopolitical stage, England had firmly refused to allow Jewish refugees to enter Palestine, fearing that the mass arrival of Jews there would strengthen the Zionist cause and threaten Britain's hegemony in the region. On the other hand, the heroic resolve of people like Sir Nicholas Winton (the savior of Czech Jewish children), the Quakers Bertha Bracey and Jean Hoare, Rebecca Sieff, Sir Wyndham Deedes, Viscount Samuel, Rabbi Solomon Schoenfeld (whose prioritization of children from Orthodox families embroiled him in a fiery dispute with Winton and others who did not intend to distinguish among the genocide's targets based on matters of religious observance), and Lord Baldwin (the former prime minister, whose famous appeal to his nation is said to have moved the British conscience) led to the creation of a movement to steer public opinion and push the British government to grant special visas to a group of about ten thousand Jewish children from Germany, Austria, Czechoslovakia, and Poland, with the hope that their parents would follow soon afterward. Half of these children would be housed in hostels, and half of them

were to be hosted by temporary foster families, both Jewish and non-Jewish. A network of philanthropists, volunteers, social activists, and religious leaders quickly took action to get the British Parliament to approve of the immigration, establish welcome centers, recruit English foster families, put together the list of young candidates eligible for expatriation, get permits from the Nazi government, arrange for their transport, notify the families, gather the children on the established dates, safely get them to their destination, and oversee their welfare once in England. The sponsors had to pay £50 per child—a considerable sum at the time. Vera Fast describes the time frame originally envisioned for the Jewish children's stay: "According to the Inter-Aid committee agreement with the government, the children were to be in Britain, supported by the Jewish community, for educational purposes for up to two years, by which time they were expected to have re-emigrated."¹² Obviously, England's entry into the war radically changed the terms of this deal. The last transport out of Nazi Europe was fortuitously scheduled for, and dutifully took place on, September 1, 1939, the day Hitler invaded Poland.

IN THE HOUSE OF STRANGERS

Former Kindertransportees may have shared their survival stories with their close friends and family members, but the tales received scant public attention for fifty years (despite the 1964 publication of Lore Segal's autobiographical Kindertransport novel, *Other People's Houses*).¹³ They had been "lucky" children, spared the worst; they were expected to pay back their debt to British society through an uncritical appreciation of and a voluntary submission to its rules and behavioral norms. To make a public display of their pain or remain attached to the tragic past could have been interpreted by their host country as an act of ungratefulness. Thus for a long time, the former Kindertransportees were denied (or did not recognize) their identity as Shoah survivors. They had, after all, "nothing" to complain about: they had been saved, they had had a roof over their heads and food on the table while other Jews were being butchered and starved to death on the Continent. To be guaranteed salvation in England, the Kindertransportees had been instructed, advised, expected, and sometimes forced to be quiet, obedient, inconspicuous children. By war's end, having gone through the traumatic experience of separation, relocation, acculturation, and orphanhood, most of them had naturally become quiet, inconspicuous, and well-behaved adults. They had learned their place. So they stayed to one side while history and a growing Holocaust culture honored, recognized, memorialized, and tended to the "real" victims. As Milena Roth unequivocally remarks, "there was a hierarchy of suffering, and we [Kindertransportees] were at the

bottom.”¹⁴ Roth is no less sparing in her assessment of the motives behind the rescuers’ decision to take in the Jewish children. Her overall judgment is not entirely flattering, even when it involves Doris Campbell, her own savior:

There were some cases of altruism . . . Others had other motives. Many of the families were religious, and some were doing their good deed. I remember Doris talking about me in whispers at church, where she was admired for having taken me in . . . Some hosts were emotionally disturbed, and many children suffered at their hands. Some hosts took in refugees because we came from middle-class homes, which was thought preferable to being forced to accept evacuees from London after its expected bombing, since those people would come from poor homes, in London’s East End perhaps, and cause all sorts of trouble. Some took girls of thirteen, fourteen, and fifteen and used them as servants right away. But some did provide secure loving homes. Interestingly, I have not met many of these.¹⁵

In her *Kindertransport* memoir, Eva Figes suggests another possible explanation of why some rescuers were moved by the plight of these particular children: “Whatever their normal prejudices, the English middle class found it easy to feel sorry for refugees whose manners and clothing betrayed a style of living equal or superior to their own, even if they were Jews and had now fallen on hard times.”¹⁶

The Jewish communities in Europe, in collaboration with the Movement for the Care of Refugee Children from Germany (later known as the Refugee Children’s Movement) in England and the other rescue parties involved, applied various criteria to choose the “right” children to include in the *Kindertransport* lists. Of course, the gravity of the risk the Jewish children faced—arising from the imprisonment or death of one or both parents, their financial situation, geographical location, and so on—was a primary factor. But as Claudia Curio has amply illustrated in “‘Invisible’ Children,” when it came to finding the right match between Jewish refugee candidates and prospective foster families in the United Kingdom, more mundane considerations played a role in the selection. The children had to be deserving of saving; they had to have all the qualities the foster parents would have wished for in their own children. Only perfectly normal children, physically and mentally fit, were allowed on the lists. Needless to say, normality, especially under such utterly abnormal circumstances (death threats, military occupation, impending genocide, poverty) is a cruelly capricious formula. Curio recounts several harrowing stories, including the case of a deaf and dumb boy from Vienna, Heinz Gastler, who took the initiative of writing directly to prospective adoptive families in England and pleading his

desperate case: “One person who heard from [Heinz], Lord Stead, passed the letter on to the Refugee Children’s Movement, which sent the letter back to Vienna with the following note: ‘We regret that we cannot do anything for this boy, for within the framework of our organization we can only bring children who are 100 percent healthy, both mentally and physically, to England.’”¹⁷ Consequently, Gastler was denied sponsorship; he was later sent to Theresienstadt and murdered.

“Only those children capable of integrating were to be sent to England, in order to give a positive impression and thus to support further emigration of children,” Curio explains.¹⁸ In 1938–39, the children selected had demonstrated the appropriate qualities that allowed them to be among the few saved from the massacre. In order to survive, they learned to be adaptable and inconspicuous, which perhaps explains why their stories remained underreported for so long. In 1988 Bertha Leverton, a former Kind (a child from a Kindertransport) still living in England, noticed that the fiftieth anniversary of her arrival was coming up. She was about to let it pass unnoticed because, as she quickly realized, no one was talking about it. There were no signs of any upcoming commemorations. “I then started to organize a fifty year jubilee reunion,” Leverton recalls: “News travelled fast, and shortly I had a world-wide two-day reunion on my hands.”¹⁹ Together with Shmuel Lowensohn, Leverton edited the first anthology of stories from former Kinder, *I Came Alone*.²⁰

Starting in the early 1990s, many European nations began creating spaces for Holocaust memorialization—ranging from big institutional ones, such as national museums and cenotaphs, to small-scale works of commemorative art on the streets, in city parks, or in other public spaces. Several memorials were also commissioned in the twenty-first century for the children who escaped death on those trains to England. In 2003 a memorial sculpture by Flor Kent titled *Für das Kind—Displaced* was installed at the Liverpool Train Station in London, where all the transports arrived.²¹ The memorial was meant to symbolically link this point of arrival together with all the Continental points of departure of the transports—at Hlavní Nádraží in Prague, at Westbahnhof in Vienna, at Bahnhof Friedrichstrasse in Berlin, and at Gdańsk Główny in Poland—to commemorate the success of the rescue operation and to mourn the disaster that broke families apart and destroyed lives.

I mention the belated and relatively exiguous attention given to the Kindertransport episode because the characteristics that mark so discreet a commemoration (reservedness, tactfulness, reticence, and so forth) reflect the loneliness, isolation, and forlornness that defined the overall experience of these refugee children. At their young age, they had lacked the perspective to grasp the mag-

nitude of what was happening, and even as adults they were for a long time reluctant to classify themselves as victims alongside the other violated and dispossessed Jews. After the process of relocation, assimilation, and integration was completed, the former refugees ended up seeing themselves mostly as lightweight survivors, so to speak, as if there had been something cowardly and not worth retelling about their escape before having suffered the worst of the Shoah's physical and mental damage. About this feeling of total isolation, Roth recalls: "I didn't know another person in the world to whom this had happened. Absurd as it sounds, I had come off one of those trains, one among 10,000, but had been too young to take in, or to remember later, that there were others who had literally been in the same boat. I had no idea until about 1988 that there were 10,000 of us."²² A sentence from Ruth David's memoir highlights this same isolating effect: "I was confused. One of my suitcases was with me, the other larger one had vanished. Suddenly I saw it standing on a platform, looking as forlorn as I felt."²³ This sense of forlornness is a returning motif in all former Kinder's memoirs.

The youngest of these refugees belong to what Susan Rubin Suleiman calls the "1.5-generation," or "child survivors of the Holocaust, too young to have had an adult understanding of what was happening to them, but old enough to have been there during the Nazi persecution of Jews."²⁴ The world around the child refugees did not pay much attention to their psychic needs and was not very sensitive about their conflicted identities. The enculturation process was hard, and its success required the victims to dismiss their traumatic upheaval. Curiously, the subtitle of Roth's memoir is *A Child's Flight from the Holocaust* (which is almost identical to the subtitle used by Ruth David, *A Young Girl's Flight from the Holocaust*). It is interesting that both Roth and David use the word "flight" rather than, say, "rescue" or "escape," which are more frequently assumed to relate to war. "Flight" brings to mind the idea of "flight of imagination," the "flights of fantasy" of imaginative children. We could perhaps read this "flight" as the incapacity to face the traumatic past, the need to "look away" from it, that has characterized the Kinder, who felt that their luck somehow stripped them of the right to be counted among the victims and feared that any such claim to victimhood might be taken as an act of ungratefulness by the country that had harbored them. This state of denial may in part be imputable to the host country's unacknowledged vein of antisemitism. The resistance to memorialize the Shoah in Great Britain indicates the persistence of an old enmity.²⁵ "I was so busy trying to pretend to be British and normal," Roth remembers, "that I couldn't think of Jewishness and refugeedom at the same time." Eventually, she "grew to love the British in spite of everything,"²⁶ and this feeling of love,

gratitude, and belonging is shared by other Kinder alongside an awareness that although they had become British, they never succeeded in becoming English.

The Kindertransport chapter is, like all aspects of this atrocious historical epoch, uniquely tragic from a number of perspectives. The rescue operation itself, the first of its kind, was certainly a grand humanitarian act and an extraordinary testament to national and personal resistance to barbarianism. Though the movement was of course a success—the children were saved, their lives and futures ensured—this triumph ought to remain permanently shrouded in mourning because, as Sue Vice points out, the Kindertransport stories are fundamentally about “the trauma of transplantation rather than the success of rescue.”²⁷ The experience of these children was neither one of traditional emigration nor of adoption. They were exiled refugees, and they had not been abandoned by their biological mothers and fathers or orphaned (yet). Often these Jewish children came from richer, more sophisticated and progressive milieus than those of their new families in England. And not only was British culture and society different from Germany’s, but the Jewish culture of the children—no matter how assimilated and secular their backgrounds—created a further degree of differentiation between what the refugees were leaving behind and the new circumstances they encountered. “Despite the best intentions of host families and groups,” Phyllis Lassner rightly points out, “because the rescue was predicated on a temporary stay and because of cultural mismatches, misperceptions, and misunderstandings, the establishment of emotionally intimate and secure relations was rare.”²⁸ The quality of the relations the Kinder established with the host families, which many times became their adoptive ones, varies greatly from case to case.

As mentioned earlier, Britain’s traditional attitudes toward Otherness in general, and the long-standing English antipathy toward the Jews in particular, contributed to certain difficulties in relating to and accepting these foreigners. The English-Jewish relationship was an old one and had gone awry as early as 1290, when England expelled all its Jews until Oliver Cromwell saw the economic advantages of inviting them back over three centuries later. “Britain was a tolerant society and was thus opposed to the intolerance of anti-Semitism,” Tony Kushner explains. “The Jew, in return for his total acceptance in Britain, would remove any distinctiveness. The corollary of this, however, was that if anti-Semitism persisted after emancipation then it was the Jew’s own responsibility.”²⁹ Jews and liberals in Britain understood antisemitism as a backlash resulting from the widespread socioeconomic conditions of the lower classes: if you cure poverty and ignorance, you cure antisemitism was the naïve adage of the era. However, as Richard Bolchover writes, it turned out that “educating the

Jews against anti-semitism . . . was an easier task than educating the Gentiles.”³⁰ To the English mind, as Kushner penetratingly points out, what was objectionable about Germany’s attitude toward the Jews during the Nazi era was not the fundamental racism but the inelegant character and disproportionate magnitude of its expression—that is, the barbaric riots and uncivilized hooliganism. “Nazi anti-Semitism,” Kushner argues, “remained a mystery to many in Britain because it could not be justified in terms of a response to Jewish behavior. Social ostracism and ‘polite’ discrimination were acceptable but mass murder could not be rationalized.”³¹ To the liberal, civilized Englishman, barbarianism was intolerable, even if directed against the Jews. In the years between the two world wars, there appeared on the prestigious pages of the *Times* a series of articles on the theme of “Alien London.” One of them, from November 27, 1924, describes the Jews in these terms: “They stand aloof—not always without a touch of oriental arrogance . . . They look upon us with suspicion and a certain contempt . . . These people remain an alien element in our land.”³²

The idea of the tolerated foreigner as an indebted subject who ought to completely merge with the majority society in order to be accepted or else risk rejection (and thus be responsible for his own fate) was as much alive in the nineteenth century as it was in the mid-twentieth. In fact, as Bolchover suggests, the infamous cowardly behavior of a large section of Anglo-Jewry vis-à-vis their European coreligionists during the Nazi era can be attributed precisely to the persistence (and fear) of Judeophobia in England.³³ Many Anglo-Jews had prioritized “English blending” over “Jewish identification” and had been unwilling to open their doors to refugees. On this topic, Roth rhetorically asks, “where were the Jewish homes, and most particularly the Orthodox Jewish homes, when they were needed in 1939? Some Orthodox children lost their lives because such homes were in short supply, and their religious leaders refused to compromise with any other kind of home . . . It was even felt by some Jewish leaders that these Kindertransports should not be encouraged, as they might provoke more anti-Semitism.” Roth too fell victim to the dynamics of self-loathing generated by such a homogeneity-obsessed society. “I didn’t admit my Jewishness or foreignness to any new acquaintance,” Roth remembers of her postwar life, “and many of my friends didn’t know about it till years later, because I feared being thought of as dirty and somehow bad, being ‘different’ or pitied.”³⁴ Of those mid-century years in England, Roth recalls that “the British were very anti-Semitic, in the sense that they regarded Jews as somehow dirty. All foreigners were funny, both ha-ha and peculiar funny, but the Jews were beyond funny . . . The subject of Jews was almost taboo in society and in the newspapers. The implication was that they had almost brought all their troubles upon themselves.” Although she never

encountered any hatred or ill treatment in her relationship with local children, apparently adults had no qualms about expressing their displeasure to her. This was the case with the “openly anti-Semitic” family (“uneducated snobs,” Roth calls them) of Arthur Campbell, Doris’s husband: “When I got married, one of them asked me, ‘Does his family mind that you are Jewish?’”³⁵

Nowadays, a lot has changed. European countries are dealing with utterly metamorphosed societies, racial and ethnic mosaics that have made these countries begin to rethink their conception of nation. This has in some sense cracked the monolithic, national veneer behind which the Jews (the oldest permanent minority in Europe) had been forced to hide for over two thousand years. As Beate Neumeier remarks, “normative Englishness has only recently given way to an acknowledgement of the plurivocality of Britain as a multicultural society.”³⁶ This changed and improved climate (Europe’s newfound willingness to deal with its past and responsibilities) is reflected in the proliferation of memorials, plaques, statues, museums, and other Shoah-related public displays, including the recent Kindertransport monuments. These monumentalizations and memorializations signal the important revision each country has been forced to undergo vis-à-vis its own imbrication and responsibility in the genocide of the Jews during World War II. One particularly significant example is the permanent national Holocaust Exhibition in London, opened by Queen Elizabeth II in 2000 as the latest addition to the prestigious Imperial War Museum (founded in 1917). It was a request from the Imperial Museum that Milena Roth donate a relic of her past as a child refugee in England that gave her the courage to view her private, silenced past as something she might share publicly, something that others might now, at last, want and need to hear. Roth found a few relics to spare, but she also sat down to write her memoir.

IN THE HANDS OF WOMEN : CONTEXT, MEANING, AND MEANS OF THE KINDERTRANSPORT STORIES

The most powerful parts of Roth’s memoir are the letters written in English by Anna Rothová to her friend in England, Doris Campbell.³⁷ The two had met in 1930 at the International Girls Guides Jamboree in England, to which Anna, then still young and single, had proudly participated as the Czech “ambassador” and leader of her nation’s Brownies and Guides troop. Anna established very strong ties with Doris and four other English girls from the Midlands on this occasion. Later, these five women were instrumental in helping to save her child and looking after Milena when Anna could no longer do so herself.

Anna was very good at keeping up the correspondence with her girlfriends across the Channel, a correspondence that also gave her the much-welcomed

chance to practice her English. The letters to Doris Campbell are initially light-hearted, cheerful, and full of domestic and pedestrian details about weather, health, family matters, engagements, marriages, and holiday planning. In one, she joyously communicates the birth of her first (and only) child, Milena. The first part of Roth's memoir is composed of these letters; the second half of the book is a reflection on her experience as a transplant in a foreign culture who is aware of the tragedy of which she had been a victim and yet who denies herself—and is denied by the surrounding world—the right to fully mourn. This testimonial memoir enjoys the hindsight perspective of the adult survivor daughter but also speaks in the direct voice of a victim: the murdered mother. By including the letters penned by her mother, Roth allows her to tell at least part of her story in the first person. In this case, the daughter's task is not only to remember her own past but to fill in the blanks of her mother's past as well, to speak for her when the victim's voice ceases. After a final, excruciating missive written by her mother before being deported to Theresienstadt, the daughter takes up the story. Though it purports to tell Roth's own story of Holocaust survival, this unusual memoir is in fact the chronicle of a mother's fight to save her daughter at all costs, as well as an entire family's story of victimhood.

Roth's story presents us with a double-motherhood scenario again. But unlike Kofman's experience with two mothers, this time the daughter's loyalty and attachment to the biological mother remains unchallenged, and her case does not reproduce the old "bad mother supplants good mother" archetypal story. Roth's biological mother is not supplanted in the daughter's affections, and the daughter does not fall under the spell of the new mother. Despite the heroic role played by Doris Campbell in saving Milena, the relationship between the adoptive mother and her accidental daughter remains cold, distant, and impersonal, much like Doris's relationship with her own children—one of whom lost his life defending England in the war. Doris turns out to be a complex female figure, though one with behavioral traits not at all rare for her times. She was quite a typical representative of her class except, it must not be forgotten, that few of her peers voluntarily offered their money, houses, and lives to save other people's children, as she did. Doris belonged to that Anglo-Saxon brand of Puritanism that sometimes jarringly combines good samaritanism with a heart of stone; strict vigilance with a complete lack of interest in people or world affairs; an extreme attention to society's demands with an extreme protectiveness of private boundaries; and, of course, an obsession with appearances with a sense of ethical obligation deriving from one's class.

Roth describes her new guardian thusly: "Doris was a big dominating figure, tall, not thin, with a loud voice, very frightening to me."³⁸ She adds:

Interaction with her was a one-way street. She talked; others listened and responded to orders. We never did have a conversation in all the years I knew her. She didn't listen, and she never asked questions except about domestic tasks done or not done. I had complete privacy in my head. She never asked me what I had done at school or anywhere else. She had no idea who my friends were. I was a nuisance, even though she had invited me and insisted on keeping me when she knew my parents couldn't reach England . . . She taught me to massage her back, place damp cloths on her head for her migraine, and hold her head when she was sick. And of course I had many domestic tasks, was a good listener, and didn't argue. Her highest compliment was, occasionally, that I had been "useful."

She preferred animals to people and told this to the world, and particularly to me. "Don't you dare ill treat my animals!" . . . "We chose to have them. You were pushed onto us." . . . She said it after we'd learned the fate of my parents.³⁹

Such cruelty on the part of the foster parents or hostel matrons was none too rare, but these instances must be partially chalked up to that era's widespread inadequacy in dealing with children and to English child-rearing methods of the day, which were warped by strict, maiming, and often counterintuitive Victorian principles. Roth describes the climate of her English home as follows: "I could feel no fun or laughter in the home; the atmosphere made me tiptoe. Nobody seemed to relax or do anything together, especially not talk. It was a house, not a home."⁴⁰ This coldness was perhaps influenced by the specific brand of British antisemitism, which was, as many have argued, a paradoxical product of British liberal culture.⁴¹ As is stressed often in the memoirs of the Kinder, no one asked them anything: these strangers were not seen and were indeed not supposed to be seen. Kushner observes: "There was essentially no educational, cultural or artistic attempt to confront the subject" of the extermination of the Jews in the immediate aftermath of the war, and this "was not simply a case of benign, naïve ignorance, but was part of the informal workings of liberal ideology under the added restraints of an exclusive Englishness. With regard to the Holocaust and pre- (and post-) 1945 British racisms, there has been a conscious desire to remember to forget—a process achieved largely in a voluntary and discreet manner . . . For example, the few Holocaust survivors who were allowed into Britain after the war were told in no uncertain terms to shut up about their particular, un-English experiences."⁴² The British had tacitly agreed to save 10,000 Jewish children as long as no one had to confront their messy pasts. Roth became very close to Jane, Doris and Arthur's daughter, yet "despite our

longstanding friendship, I've never talked to her about my own family. I feel she would share the general attitude that looking back is futile and insulting, and she's never asked me any questions whatsoever. It's as if my whole background never existed. It was unimportant."⁴³

Although grateful for her good fate, Roth caustically writes that Doris "had continued with the mental annihilation where Hitler finished with the physical." Doris's cousin confirms the accuracy of Roth's sense of uneasiness by telling her (many years later) that whenever her name was mentioned, everybody in the family would always add a sympathetic "That poor little Milena, [Doris has] turned her into a servant." More explicitly, another relative of the Campbells tells Roth that Doris "wanted to break you." This particular relative, Doris's sister Kathleen, a missionary, had once tried to convert Milena to Christianity: "She was benevolent, though there was that strange sadistic undertow, the punishing Victorianism, with which they'd all been brought up . . . For instance, when Kathleen explained to me that her sister had wanted to break me, she said it with a certain relish, as if breaking people was quite an acceptable and recognized way of exerting power. Also, quite oblivious to the hurt it might cause, she quoted her mother as saying of me, 'We don't know where she came from'."⁴⁴ Implicitly, Roth's memoir is an attempt to answer this question: where did she come from?

FOREGROUNDING ROOTS

In the 1920s and 1930s Czechoslovakia was an independent republic, and its founder, Tomáš Masaryk, was an enlightened, philosemitic, feminist, and progressive president. After centuries of subjugation to the Austro-Hungarian Empire, after World War I the country's self-respect and economy were on the rise. Regrettably, though, there were unresolved ethnic tensions, as the Slavs (mostly peasants and members of other lower classes) bitterly resented the ethnic Germans (mostly members of the urban upper middle class). The German-speaking minority was not ashamed to flaunt its sense of intellectual and financial superiority in the face of the Slavic majority. Squeezed between the two factions was a sizable Jewish minority that was divided into two subgroups: Jews of Germanic origin who spoke German but felt profoundly connected to the history and political interests of Czechoslovakia (Franz Kafka's family, for instance); and Jews who spoke Czech and had severed all bonds with the Prussian or Austrian world of their forebears.⁴⁵ The only thing on which the first two groups, Christian Slavs and Germans, could agree was their common dislike of the third group, the Jews, regardless of which language or customs the latter adopted.

It is hard to detect traces of the Steins' or Roths' Jewish affiliations in Anna's letters to Doris from before 1938, partly because of the outsize role Christmas plays in the correspondence. Anna and Doris sent each other thoughtful cards and Christmas presents every year, and Anna explains in detail the traditional ways in which the holiday is celebrated by the Czechs (and, one can deduce, by her family as well). "You asked me about Xmas," we read in a letter from March 4, 1932: "Yes, we too have turkey, and always fish . . . We haven't got any Xmas pudding, (but Xmas cakes) . . . in most of the families there is a Christmas tree, i.e. a fir tree lovely trimmed with cakes, glittering things and candles . . . We haven't got holly in our country at all, (it does not grow here), and the custom with mistletoe we have adopted from England I think." The following year another happy letter announces: "I have got your present and dutifully have opened it at Xmas Eve (which is the greatest moment of the whole Xmas time in our country.) . . . I must confess that in the first moment I was not quite sure about the ruffles you sent me, what they were for. My husband suggested they might be muffs for the baby. But later all the family came for supper, (Xmas Eve they were all my guests), so we determined with my sisters and sister in law that they were ruffles, so used them for this purpose, and they were perfect for this. So I hope we were right." References to nonkosher foods and more Christmas details abound: "The St Nicholas brought Milena lovely toys to play with" and "for Xmas we shall have a Xmas tree nicely trimmed with all kinds of glittering and sweet things on it."⁴⁶ I want to call attention to the fact that these descriptions are characterized by an overabundance of material things, which in turn signals, as I will show later, Anna's almost overactive consumerism. Specific references to Judaism or Jewish identity, however, remain conspicuously rare. Clearly, Doris was not enquiring about Jewish celebrations, and Anna was not volunteering details that might be unwelcome or alienating. In a letter from 1931, Anna sends photos of her civil wedding ceremony and tells Doris about her new husband, specifying that "he is Jewish as I am." The issue comes up again four years later, around another Christmas time: "We shall have a Xmas tree although we are Jews, and don't keep of course religiously the habits of this feast, but it is such a joy for the children to have a Christmas tree and presents under it."⁴⁷ This attitude was predominant in Europe among assimilated Jewish families living in urban settings: Jews in Prague, Vienna, and Berlin adopted the Christmas festivities as a way to bask in a warm, familial atmosphere. Devoid of its spiritual and theological content, a secularized version of Christmas allowed assimilated Jews to be like their neighbors without compromising their own identities as Jews. Sharing in the Christmas celebrations—more specifically, sharing in the holiday's most pagan and consumerist aspects—was a sign of

Jewish willingness to partake in the cyclical rhythms of the Christian world that had only recently allowed them to join in other aspects of civic life. In a way, such celebration can be seen as a token of gratitude on the part of the more secular Jews to the society that had emancipated them. As David writes in her *Kindertransport* memoir, “my grandmother had belonged to a society in which Jews were integrated and unafraid. They felt they belonged to a cultured, civilized nation, and were proud to be part of it. Indeed many Jews were scarcely aware of their Judaism.”⁴⁸

Once again, acting like everybody else was not only the condition tacitly enforced by society but also the tactic that Jews thought to be most effective in preventing the recurrence of old conflicts with the outside world. In an uncannily circular way, Anna Rothová’s letters reflect the same uncomfortable self-consciousness about one’s Jewishness that her daughter would experience many years later while living in a free, civilized, culturally advanced, and post-Shoah England. After the French Revolution, it had been considered bad taste in Europe to make a show of one’s identity when this identity was other than the normative one; during a large portion of the postwar era, Europeans held steadfast to this tradition. Eventually, almost nothing will remain of Roth’s ethnic background. A “vestigial Jew,” as she calls herself, Roth analyzes her detachment from Judaism in these terms: “I’ve lived among Christians for the major part of my life and feel more alien among practicing Jews than among foreigners of any kind.”⁴⁹

As the situation for the Jews on the Continent worsened considerably, the letters between Anna and Doris include more serious topics, which makes it impossible for either of them to avoid the uncomfortable subject of Anna’s Jewishness. “Thank you very much indeed for your kind words,” Anna writes on December 18, 1938 (probably in response to sympathy and worry expressed by her English friend after hearing about Germany’s claims to the Sudetenland): “I do hope that the time will not be so bad . . . Maybe that you still remember my being of Jewish confession which is a chapter for itself in Central Europe.”⁵⁰ Despite the fact that news of *Kristallnacht* had occupied the entire Western world for weeks, Anna’s letter indicates that Doris does not make the connection between her Czech friend’s Jewishness and the danger Nazism held for her. And despite the turmoil that brings Anna’s Jewishness to the fore, Doris keeps sending Christmas cards to her friend year after year, further indicating her detached stance toward the Jewish aspect of her friend’s identity.

Anna’s letters to Doris become more and more desperate as the noose around the neck of Central and Eastern European Jews tightened and Anna frantically tried to save her daughter, herself, her sister, and her husband by securing all of

the adults jobs in England, along with life-saving exit visas. Doris understood the urgency and helped her friend. The Kindertransport rescue operation would not have been as successful as it was without the involvement at all levels of women like Doris. Sybil Oldfield pays tribute to several key figures behind the rescue operation, identifying the centrality of women's role in this movement. Obviously, in a world where so few women held a position of even slight influence, the political and financial backing of a group of influential Englishmen was essential for the start of the enterprise. The stockbroker Otto Schiff, the banking mogul Lionel de Rothschild, the Member of Parliament Philip Noel-Baker, Sir Samuel Hoare, Lord Baldwin, Sir Wyndham Deedes, and Viscount Samuel were among the most notable men who used their political leverage to influence the British government's position on refugees and who initially provided the much-needed financial backing for the rescue operation. But, as Oldfield points out, "it was in the very nature of this particular project, focusing on the care of children and teenagers, that it would be *women* who would have to carry the essential responsibility in ensuring day-to-day success over ten years, or in certain cases bear the responsibility for failure."⁵¹ Oldfield focuses on the indispensable role women played at all levels of the bureaucratic hierarchy to ensure the success of the transports. It is mostly thanks to the former refugee children's testimonies, however, that we can form a more intimate portrait of the individual women involved. The history of the Kindertransport revolves around children, and the traditional association between children and women makes it almost natural that the entire operation would be marked by the presence and involvement of women—biological and foster mothers, their female friends, nurses, schoolteachers, hostel matrons, and so on. These women played an enormous role in the everyday lives of the children, as well as in the decision making and implementation of the rescue operation. Reading Kindertransport memoirs and listening to the testimonies, one gets the impression that fathers were more reluctant to emigrate or to let their children—especially their daughters—travel alone, while mothers took an active role in organizing their children's departure. "[Father] too knew that we must emigrate," writes David in recalling the swelling antisemitism in the Germany of her childhood, "but he felt daunted by the enormity of such an undertaking. He knew no language but German, he had spent most of his working life on one project, the factory [in remote Fränkisch-Crumbach]. It was Mother who saw the urgency more clearly and who, 14 years younger than her husband, was more prepared to face a new and probably very hard life."⁵² Eventually, it was David's mother who got a place for her on the Kindertransport, while both mother and father were murdered at Auschwitz after a long series of deportations from camp to camp. The father

of another Kind, Ursula Rosenfeld, was beaten to death in Buchenwald, where he had been imprisoned in 1938 with hundreds of Jewish men and boys after *Kristallnacht*. Therefore, Ursula's escape was organized by her mother, who accompanied her to the train station the day she left for England. The last glimpse she had of her mother is an image Ursula would have gladly done without: "it was terrifying, . . . [her] contorted face, full of agony, very sad."⁵³

There are exceptions, of course, to this tendency for mothers to take the lead, such as the case of Miriam Darvas. Darvas's father was an intellectual, a journalist in Berlin, a debunker of Nazi propaganda, and he was very much aware of the dangers of the situation. He was quick to realize that Jews had to get out of Europe as speedily as possible.⁵⁴ By and large, however, it appears that fathers had a particularly hard time accepting a separation from their children, probably because, consciously or unconsciously, this was also an acceptance of their incapacity to protect their own family. To send a child away was to delegate the paternal role to others. It is easy to imagine how reluctant a father would be to make so emotional a break. I suspect that viewers of the documentary *Into the Arms of Strangers* will find it as hard as I did to forget the tragic story of Lori Cahn. The only daughter of adoring parents, Lori boarded one of the lifesaving Kindertransports along with dozens of other children. As the train was leaving the station, Lori leaned out of the window to take the hand of her father who, running after the train, desperately called out, "I don't want you to go!" Locking hands, the father pulled the girl out of the large train window. Lori landed on the platform, "devastated," as she recalls, but her father "was in seventh heaven [because] he had his *puppele*, his little girl, back." As a result, Lori spent the war not in England but in Auschwitz, where she was sent with her parents—who didn't return.

In England it was often the lady of the house who took the lead in helping the refugee children. These women read or heard about the humanitarian emergency in Europe, mobilized themselves, convinced their husbands, and completed the necessary paperwork to apply as foster families. It is sadly true that not all rescuers had the noblest of intentions in inviting young Jewish girls into their homes; some English families hoped to turn the refugees into cheap (because they received no wages) domestic servants.⁵⁵ Nevertheless, the positive stories outnumber the negative ones, and in any case, one cannot ignore the involvement of women in the rescue. *Lifesaving Letters* testifies not only to the resourcefulness and ingenuity of Anna Rothová but also to the activities of the network of women that made Roth's rescue possible. Even if this account can be taken as only a partial reflection of what must have been going on in thousands of other households—both the Jewish ones in Europe and the rescuers'

in England—it nevertheless becomes apparent that (often unheralded) female volunteers were the engine behind the Kindertransport's success.

In Roth's family, all plans to obtain the exit visas were clearly made by Anna, not by her husband, for whom she is also responsible. "Only with my husband I have great sorrows," she confesses to Doris, adding: "Would you by any chance know of some kind of post in business or factory . . . I really have no idea up to now what to do with him." Anna mentions in several letters that, were she single, she would be able to get to England, but that she will not leave her husband behind.⁵⁶ Of her husband, Emil, there exists only one written memento: a short, loving note to his daughter in 1940 that was attached to one of his wife's many letters. Emil resisted his wife's plan to send his daughter abroad, only reluctantly consenting in June 1939—almost too late.

In the meantime, Doris was appealing to aristocratic and well-connected families in an attempt to rescue the Roths and their closest relatives and find jobs for the adults. This attempt is also documented in a separate bunch of letters that Milena Roth inherited from her adoptive mother. As Anna, Doris, Elsie (another former Girl Guide from England), and other women were exploring all paths and exploiting all of their social connections for a solution, the responses they got were "benevolent if not actively helpful." One notable exception among the generally positive responses to Doris's appeal came from a certain Mr. I. T. In 1939 Doris had the idea of calling in a favor she had done for a family three years earlier. She had arranged for the Campbells to host this family's daughter, Ela, in their home for an extended holiday period. Roth publishes the letter Doris received in 1936 from Ela's mother (Mrs. H. T.), which is full of gratitude and expresses her joy in knowing that her daughter is happy and safe with these good people: "It certainly is most kind of you to come to the rescue so promptly and I can never thank you enough for having accepted Ela into your home."⁵⁷ The choice of the word "rescue" is painfully ironic in hindsight, since only a few years later, Ela's parents have apparently forgotten their gratitude when faced with a situation in which a child actually needed rescue. Doris had contacted Mr. I. T. (Ela's father) to ask him for help in speeding the Roths' escape. It seems that Mr. I. T. worked in some administrative post (at an embassy or consulate), and that he was probably Czech; Doris pleaded with him for assistance in getting exit visas for the Roths. I will let his hostile response speak for itself:

Dear Mrs. Campbell,

I am afraid I can be of no help to your friend here in Prague . . . Whilst I fully appreciate your kindness and generosity in trying to help your Jewish friends, I should advise you not to get unduly worried: the Jews here are no

worth [sic] off then the rest of the nation. There is no Jew baiting and not likely to be [any]. Of course they are not a very brave race, and it's them who come squealing to the Legation, and they all want to leave the country . . . But apparently, to get sympathy nowadays you must be a Jew. The Czech Jews in particular are in no danger whatsoever . . . most of them have always been disloyal to the Republic . . .

I do not think you will be doing your country a very good service in the long run in taking all these people in. It's true they offer now to go to domestic service and work, but they won't stay there long . . . as the richest and most influential race in the world, [they] never do any manual work, but soon obtain control of commerce, finance, and all the more profitable trades . . . I certainly do not approve of the persecution in any form, and the brutal manner in which some policies are at present enforced in some parts of the world . . .

My daughter is still at boarding school in England as you know, and I have to thank you for all the kindness you have ever showed her . . . My job I expect will go west soon, and not being Jews, we have little hope of finding benefactors or refuge in your beautiful country.⁵⁸

Contrary to what this bureaucrat had written to Doris—who, to her great honor, not only ignored him but never mentioned his name again, Roth says—many Jews in Europe were prepared to accept any kind of menial jobs should they make it to England or America on an exit visa. “When not sitting in the waiting rooms of consulates and embassies,” Segal writes in her memoir, “everybody was going to the classes that had sprung up all over the city [Vienna]. Jewish professionals were scurrying to learn hand skills . . . My father . . . learned machine knitting and leatherwork . . . My mother learned large-quantity cooking. She took a course in massage, too.”⁵⁹ Anna Rothová herself, as if anticipating Mr. I. T.'s hostile reaction, had written to Doris explaining that “I can just as well, for a week or two, work for a smaller wage or for nothing. I shall be happy to find a home, and am no ‘grand lady’ who would be afraid of work or consider one work better than the other.” And the inaccuracy of Mr. I. T.'s slander about the Czech Jews' disloyalty toward their country is clear in an incident that has become one of the best-known Auschwitz anecdotes, of which we also read in a letter from Heda Kaufmanová, Anna's best friend, to Roth written in 1960: “One day, it was on March 7th, Ela [an old friend who was in Auschwitz with Anna Rothová] told me, in 1944 if I am not mistaken, the whole transport with which she [Anna] came from Terezin to Osvecim [Oświęcim/Auschwitz], was taken to the gas-room. They knew where they were going to. While they marched in, they

were all singing Kde Domov Muj, —‘Where is my home’—the Czech National Anthem.”⁶⁰

Despite the unpleasantness exhibited by figures like Mr. I. T., Roth’s book abounds with tales of women who were pivotal in providing help, advice, and sometimes even just moral support to Anna, Doris, and Milena: Mrs. Mathewson, Miss Wellington, Miss Wilson, Heda Kaufmanová (who eventually committed suicide), and the indefatigable Elsie, “who finally persuaded your parents,” Heda writes in her letter to Roth, “to send you abroad after the Nazi invasion. And she was pulling strings and moving mountains to get your parents abroad too.”⁶¹

MATERIAL MOTHERS

The material world enters Roth’s memoir with a force that is not found in other Shoah texts examined in this book. When we read the personal stories of refugee children who arrived in England, one of the elements that jumps out at us is the conspicuous presence in these survivors’ lives of things. This presence is not usual in memoirs of concentration camp survivors, whose experiences of complete dispossession seem to be reflected in their distance from the material world (apart from references to functional things such as food or clothing that made their survival possible). *Lifesaving Letters* allows us to consider the identity of women, the strength of female resistance to oppression, and the female technologies of memory making through the lens of the materiality of the surrounding world, particularly at a moment in history where, together with millions of people, every thing they had was also to be lost forever.

The Kinder were given objects by their parents to keep as souvenirs of their families, and their memoirs display a profound awareness of the relevance of these objects in their past and present lives. They are both objects of childhood (the authors’) and adulthood (their parents’), of survival and victimhood, of life and death. They are the children’s connection to a death they were destined for but did not experience.

Objects are not passive in the identity-making process. “Objects . . . participate in the formation of identities and the constitution of embodied subjectivities,” Beth Fowkes Tobin writes. She explains that “subjects can endow objects with subjectivity, and furthermore, objects can act with a kind of agency we tend to think should be reserved for human subjects.” They participate in the making of meaning and can become “a ‘mechanism’ or a ‘technology’ for producing specific identities and kinds of social interactions,” as anthropological scholars have recently argued.⁶² Not surprisingly, the colonization of the Kinder’s Jewish identities often began by confiscating the objects they had brought with them

from Europe. “Often, during the transformation of these suspicious exotics into ‘nice English girls and boys,’” Mona Körte points out, “the clothing from home ended up in the oven. Clothing always carries a high symbolic value in life as in narration.”⁶³ In the past two decades, scholars have begun to tackle the question of whether objects, and our relation to them, are gendered. For instance, the respected hobby of collecting, traditionally a male privilege, is antipodal to shopping, the unproductive (when not morally suspect) occupation of women. When women collect—and, historically, they have—they usurp an important power of the patriarchal and capitalist vision in which men are owners and women are consumers. Paradoxically, if women’s consumerism is culturally seen as (moral) weakness, it has also assumed an incredible relevance in the capitalist world since the middle of the nineteenth century—a world that thrives on the consumeristic drives of women and, indeed, largely caters to those desires. Culturally, women are thus condemned for something that, economically, they can be exploited for. Yet the capitalist economic apparatus is mostly in the hands of men. In the late nineteenth century, shopping had become an activity central to the construction of the identity of the urban woman.⁶⁴ I intend to show how both Anna and Doris reflect this new urban, empowered, materialist identity.

I will consider three ways in which the object functions in Roth’s text. First, Anna and Doris used their objects to organize the material world around them. Their possessions thus allowed their identities (national, ethnic, and maternal) to emerge. Second, objects are the palpable repositories of memory through which Roth connects to both mothers and works through her Shoah trauma. What I call “memory objects” (*objets de mémoire*, to borrow and build on the French historian Pierre Nora’s idea of “sites of memory,” *lieux de mémoire*) are of supreme importance in the Kindertransport stories.⁶⁵ Third, it is through objects that we reconstruct history and form a collective memory of the past. To state the obvious, museums cannot display people, only their things. Therefore, in a museum’s retelling of the phases and technologies of the Holocaust, objects are vital—so vital, in fact, that they are organized by museum curators in specific, well-studied ways in order to tell more than just their objective and immediate story and become symbols of a larger, cumulative history. For example, the collection of shoes at the museum installation in Auschwitz—some improvised out of the simplest materials, some brand-new, others patched up or soleless, some unpaired heaped together with girls’ and baby shoes—tells the story of millions, of the guilt of millions, of the silence of millions, and of the millions silenced. Often, the objects displayed in such museums were found after the liberation and were bought or received from private collectors or donors. Museums are collections of things on a grand scale, and they under-

line the connection, obviously not a superficial one, between our culture and objects. From the private, intimate world of the house to the public world of museum exhibits, our history is full of and told by the things we leave behind.

Objects are links to a disappeared past, and we read and re-collect that past through its objects. Our museum culture is perhaps the best proof of the collective use of objects we have adopted in order to both remember and construct anew our national or international pasts. Once donated to a museum, the objects salvaged from destruction or the survivors' heirlooms become part of a collection (and a collective one at that). It is worth remembering that museums' collecting practices are part of a specifically masculine way of constructing and maintaining history born out of the nineteenth century's love of display, accumulation, and ownership. A traditional historical museum is a collection of objects, and it is important to keep in mind, as Constance Classen and David Howes point out, that "collecting is a form of conquest and collected artifacts are material signs of victory over their former owners and places of origin."⁶⁶ Collecting is colonial, part of an imperialistic project. Given that Hitler's project was also imperialistic, collecting (through looting, dispossessing, hoarding, otherwise improperly acquiring, amassing, and relocating) was one of the Nazi regime's prominent (and destructive) features. In fact, ironically, as Jeffrey Feldman reminds us, our Holocaust museums today owe their mountains of human artifacts to the Nazis' hoarding practices.⁶⁷ The Nazis did not destroy their victims' belongings because they were supposed to be sent to the motherland for redistribution among the German population (victims' clothes and shoes), for national or private cultural consumption (looted art), or for recycling (victims' hair, prosthetic limbs, metal braces, gold teeth, and so forth). Interestingly, the perpetrators planned to leave no trace of their crime. The idea was that after finishing their ethnic cleansing, they would tidy up the mess that had temporarily arisen from the industrial elimination of millions of people, and everything would return to a sanitized Germanic order. Instead, history thwarted Hitler's imperialist utopia, and, contrary to his plans, the traces of the disaster remained visible everywhere. In fact, traces were all that was left behind.

In the remainder of this chapter, I propose that we follow the path of these objects of Shoah memory from their domestic incarnation, when they resided in the hands of their victimized owners, to their universalization in the collective space of the museums, where the Kindertransport's traces are now amassed, categorized, displayed, and explained. By asking what happens to these traces once they are translated from the private to the public sphere, I seek to answer the question of why the Kindertransport has stimulated the collective imaginary less than other aspects of the Holocaust drama.

ANNA

Roth's memory of packing with her mother before leaving for England captures some important details of her experience:

I perfectly remember us packing two suitcases together. My mother filled one with all the family linens—many . . . were embroidered with her maiden initials, A.S.—and the lace tablecloths made by her mother. She also packed the dark-red silk with the cream-colored bird and my hand-embroidered Czech peasant outfit in dark lovely colors, with its many petticoats, puffed sleeves, and richly embroidered apron and headband. There was a doll in a matching outfit. Last but not least, she included her two diaries, written in Czech, which she had started when I was born, describing every bit of my progress until I was four. My own suitcase was filled with clothes, books, toys. I can see us both bent over the suitcases on the floor at the dining end of our living room. We are discussing what I should take. I see myself moving my arms and talking, but I don't know what I said. I know I was left with the uneasy feeling that I had somehow made the wrong choices. As to what I felt, it's a blank. I see myself like a moving doll who is dumb but wants to speak.⁶⁸

One of these suitcases, with Roth's exit number painted on it in green, became a Kindertransport artifact at the Imperial War Museum in London.

After losing her mother, Roth struggled to anchor herself emotionally in the surrounding world, a world that turned colder and more distant after her departure from home and was incapable of giving her, as a child or an adult, the sense of warmth and safety she had briefly known in Prague with her parents. The presence of these objects, however, allow the daughter and mother to connect, albeit only in memory. Marianne Hirsch calls this kind of material remnants of the past "testimonial objects" and points out that they "carry memory traces from the past, to be sure, but they also embody the very process of its transmission."⁶⁹

Anna and Doris are also linked by their relationship to objects. As I have already noted, it is obvious from Anna's letters that the material world was extremely important for both women, regardless of the impending war and the destruction the future threatened for Anna. In a letter sent to another British Girl Guide, Mildred, Anna writes: "It is now quiet here, but things have got a new feature. A funny thing. The same object, and it has changed its feature, the same man [person] and he has changed his view to look at things."⁷⁰ She is referring to the shift in the political circumstances in the autumn of 1938, and she conceives of this shift in terms of how she views the objects around her. In trying to convey a picture of her life to Doris and her other friends, Anna

continuously refers to the material world: the things she buys or plans to buy, the loving memories of things she has seen during her stay in England and that she imagines her daughter will soon see, the burden of things that must be transferred from one place to another as the Roths move from Prague to the countryside and then back to Prague.

In late August 1939, just days before the war would destroy all hopes of escape, Anna was still frantically working on her and her husband's emigration. It is impossible to tell if she knew how slim their chances were and was merely trying to keep hope alive, but her letters express the faith that a "miracle" (as Anna refers to the possibility of securing an exit visa and joining their daughter in England) would happen.⁷¹ Between the lines, however, one senses a desperate panic and a loss of hope:

Tuesday 22nd August 1939

Dear Mrs Campbell,

I have been so glad to have got your very nice letter of the 17th, by which you have told me that you want to wait for me and that you apply for the double Permit . . . Thank you also for the snap[shot]s, and also very much for the plan and suggestions of what I have to take.

If only I could distinguish words like dresser, sideboard, cupboard, wardrobe, I should be glad . . . Well the main thing is, that you suggest me to bring a sideboard. Please could you tell me what it is for and how it looks like in England. Is it not something similar as the dresser? . . . And what is a dresser for? Where do you put food, flour, stores of marmalades etc? I have a small laundry room for it.

This I intend to bring, and if possible the piano, wireless, gramophone, and sewing machine. Two armchairs, table and small chairs . . . Have I well understood that in case I should not bring a bed for Milena, you would lend yours? Thank you very much indeed.⁷²

From these lines, it appears that Anna was trying to mitigate the terror of her present situation through the fantasy of preserving a middle-class lifestyle in England and the attendant material comforts. The concern over furniture and other such objects perhaps allowed her to avoid thinking about the threat of losing everything (including life), which loomed large. The original of this letter is reproduced in Roth's book, and it even includes a drawing Anna made of the cabinet she would have liked to bring but for which she lacked a word in English; therefore, she drew a picture in the letter to show it to Doris. Anna had asked her friend to give her a specific description of the lodgings she and her husband (who would have been employed as a gardener at the Campbells'

home) were to occupy. This allowed her to fantasize about furnishing it and making it cozy for her family. Through this fantasy, Anna was able to hold onto her role of mother and wife and project herself into a future of normalcy.

Both mothers highlight a very specific and feminine relationship to objects and consumption, one that somewhat clarifies how Anna and Doris could have become friends in the first place. The pleasure with which each talks and cares about the things they owned or wished to acquire expresses a sense of empowerment and identity. Although these women were from different national, religious, linguistic, and social backgrounds, they were able to connect at such a deep level that one friend offered to protect the most prized possession of the other: her only daughter. Roth inherits the attachment her mother felt to her possessions, as shown in the former refugee's memories of the objects from Doris's world and those she acquires for herself as an adult—including her own first child. "Along with my intense fear of never having a family again," Roth confesses, "I had a huge fear of losing my first baby; this would be the very first flesh and blood after all the losses [in the Shoah]. The first true physical belonging."⁷³ This fear illustrates how for the victims of genocide, particularly female victims, to be violently separated from the material world violates their sense of self. And as the quote from Roth indicates, children are sensorial, physical, and material possessions in their own right. Having a child becomes for the survivors a form of reconstituting a lost attachment to the world and to life: "I had a tremendous craving for 'normality.' This to me meant being ordinary, having an actual, real family and a 'place' where I belonged without question," Roth writes: "To see others lead what looked like normal lives was really hard. They were so relaxed, so apparently complacent. They had a cushion of care under them,"⁷⁴ It is fitting that the metaphor Roth uses relies on a household object: a cushion. Like her mother in the letter quoted above, she can only fantasize about such objects of comfort.

The connection between memory and objects is subtle yet powerful; even the young Roth's preference for certain children's books is subconsciously determined by a link between their content and her personal attachment to them as objects of her past. For example, once in England, she becomes a great fan of Beatrix Potter's books, among which her favorite was *The Tailor of Gloucester* "for the beauty of the fabric and embroidery and the pathos of the story." The way in which she recalls the beauty of those books is tactile and reminiscent of the embroidered pillowcases her mother packed in her suitcase. It is perhaps because of her intensely tactile memories of her Prague past that Roth's first days in England were so unpleasant: "I embarked on a week of non-stop crying for my parents, day and night. Doris complained that it was very inconvenient

. . . I remember playing a primitive game of mud pies in the garden . . . About fifty years later, Doris told me that I had written to my mother saying that I was mad with longing for her. From then on, I was crippled with homesickness at every move. I could not stay away from my new home for even a week without getting ill with it.”⁷⁵ Given Doris’s cold personality, it is clear that “home” here must be understood as the physical house: its objects, rooms, and the human figures populating it. Since Roth had not found a home in the sentimental sense of the word (the loss of that kind of home in fact was the root of the child’s inconsolable suffering), she formed an intense attachment to the safety of the physical place. In its materiality, the new house filled the void left by the absence of her mother.

In Muriel Dimen’s study of the gendered character of “want” and “need,” we learn that these are inseparable in infancy but grow apart as one develops into adulthood: “Wanting, associated with adulthood, active will, and masculinity, is better than need, lined to infancy, passive dependency, and femininity . . . These patriarchal judgments fuse with unconscious forces and political exigencies to make need alarming.” Dimen brings up a paradox in our cultural representations of subjectivity: “The subject, ‘Man,’ desires and represents authorship, agency, and adulthood. But women are adults and as such are expected to be subjects, too. However, at the same time, through conjoined psychic and cultural splitting, women are also expected to be objects.”⁷⁶ However, this expected passivity clashes with the inducement of women (from the nineteenth century on) to be consumers in the capitalist world. On the one hand, women are encouraged to go out and acquire things that will increase their desirability for men; on the other hand, it is imperative to limit women’s desires so that they do not compete or interfere with what men wish themselves to obtain, including an education and a high-status profession. Both Doris and Anna are women caught in this paradoxical predicament. Both were denied opportunities, and many of the girls brought to England on the Kindertransports were denied (by historical and personal circumstances, but also by tacit societal restrictions on their desires) high-powered careers and the education necessary to pursue them. For instance, when Ruth David was taken under the protection of two English female teachers who saw her intellectual potential, she was made to feel ungrateful and disloyal by the hostel’s matrons for having such ambitions. Similarly, Doris’s emotional stinginess damaged Roth’s sense of self-worth and dampened her enthusiasm to pursue a “serious” profession. Roth declares: “I feel a sense of outrage for all those generations (including my own) that were denied proper and adequate schooling . . . This happened again and again in my own and many other families . . . [And when compet-

ing with boys for opportunities, g]irls, of course, were the second ones to get a chance.”⁷⁷

To be sure, material objects in Roth’s memoir signal both an abundance and a lack. Anna tries to make sure that her daughter will have enough clothes and possessions while in England so as to be comfortable and so as not to be a burden on the Campbells. “Milena will have sufficient dresses I think for this and the coming year,” she writes to Doris. What Anna most tragically cannot supply Roth with is the memory of who she is and where she comes from. For this she must rely on Doris, but the English woman will fail to comprehend the urgency of helping the girl remain connected to her roots and disregards Anna’s plea. Anna hopes to preserve Roth’s attachment to her Czech origins through books, important connective objects in their own right: “I want to send also Czech books with her things, Fairy Tales etc. because I should like her to have something of her own language near her and not to feel quite lonely. And then I should not like her to forget quite her mother tongue.”⁷⁸ However, her daughter, unassisted by Doris and the surrounding world, cannot fulfill her mother’s wish: she forgets Czech. Anna had tried to save not only her daughter’s life but also her daughter’s identity. Yet somehow Anna’s objects do succeed in keeping Milena attached to her roots and to her vanished mother. Furthermore, Anna’s choice of the Czech books demonstrates how objects—even nontextual ones—are intertwined with the mother tongue, both literally and symbolically, in Roth’s memoir. Together with her mother’s letters—a material cache—Roth has also inherited Anna’s two diaries, both written in Czech, a language she can no longer read.

Despite her limited contact with Doris over the years, Anna perfectly understood the risks of dealing with a peculiar woman like her. She was terrified that Doris would change her mind and put Roth out on the street, and thus her letters gingerly communicate her family’s dire situation without debasing herself. She reassures Doris that Roth will not be a problem, and that she and her husband will make excellent, loyal workers. She repeats to Doris several times that “if there would be again something you would like me to tell Milena, please do it . . . I can help you a little bit with this.”⁷⁹ In this way, Anna retains something of her role as mother, acting as her daughter’s protector by offering to mediate between her and her new foster parents, conciliating Doris so that her daughter won’t be suddenly rejected or made to suffer. It will take the young girl years to figure out empirically what Anna intuitively grasped about Doris’s tetchy character.

“She is a very good child with very much good will,” Anna writes Doris just days before Roth would reach England on the Transport. She continues:

And she always tries to do so as it is right. But of course as with all children one must know the right way to treat her. She can dress and undress herself, brush her teeth and wash herself. She is a very good eater and eats everything. She does not like fish. She loves milk. Raw fruit and raw carrots etc she is very much fond of. If you still would like something that would be good to teach her, please tell it to me. Her supper consists of bread and butter and milk, or bread and butter and an egg, boiled or fried, or some ham, and so on. I don't think she will much like porridge in the beginning . . . I think it will be easy to accustom her to the English time of meals and to the English food . . . But maybe in the beginning she would be hungry if she would get the last meal at 4.30 p.m. Although I know your tea is such a big meal that it would be perfectly sufficient.⁸⁰

But the tea wasn't sufficient, and Roth recalls her nighttime hunger pangs quite well, along with Doris's inflexibility in changing the meal schedule. In a significant chapter devoted to family correspondence among Jews just before and during the war, Alexandra Garbarini remarks that "writing was parents' only means of communicating specific information as well as affection and support to their children" once the young had been sent abroad, either to relatives across the Channel or in Palestine, on the Kindertransports, or through other means, and Garbarini incisively defines this as a form of "parenting at a distance."⁸¹ Anna presents a particularly interesting case of such parenting because she is indeed a mother trying to instruct another mother on how to bring her daughter up. She is kind of a translator in that she is trying to explain her daughter's nascent character to a stranger, while trying to prevent as many conflicts as she can that might be caused by the clash between the two cultures, the two languages, and the two maternal models that her young daughter will not be able to navigate, interpret, and negotiate for herself.

In spite of Anna's best efforts, Doris completely changes Roth's sense of self. Through Doris's reeducation, the good girl Roth's mother had made her believe she was becomes a bad girl, worthless and a nuisance to everybody. "Was I as good as my parents felt, or as bad as Doris said," Roth wonders. She continues: "I lived in an atmosphere that told me I was a bad person, a disgrace . . . Doris actually wished me to fail and forecast my downfall daily . . . 'You'll never pass your exams, you have no friends, you can't achieve anything, you have no money, have you?' Also, no one would ever want to marry me, what with my Jewish looks and my general badness . . . She never learned what my eventual profession was . . . To this day I don't know what my crime was, except that I existed."⁸²

In Prague, Roth had clearly been accustomed to a loving family atmosphere. Her mother's tenderness and sweetness come through quite clearly in her letters. "The other day we were busy with Daddy a whole afternoon sticking some of the snap[shot]s of you into an album," writes Anna to her daughter. "It will be a nice souvenir for you one day when you are grown up." In a footnote, Roth informs us that the photo album did not survive. Anna's own love for material things made her particularly sensitive to their broader importance. Perhaps she had already realized that whatever she could deliver safely to her daughter in England would one day be the only connection between them. She was right: in Roth's relationship with her absent mother, objects became connective and supportive tools for personal psychic survival, and they also made memory possible. Even the objects that disappeared or were never sent are present in their radical absence: a void that reflects their owners' loss. "I wanted to send Milena a parcel with the rest of the things," Anna writes Doris on August 12, 1939, "but now I shall wait and take them with me"⁸³ Neither the parcel nor the mother ever made it to Roth.

What does survive, however, is a final handwritten letter to her in Czech, signed with a moving "Tvoje mamínka" (your mommy), in which Anna anxiously imparts an important lesson to Roth about manners, diet, and, not surprisingly, objects. Now that her daughter is a disadvantaged immigrant child (and soon to be an orphan), she instructs Roth not to touch things that she is not allowed to have ("You can't have everything you see . . . You can listen to Jane playing [her violin] but you mustn't want it"), not to refuse foods that taste funny to her ("don't ever say, Milena, 'This is not good'"), and to "be good, so they continue to like you."⁸⁴

DORIS

Doris is an extraordinarily complex character, the only one of the three women at the center of this memoir who does not have a voice of her own. As previously mentioned, her role can be read through the archetypal motif of the bad mother replacing the good mother, but Roth twists this expected development into a more interesting and complex articulation. In this case, before her death, the good mother leaves her daughter (and us) an alternative interpretation of the Doris character, by whom she is to be replaced. Interestingly, her abdication is implicitly signaled in one of the later exchange of letters. Anna had always called her various English friends by their first names, except for her most important friend, whom she always addressed as "Dear Mrs. Campbell." That is, until September 9, 1939, six days after the United Kingdom declared war on Germany, when all borders were shut and all her hopes of escape shattered. Then,

finally, Anna addressed her friend in a new way: “My dear Doris.” This shift is enormously tragic, indicating as it does that Anna had a clear sense of what the changed circumstances meant for her and her family. Irrevocably trapped on the Continent, she could now talk to Doris, who was to become her daughter’s new mother, on an informal, equal footing—from woman to woman, friend to friend, mother to mother. Mrs. Campbell was no longer going to be her employer; Doris was going to be her daughter’s only hope. Thus by addressing the letter to “My dear Doris,” Anna acknowledges the women’s newfound intimacy and her own abdication.

Anna was Doris’s friend; she was very fond of her and obviously trusted her greatly. Thus Doris is perceived differently by the reader depending on whether we reconstruct her through Anna’s words or through Roth’s. Anna admired Doris and flattered her Englishness, drawing comparisons between her own Czech culture and Doris’s British world and enthusiastically commenting on all the things she had seen, tasted, and learned while she was in England. Anna, who loved the English language, also relied on Doris to teach her all the words she did not know or couldn’t find in her treasured Czech-English dictionary, which she sent to Roth once she realized she wouldn’t be able to make much use of it anymore, with the war having started and the dream of getting to England about to die with her. In contrast to her mother, who paints an encomiastic portrait of Doris, Roth makes fun of Doris’s ungenteel South London accent, which very clearly identifies her as a woman who has risen to a higher social standing from a lower one: “Doris did not speak or act like a lady.” Doris’s accent inspires Roth to imitate the more refined accents of her ladylike teachers, which, in turn, irritates Doris, who accuses Roth of not knowing her place. Roth takes this rebuke to mean one thing: “I should be servile in my attitude because my parents would have been her servants.”⁸⁵

Though this may paint an unflattering portrait of Doris, we should note that despite Doris’s self-serving plans to get good use out of her refugees if they were brought to safety to her house in England, Roth’s parents were in fact grateful for the chance of work, no matter how hard or lowly, if it meant being reunited with their daughter in a safe place. Aside from all practical considerations, Anna was eager to earn her keep because she had a highly developed sense of her own productivity. As a young girl, she had fought with her father over pursuing her studies, which was her dream, but being the oldest child, she had been chosen to take over the father’s business the way an oldest son would have. Anna “was the one that got the raw deal and was denied the higher education she desperately wanted.”⁸⁶ Her mother—Roth’s grandmother Marie—had also been taken out of school, in her case to learn the craft of dressmaking, while

her brother—Roth’s great-uncle—had been pushed onto the education track and became a doctor.

Anna and Doris had experienced the same gender imbalances in their youth; Doris was “another woman who had wanted an education and been denied it.” She had married up, and her in-laws did not let her forget it. However, she fully embraced her newly elevated status: “She had a lot of good clothes,” Roth recalls, “in spite of clothes rationing . . . Her shoes were fine leather, in elegant styles and with high heels. Doris loved clothes.” Growing up in England in the early 1900s, Doris had had own soul crushed, her own aspirations checked, by hearing the same disparaging comments that she would later use to criticize Roth. “Who do you think is going to look at *you*?” her parents would tell Doris, placing her in the same lowly, unwanted position she later would cruelly force Roth into.⁸⁷

Despite these various character flaws, Doris came into her own during the war. Roth’s and Kofman’s memoirs delineate interesting portraits of two women during World War II, Doris and Mémé, who were defiant and challenged the societal norms of their time. Mémé braved the terrible dangers associated with harboring Jews in occupied Paris; Doris opened her house to a child who could (and did) become a permanent burden against the advice of some acquaintances, such as the odious Mr. I. T., who warned her about taking up the cause of ungrateful refugees. Mémé had the audaciousness to have a lover; Doris was married, and although her husband had been most useful in securing a higher social status for her, his lethargic nature allowed her to take charge of the home and all practical matters. The war had reduced the people of Europe to an unprecedented state of need. Shortages and rations meant that the vast majority of people were subsisting on minimal resources. Yet Mémé and Doris lacked for nothing, and the people in their care were also better off than many of their compatriots. Kofman recalls: “Despite the rationing, and thanks to the black market and the packages of eggs and butter sent regularly by her cousin from Saint-Lô, she [Mémé] was able to prepare exquisite dishes, and I had never eaten so ‘well’” (RO/RL, 51). And Roth writes:

[Doris] was most unusually lucky in having a car of her own . . . She and Arthur gained all sorts of privileges for themselves, for petrol because he was a doctor and made house calls, and to produce food in the country . . . There were hens and ducks for eggs and meat, goats for milk, rabbits, honey, vegetables, and fruit. Even walnuts and chestnuts from their own trees, and sugar to give to the bees. But there was never enough to eat, especially for children. Not even for her own children . . . She managed to employ servants

even during the war . . . Sometimes we did have a chicken or a rabbit from the country. The majority of people at that time were slim [but Doris was always heavy].⁸⁸

The fact that Roth and the other children in the household were always hungry was not for lack of food but because of Doris's bad temper and harsh discipline, which contributed to that "atmosphere of sin and punishment [that] did seem to haunt their backgrounds" and makes Roth wonder if Doris "must have caught the tail end of the Victorian era."⁸⁹

And yet Doris's prosperity manifested itself in the home. Roth describes in detail the rooms of the house and the objects that she distinctly remembers in them. This material abundance paints an image of women who not only were heroes because of their ethical choices but who also subverted masculine visions of appropriate female behavior despite their conformity in areas like social snobbery and antisemitism. In a compelling essay, Andrea Adolph examines the intersection between austerity in times of national hardship and women's agency over desire. "Wanting," she writes, "is perceived as purposeful, willful, and masculine; the desire that arises from wartime scarcity pushes the limits that have traditionally defined women as needy, and thus as passive."⁹⁰ Britain at war asked of its citizens great sacrifices and self-restraint. On the one hand, it asked women to get out of the house and become active players in the war effort, as nurses, volunteers, makers of goods to be sent to the front, relief workers on the Continent at the war's end, and so on. But on the other hand, it emphasized a conception of femaleness that was quite archaic. The proper consuming habits that had been enforced on women for centuries became a central issue again during the war, when food shortages and rationing made women's self-sacrifice a matter of patriotism and national safety.⁹¹ Women were expected to put their desires on the back burner and make the good of others a higher priority. Adolph sees this call for self-denial, especially vis-à-vis food, as one explicitly aimed at women, since "the mouth and the vaginal cavity are linked as twin creatures of transgressive desire—one for gluttony, the other for lust—and this conflation of female desires results in a policing of what enters the mouth as a way to proactively defend the genitals, that biological center of femaleness . . . The ongoing equation of lust with hunger has resulted in what is now considered a normative, 'feminine' interest in self-denial—of food, of sex, of embodiment . . . The World War II era in Britain presented no exception to this rule; indeed the fact of scarcity only increased the ways in which women were figured as icons of self-denial."⁹²

At a time when women's practices of consumption were under particular

scrutiny, people like Doris and Mémé took the meaning of their affiliation (or loyalty) to the nation into their own hands and resignified it: they actively and ethically defied the enemy by defending those whom the Germans had decided to annihilate. This was their heroism and their way of honoring their nations. In this light, Mémé's act of defiance in particular becomes exemplary: her act was one of disloyalty to the nation in 1942, because Pétain's France was allied with the Germans in the genocidal project, but it became an act of true heroism in the Gaullist France of 1945. These heroic women helped Jews survive, and they also made sure to procure for themselves and those in their care the food and necessary comforts to live adequately, at least in the circumstances in which they found themselves—which speaks to their incredible resourcefulness, cleverness, and industriousness. In a paradoxical way, then, these women (to whom we can also add Anna, with her love for material goods) gave a subversive spin to the long-held idea of women as passive and idly consuming. Their consumption was itself an act of resistance, self-assertion, and activism in its most literal political sense: these were resistance women who reacted against a male-dominated totalitarianism and imperialism to which they independently responded by choosing their loyalties, saving Jews while not submitting to the widespread policing of desire that Adolph identifies during World War II. These women made themselves survive when history had set them first in line to die (the self-sacrificing mothers of nations at war)—together with their heroic sons and brothers, the nation's soldiers. It is important to remember that Doris had also given a son to the nation.

Anna and Doris both saw the material world as a canvas on which to create a representation of their identities. They defined themselves as middle class, independent, and self-supporting through their ownership, while they also inscribed themselves into history through heroic and self-sacrificing acts of resistance to domination, imperialism, and the genocidal fury of their time. This is also true of Mémé who exposed herself and her extended family to retaliation, possibly even death, for harboring two Jews in her apartment in occupied France.

Throughout the decades, Roth made ample use of her mother's things. In fact, it is through using these objects that a contact point can be established between Roth and Anna, daughter and mother, survivor and victim. The term "contact point," a concept to which I will return in a moment, is used by Feldman to refer to the interaction between body and object and what remains of this interaction after the disappearance of the body.⁹³ Roth laments: "I wish I'd known my mother's mother, Marie . . . I have so many of the lovely things she made. Lace tablecloths, seven of them, and in particular the 'special' cloth,

which she made for each of her three daughters, possibly intended for the wedding dowry and breakfast. That is what we have used it for, for my own and my elder daughter's weddings, and I expect my mother put it to the same use . . . These material things become so important, perhaps too important, because the people themselves are missing." Later, she writes: "I use this furniture every day and feel a satisfying sense of connection with her [Anna]. The desk in particular is in front of me now . . . [the desk] has been used for the whole of my life, and this matters when all else has been broken . . . And, on further reflection, I realize that such objects were seen as somehow more 'permanent' in those days." Roth ultimately realizes the precious contact points these objects represent: "Thus my mother's preoccupation with these belongings was not so futile. They did form a very real thread of continuity between us."⁹⁴

MEMORY OBJECTS : EXHIBITING WOMEN'S EXPERIENCE

The same year that Roth's memoir was published, the American scholar Alison Landsberg released an important book in which she argues that "modernity makes possible and necessary a new form of public cultural memory," which she labels "prosthetic memory." According to Landsberg, prosthetic memory "emerges at the interface between a person and a historical narrative about the past, at an experiential site such as a movie theater or museum. In this moment of contact, an experience occurs through which the person sutures himself or herself into a larger history . . . the person does not simply apprehend a historical narrative but takes on a more personal, deeply felt memory of a past event through which he or she did not live."⁹⁵ Almost a quarter-century earlier, Nora had coined another term, *lieux de mémoire*, to define the sites "where consciousness of a break with the past is bound up with the sense that memory has been torn—but torn in such a way as to pose the problem of the embodiment of memory in certain sites where a sense of historical continuity persists. There are *lieux de mémoire*, sites of memory, because there are no longer *milieux de mémoire*, real environments of memory."⁹⁶ Using this concept to guide his three-volume work on the national memories of France (*Les lieux de mémoire*, published in English as *Realms of Memory*),⁹⁷ Nora bemoaned the defeat of real memory, which is "life" in his terminology, at the hands of "history," which to him is an artificial reconstruction of life—or, better yet, of its absence. As Michael Rothberg, Deberati Sanyal, and Max Silverman point out, it is quite ironic that the monumental *Les lieux de mémoire*, a *lieu de mémoire* itself, "helped stimulate a boom in the study of memory [and yet it] is premised on the demise of memory!"⁹⁸ In this closing section of the chapter, I want to focus attention on the roles of mnemonic objects salvaged from genocide and how they are used to reconnect past

with present, surviving victims with their lost lives, and the victims with us. And I intend to reiterate the importance of women's memoirs and the centrality they often assign to objects in the reconstruction of these pasts and relationships. When some of these objects pass from the hands of their direct inheritors to the public space of museum collections or various mausoleums (as was the case with Roth's luggage, pillowcase, and her mother's letters), an important shift occurs in the psychic charge of the given object. This shift has the potential to confine Shoah memory to a new hegemonic and curatorial domain, which might obscure the traces that some of these objects carry of the historical experience of women. In this light, I hope to reinforce the importance of women's writing as an act of resistance against the hegemonic modes of the making of history or memory that often trample the gendered character of human experience. In the heterodox space of women's memoirs, the difficult equilibrium between private sentimental memory (*milieux de mémoire*) and communal or universal memory (prosthetic memory, or *lieux de mémoire*) can be successfully reached.

In the service of representing a lost past, objects become precious mnemonic prostheses, endowed with the power to hold and call forth a memory that is otherwise intangible, indescribable, or perhaps not even fully formed (as is the case with memories inherited by the second generation or those of early childhood). Building on Landsberg's idea, I argue that objects and the memories they carry are prosthetic even before they end up behind museum doors and are exposed to the eyes and interpretation of the world. I am interested in the prosthetic power of objects in the private sphere, where they still belong to people directly touched by the traumatic events. In other words, I use Landsberg's idea of prosthetic memory to signify not only the ethical act of taking on another group's traumatic memory by people utterly detached from the events involved, but also the process by which someone personally related to the past that the object refers to is able to keep connected to it. I also suggest that objects are prostheses of memory, as much as people are prostheses to the memory objects: it is our effort to recollect, to provide contexts and stories for each object, that symbolically animates these things and empowers them with a prosthetic function for future generations and for people culturally, geographically, or historically removed from them. We have seen (in chapter 1) how writing books about the Shoah was a way for Edith Bruck to call the dead back into the traumatized present. In Roth's case, it is her mother's letters that summon the living to remember. The many objects the former Kindertransport refugees mention so often in their memoirs, and that many of them have donated to the London museum, perform the same call to remember. These objects summon the living to the dead. As Landsberg explains in her chapter on the Holocaust, these objects create a

transferential space where a mixture of cognitive and processual (or sensual) approaches to knowledge allows the public to “adopt” the position of inheritors of someone else’s past.⁹⁹ Memory objects enable identification and empathy.

Prosthetic objects replace absence with presence. Landsberg’s prosthetic memory, *de novo* (or even *ex nihilo*), can transmit the knowledge of an event to people who are unconnected to that event.¹⁰⁰ So too the prosthetic objects of memory can, in the hands of their direct inheritors (such as a former Kindertransport refugee, a genocide survivor, or a daughter of a survivor) act as a psychological life support, as necessary and as intimate a part of one’s being as a bodily limb. They are the phantom limbs of many a survivor’s life. However, as we know, a prosthesis is an artificial part that functions similarly to the one it replaced, yet it is also only a fiction. The memories and the objects that contain them are felt as real and present by the first- and second-generation survivors who cling to them, but they are not an organic part of the remembering I. It is in the crevices of this unbridgeable chasm—between what remains and what is radically absent—that the texts of the Jewish women this book examines reside.

Landsberg sees in these prosthetic connections a positive way for people to know and empathize with the histories of others, but Nora regrets the loss of what he calls “real memory” at the hand of the *lieux* (or institutions) of memory, which in his view are like prostheses or signifiers emptied out of the signified. “*Lieux de mémoire*,” Nora explains, “arise out of a sense that there is no such thing as spontaneous memory . . . without commemorative vigilance, history would soon sweep [all preserves of memory] away.”¹⁰¹ The use Roth personally makes of her mother’s objects seems to work as an antidote to the anxiety Nora expresses about memory’s succumbing to history under the pressure of the modern era. With each point of contact between the survivor and her mother’s objects, the Holocaust is made present and the mother is intimately remembered; her letters speak in the present, not in a fossilized past. This living memory happens without the dispossession that public ceremonies, official celebrations, and monumental displays often effect. Adapting Nora’s terminology, I call the objects still in the hands of individual survivors *objets de mémoire*, or memory objects, intelligible and perceptible by both mind and body. In a literal sense, they are objects of memory in that they are the focus of memory, but they are also objects in the grammatical sense because they are just as much affected by the action of the subject as they affect that action—while being the goal of the subject’s action as well. It is their actuality that makes them potential sites for the transferability and transmittability of history, while their psychological impact far outweighs their material value or any practical use they might have. Given the Shoah context I am dealing with here, I am wary of using the word

“sacred,” but such objects can be read as totemic (in that they stand in for a sacrifice), ritualistic (in that they signify a rite of passage and perpetuate the repetitious timelessness of trauma), magical (in that they symbolically corporealize something that no longer exists), and—most of all—unalterable yet shifting (in that they are subject to the dialectics of remembering and forgetting). Either in the private environments of their owners or in museum installations, these memory objects are memory sites, and the same definition that Nora supplies for *lieux de mémoire* applies to them: “simple and ambiguous, natural and artificial, at once immediately available in concrete sensual experience and susceptible to the most abstract elaboration. Indeed, they are *lieux* in three senses of the word—material, symbolic, and functional.”¹⁰² Yet, unlike Nora, I invest the idea of memory objects with a positive valance: these memory objects are not without real environments of memory. Although Nora’s treatment of *milieux* subsumes the feminine under hegemonic, phallogocentric discourses (history and memory are implicitly male in his discourse), the objects I explore here are bonded to the domestic world and the intimacy that women derive from using, owning, and sharing them. Paying attention to the domestic quality of these *objets de mémoire* allows women’s histories and memories to emerge.

Before I continue with my analysis, a word of clarification is in order. Although I am appropriating those valuable concepts from Nora that help support my hypotheses regarding the material objects that are instrumental agents between the vanished past and its posthumous reconstructions, I am troubled by Nora’s formulations about what constitutes real memory and his problematic nostalgia for the lost (premodern) community. Nora’s basic idea is that memory (as we “once” knew it) is dead, but a new memory—a modern one—has formed and is made omnipresent by innumerable locations (*lieux*) of memory. In our age, Nora proposes, the past has been irrecoverably disconnected from the present because of the disappearance of a real, “lived,” intimately experienced memory. All the memorial apparatuses (monuments, museums, works of art, texts, films, and so forth) that we put in place in order to represent the past and hence to produce memory in fact end up killing it: monuments in particular, in his view, destroy memory’s spontaneity by making remembering a hyper-self-conscious act. I agree with him on this particular point: a monument or a museum risks subsuming other types of memory by cementing its own version of the past. These polymorphous apparatuses are the *lieux de mémoire*, whose signified isn’t “real memory”—yet it is the only memory available to us nowadays, in Nora’s view. The disappeared “real memory” used to be spontaneous, intimate, practically unmediated memory, chronologically nestled in the premodern era. But, most important, Nora’s “real memory” is

synonymous with good memory—that is, *la vie paysanne* (the rural life of the peasants) and the village communities of the provinces, animated by figures such as the schoolteacher and the postman. Of course, it is not clear that such a good simple life (especially for the peasants, even the French ones) ever existed. In any case, Nora postulates that these *milieux de mémoire* have been erased twice: first by modernity's vision of nationhood (whose institutions—such as family, school, and church—overpowered the close-knit intimacy of old communities) and second by postmodernity's stress on minorities, plurivocality,¹⁰³ democratization (Nora's word), mass culture on a global scale, and its hypermediated way of experiencing history. Nora nostalgically gloats: "Through the past we venerated ourselves" (I find that "we" in his work profoundly disquieting). And he laments: "Now that we no longer have a single explanatory principle, we find ourselves in a fragmented universe . . . When we look at the past . . . we know [it] is no longer ours."¹⁰⁴ Nora charges a number of minority communities with the responsibility of having "cracked" the internal coherence of the nation with their claims to particularism: Jews, royalists, Bretons, Corsicans, women, workers, and other provincials.¹⁰⁵ The conservative, if not reactionary, tone underscoring Nora's nostalgic idea of real memory and national past renders his work on the subject not entirely persuasive to me, but I intend to tap into and resignify some of the most valuable propositions he offers: by creating the concept of memory objects (*objets de mémoire*), I hope to take the most usable aspect of Nora's idea of *lieux de mémoire* and inject it with a positive, generative, and feminist edge. The memory objects I talk about are *lieux de mémoire* in that they are prosthetic, but they also retain a connection to the domestic, intimate, lived experience that Nora sees as the lost *milieux*. In the context I highlight here, these *lieux* are not devoid of mnemonic *milieux*, thanks to the living relationship established with them by either the surviving refugees or the following generations.

In the hands of the (direct or indirect) survivors, memorial or prosthetic objects inhabit a space between their direct connection to the places, times, and events of the past and their future position in the collective culture as metonymies of an entire historical chapter to which they refer and for which they are prostheses. The survivors, who also inhabit this middle space, are not erased or replaced by the objects. "Memory," explains Nora, "is rooted in the concrete: in space, gesture, image and object."¹⁰⁶ But how, I wonder, can these *lieux de mémoire* make memory manifest? It is not through their mere existence; it is not their intrinsic, essential power, but their ethical encounter with the human that allows them to bear witness, to speak a story (history) with authority. The personal relation between survivors and these prostheses of memory is ongoing and can illuminate complex aspects of the past that we risk losing in our

historical reconstructions (in museums, films, and so forth). The Kindertransport chapter of history is profoundly marked not only by the proactive presence and mobilization of women and the centrality of children (a category always assimilated to that of women) but also by the objects brought to safety that constitute the only bridge remaining between the vanished lives from a vanished continent these refugees left behind as children and their present identities. As I've argued, these objects are strongly rooted in the gendered space of the domestic world, a world that is always a challenge for the phallogentric culture to represent.

The lucky children who made it onto the Kindertransports were allowed only one or two small pieces of luggage each: a cargo no larger than what a child could carry alone. How to pack your child's life in one suitcase, a suitcase small enough for the child to handle but complete enough to anticipate the needs of an uncertain future? Together with the indispensable, mothers and fathers managed to smuggle into those bags a little special something that they knew would become the only simulacrum of their previous lives together that their children would have left: a photograph, a teddy bear, an embroidered towel, a special blanket, a family Bible, a piece of jewelry (which could also come in handy in case of financial need), sometimes even a piece of perishable food to bring to mind the memory of a family meal in happier times. As previously noted, nine out of ten children of the Kindertransport never saw their parents again.

These objects, brought to safety to England in a suitcase, were all that most Kinder possessed after the war. Some kept going back to them incessantly throughout their lives; some put them away and rediscovered them only much later, when, as adults, something in their psyches finally allowed them to face the past and recognize themselves as victims, therefore beginning the long-delayed process of mourning for their lost families and lives by reconnecting with these little material things. Regardless, as Körte points out in her article on the metaphorical and literal value of these mementos, "the object not only presents a connection to childhood experience, but it also forms a link to the parents, later becoming a support for memory and still later, with greater distance from events, functioning as a bridge to memory or a bracket for an event."¹⁰⁷

Lee Edwards, a former Kind, writes about her special object: "It has nine pearls and twenty-six little diamonds. I know, because I just looked at it again. I can't say I look at it very often—maybe once or twice a year, and I NEVER WEAR IT, but just looking at it brings back all the memories; some sad, some bitter-sweet; some joyful."¹⁰⁸ Despite the danger of being caught by the Nazis on guard at the station, Edwards's mother managed to quickly hide a precious necklace under a blanket in the child's suitcase: "My mother achieved her wish

on that gray March morning at the Frankfurt railway station in 1939: I could not treasure her; I never saw her again, but I treasure her necklace for ever.”¹⁰⁹ Another object was a tapestry woven by the mother of Kindertransport refugee Ester Friedman. The mother had started the project once she and her husband were deprived of the right to work in 1940 and evicted from their Viennese apartment. A non-Jewish woman, a neighbor, kept the tapestry until she was able, after the war, to locate Ester and give it to her. Ester asks: “The Tapestry? What has a tapestry got to do with the death of my father, mother, sister, uncles, aunts, cousins and six million Jews?” She answers her own question this way: “What is there of greater value to me than this heirloom worked in times of happiness with love and in utter despair. The only thing that escaped destruction—the only thing left of them except their ashes in a mass grave in Auschwitz.”¹¹⁰ In Segal’s memoir, the packing scene offers very moving family vignettes: “‘She can take my best crocodile belt,’ said my father, wanting to give me something.” As her frantic mother searches the kitchen for foods to pack that will last until their daughter reaches England, the girl, more to calm them down than anything, suggests knackwurst. “‘Not without bread,’ said my father. ‘Knackwurst,’ said my mother. ‘You like that? I’ll go down this minute and get you one.’”¹¹¹ And so it comes to pass that Segal escapes Germany with a sausage in her suitcase. Not surprisingly, it very quickly begins to stink and, discovered by the supervisors and the other children in the hostel, it causes an embarrassing scene for Lore. In the textual space of her memoir, the unpreserved sausage found posthumous life: the family love it represents has outlived and certainly outweighed the temporary pain of being made fun of by other children. In one final anecdote about these objects, Ruth David inherits from her aunt Liese, a survivor, a few pieces of silverware that her family’s neighbors in Germany had kept safe for her during the war. This cutlery is jokingly referred to by David and her siblings as the Rheingold (the mythical treasure of the saga of the Nibelungen)—though irony aside, she appreciates its true value: “She left this cutlery to my brother Michael and me. I treasure my share of it. It is a constant reminder and a witness to the potential of goodness in humans.”¹¹²

One could argue that both Roth’s memoir and her Shoah memory took shape in 1999, when she was contacted by the Imperial War Museum, as mentioned above. Her memory was thus triggered by the reestablishment of a connection to the objects of those days. She chose a pillowcase and the suitcase she and her mother packed together, which by 2000 was battered, rusty, and missing a handle but still had the green exit number assigned to her painted on its back.

When viewed behind glass in the museum, these objects are the prostheses that Landsberg writes about. The pillowcase, which for Roth functions as a

metonymy for her lost mother, functions as a metonymy for the whole Shoah in the public context of the museum (a “devotional institution”¹¹³). The object now connects the visitors to the larger Kindertransport story and to the broader Holocaust tragedy. Interestingly, Landsberg does not find this transition or translation problematic. Although philosophers and intellectuals have always been deeply concerned about the disenfranchising powers of mass culture and the ever-present risks of the modern spectacle, Landsberg seems to have overcome this anxiety by having located even in our culture, with its omnipresent mass-media, the opportunity for ethical encounters and intercultural empathic sharing. On the one hand, Landsberg points out how memories of the Holocaust have been created by films (such as *Schindler’s List*) and museums (such as the US Holocaust Memorial Museum, in Washington, D.C.) to the point where the Holocaust has become an “American memory” grafted onto the consciousness of people racially, religiously, politically, geographically, and chronologically removed from the events of the Shoah. On the other hand, Landsberg describes the object-related experience that visitors are invited—in fact, forced—to have on the second floor of the US Holocaust Memorial Museum and concludes that the objects’ “very materiality . . . their seductive tangibility, draws you into a lived relationship with them.”¹¹⁴ And for her, it is precisely this relationship that makes the all-important ethical transference possible. I find her argument compelling and convincing.

Whether or not a relationship can actually be established with and through the materiality of the objects exhibited in a museum raises another question: are museums able to make apparent the gendered complexities of each object? Some of these complexities, as we have seen, refer to a very specific and uniquely female experience of history, family life, emigration, and acculturation. Museums (such as Holocaust museums that deal with events on a massive geographical and historical scale) strive for maximum historical precision, yet this precision necessarily tramples on historical details. The enormous number of victims makes the task of zeroing in on the life of each one impossible. In the last two decades, memory artists have attempted to establish a meaningful contact point between the present and the radical absence of the past. Antimuseums, invisible museums, post-traditional museums, and a *Gesamtkunstwerk* approach to memory that involves mixtures of media and genres are all postmodern answers to the question of how to reshape memory to better capture the Jewish experience. James Young writes: “Rather than a singular master narrative of memory—that which has been traditionally recited as liturgy—there are now many forms of memory, each owing a debt to the particular Jewish community doing the memory-work.”¹¹⁵ However, as it turns out, architectural or visual postmodernism

has not necessarily provided the antidote to a gender-essentialized vision of the Shoah. The canonic museums are still heavily imbricated with the masculine and patriarchal culture that birthed them in the first place over a hundred years ago; these institutions are often one more cultural technology that normalizes history as paradigmatically male. Anna Reading pertinently asks: “Are artefacts [sic], films and photographs in Holocaust museums shorn or attached to the gendered stories that may explain their provenance or inclusion?”¹¹⁶

After carefully examining how the specificity of gendered experiences is represented in some of the most renowned Shoah memorial sites (the Auschwitz-Birkenau camp in Poland, the Imperial War Museum, the US Holocaust Memorial Museum, and the Jewish Heritage Museum in New York), Reading concludes that “while the dominant narratives of men tend to confirm and reinforce each other in different national museum contexts, the stories of women remain somewhat disjointed and discontinuous.”¹¹⁷ She finds the Imperial War Museum to be most successful in terms of including women and their war or genocide stories, while the US Holocaust Memorial Museum is the least successful. The field of museum studies has produced extensive and high-quality scholarship over the last two decades. Its important critique of museum culture has highlighted both the positive impact of these sites of cross-cultural contact as well as the old and new pitfalls associated with how these sites exercise hegemonic control over the telling of a past or a culture to the subjects who enter the complex space of the museum. In the twenty-first century, research in the field has turned from the content of the museum to the context of the museum. As Anna Conlan and Amy Levin explain, the museum is now a place not only in which but also on which to conduct research: “This self-reflexive framework departs from traditional museum concerns of collections and classification and emphasizes social relations embedded and enacted in the museum.”¹¹⁸ Much work needs still be done, however, in terms of feminist readings of the museum locus, discourse, and praxis.

In this era of excessive and spectacular memorialization, we risk a new memorial colonialism through the institutionalization of memory—that is, the claim of control over personal and collective memories by national or international bureaucracies, not to mention the warranted and unwarranted spinoffs of the mass-mediatic productions and the way they shape our social reality. Is there a difference—or a *différance*, that Derridean idea of an epistemological “spacing”—between the embroidered pillowcase from Prague that Roth used and preserved in her linen chest for fifty years and the embroidered pillowcase we look at in a display at the Imperial War Museum? Can we establish what Feldman calls a “contact point” with it? Feldman has illustrated the idea of

“contact points” in his study of relational dynamics within the contact site of museums (or what Mary Louise Pratt named, borrowing from linguistics, “contact zones”¹¹⁹). Feldman supplies an intriguing example of his own personal contact point with the Shoah.

One day, as Feldman stood in front of the pile of thousands of camp prisoners’ shoes displayed at the US Holocaust Memorial Museum, he became nauseated by the stench emanating from the old leather, the mildewed fabric, and perhaps (in such places our imagination runs wild) remnants of human skin. This powerful reaction helps illuminate one of the flaws of all traditional museum systems: although traditional museums do not completely suppress all sensory experiences, they are unprepared to work with them, to combine other sensory experiences with those of sight, and to engage the other senses in ways that can enhance and complicate the impact of the visitor’s encounter with an object.¹²⁰

Western tradition has decreed that the experience of women is grounded in the material, physical, and sensory, thus by design museums are engineered to exclude women in their exclusion of that material, physical, and sensory experience. Most traditional Holocaust museums are ultimately sites of visual experiencing. Images, relics, and objects are there to be seen and absorbed through the overfocused, overstretched sense of sight. Since the social world, in contrast, is shaped by the experience of the body,¹²¹ and this particular level of experience is usually connected to the feminine, excluding the sensory experience from the historical reconstruction that goes on in museums is to undercut the possibility of female experiential modes manifesting themselves, or “speaking.” Of course, this exclusion also affects the museum visitors’ contact with the objects they encounter there: some of their senses are restrained and put under surveillance. “The sensory approach to objects . . . positions them as integral to human behavior,” write Elizabeth Edwards, Chris Gosden, and Ruth Phillips. “It accentuates the relational qualities of objects as ‘categories’ (e.g. subject/object) or entities (e.g. person/thing) which work in *relation* to one another to produce further sets of relationships or understandings that, at their broadest, might be termed ‘culture,’ ‘society’ or ‘locality.’”¹²² As noted by Feldman and others, the centrality of seeing (versus feeling or perceiving) privileges a patriarchal, rationalist (Western) approach to knowledge over alternative methods of access.

In the Western mind, sensuousness used to be considered the prerogative of so-called primitives but was also typically associated with women. Around the beginning of the twentieth century, museums arose as public places in which to display collections of various kinds, and as such, they had to exercise extreme control over their audiences, which were now pulled from the masses rather

than from a restricted pool of elitist connoisseurs. Museums “reflected many of the visualizing trends of the day . . . They were major sites of display: wealthy capitalist nations needed showcases of cultural capital. Museums were also sites of surveillance and public order. Strict bodily discipline was required from museum visitors who were expected to become as close to pure spectators as possible: not to touch, not to eat, not to speak loudly.”¹²³ Building her argument around the 1950 term “proxemics,” coined by the anthropologist Edward T. Hall, Beverly Gordon reminds us that “the male-formulated ideal [in traditional Western aesthetics, is] related to the abstraction and depersonalization of the far distances. The tangible, sensory qualities of the near distances [are] considered suspect.” Proxemics, or “the use of space as an elaboration of culture,” was used by Hall in the middle of last century to study and measure the way in which people interact when set against an intercultural background: “Culture permeates and colors perception, and if men and women live in overlapping but different cultures, they perceive and experience the world somewhat differently. Given the masculine bias of the dominant culture in the West . . . women’s perceptions and experiences have been devalued.”¹²⁴ This bias forces us to ask whether the patriarchal hegemony that sustains the way we experience culture also permeates the way in which Holocaust museums are conceived of and received.¹²⁵ Feldman thinks that it does, writing that “museum displays risk reinscribing the silences and eliminations that gave rise to the contact point in the first place.”¹²⁶ In other words, this devaluation of women’s experience risks colonizing again that to which it had meant to give agency and authority.¹²⁷ Similarly, Classen and Howes argue that museums are sites for cross-cultural consumption that upset the sensory order that every society has developed (and that is part of every society’s DNA) precisely by ignoring that sensory order in their exhibits.¹²⁸ Museums still largely operate on the old Western dichotomy between the world of the body (which is feminine and suspect) and the world of the mind (masculine and privileged). We know that these dichotomies and categories subordinate the feminine to the masculine. Given that the concept of the modern museum as public space originated in the strongly patriarchal and imperialist society of the nineteenth century, the museum risks reproducing systems of ethnic, racial, class, sexual, and gender oppression, despite its best curatorial efforts to balance gender in its contents.

As Reading’s study highlights, significant strides have been made toward a more inclusive view of women’s presence in museum reconstructions and representations of history. Women have begun to be included in the creation, conceptualization, and design of Holocaust museums, which is a first step toward constructing a more balanced discourse on gender. For example, the

feminist scholars Joan Ringelheim and Marion Kaplan lent their expertise to the US Holocaust Memorial Museum and the Museum of Jewish Heritage, respectively.¹²⁹ Yet despite this female participation, there are more essential ways in which museums, themselves the product of a European patriarchal culture, are intrinsically ill suited to accommodate female experiential modes—including the social, historical, and personal. On the most basic level, traditional museums reflect the patriarchal order in that they derive their *modus operandi* from two activities deeply connected with masculinity: collecting and historiography. What happens to the gender-specific experience of women in a homogenizing site such as a Holocaust museum? And what happens to experiences (of both men and women) that are rooted in the feminine or the maternal, such as the many stories from the Kindertransport—whose ultimate success, as we have seen, depended on the actions, connections, resourcefulness, and resistance of women?

Earlier in this chapter, I pointed out that the Kindertransport rescue operation is a less well known aspect of the Nazi genocide (not for scholars, but for the broader public), and that the episode is shrouded in a forlornness that somehow mirrors the abandonment and loneliness of its protagonists, as well as the things they carried with them. The forlorn objects from the Kindertransport may be just what is required to highlight the difficulty of finding a space for women in museums and history. In the communal history of the Jewish genocide that is still largely told from a male perspective (characters in this awful drama are still understood as paradigmatically male unless specifically identified as female), the appearance of the Kindertransport rescue operation on the margins creates a small yet permanent rupture. It forces us to confront the role of women as protagonists and agents of history; the overlooked, gendered aspects of survival techniques; and, most important, female modes of memory making. As I've stated repeatedly, the Kindertransport movement was defined by the actions of women. These refugees' stories did not take place in the dehumanizing spaces of concentration camps and ghettos but were contained and experienced inside the domestic borders of people's homes. They are profoundly connected to the house, the domestic world, and what is traditionally categorized as the female sphere. Therefore, the appearance of these stories within the overarching story of the Holocaust—defined by the eruption of an imperialistic (and hypermasculine) war—disrupts the expectations and modes of retelling or reconstructing the past to which traditional historiography has accustomed us.

Reading the Shoah through a feminine lens also heightens our attention to issues such as the effects of genocide on the body. I use the body here not only to mean the corpses left behind by the genocide but also to refer to the living

record on which the Shoah has inscribed its passage: the tattoos on the arms, the shaved heads, the destruction of physiological functions (amenorrhea, digestion problems, and excretion inhibition), and, more abstractly, a kind of amputation from or impaired physical connection to the material world. The objects that were preserved by the survivors and their relatives and that resurface in the memoirs of Shoah writers (Kofman's fountain pen, Bruck's photographs, Roth's tablecloth and pillowcases) are captured in these women's texts in all of their fragile individuality and specificity. Such objects come from the domestic world of the victims, a world whose material demolition was an integral part of the perpetrators' plan to annihilate human lives. These objects used to be part of the daily landscapes of the living. And because the domestic sphere (the place from which the objects were expunged) is where the presence of women is traditionally charted, scrutinizing the material world and the relation that survivor writers have with these salvaged objects can allow the specificity of gendered experiences of violence and genocide to emerge more distinctly. Furthermore, as Marion Kaplan remarks, violence against objects is a symbolic act aimed at violating the owners of those objects: "A powerful image," Kaplan writes, "mentioned often in Jewish women's memoirs, is that of flying feathers—feathers covering the internal space of the home, hallway, and front yard or courtyard. As in Russian pogroms at the turn of the century, the mobs tore up feather blankets and pillows, shaking them into the rooms, out the windows, and down the stairways. Jews were deprived of their bedding and the physical and psychological sense of well-being it represented. Broken glass [after *Kristallnacht*] in public and strewn feathers in private spelled the end of Jewish security in Germany."¹³⁰ Objects become invaluable memory sites that are capable of restoring women's historical voices. As illustrated in this chapter, the material and the narrative are interwoven in Roth's memoir. On the one hand, the narrative becomes material (through the donations of objects and letters to a museum); on the other hand, the material (letters, her mother's two diaries in Czech, Roth's heirlooms) is the narrative.

The relationship established in the private domestic sphere between survivors and objects disrupts—or counteracts—the colonizing forces of museums, which tend to separate the body from the material world to which it belongs. Objects are thus made into historical relics by the decontextualization they undergo in the passage from their original environments to the recontextualizing environment of a museum. In a Marcusean or Durkheimian sense, these objects end up losing their inherent everyday functional purpose and become somewhat sacred, and hence museums risk becoming reliquaries. The once vital objects become, as Nora would lugubriously point out, history. In

the literary space of memoirs, in contrast, these objects maintain a connective role. Language re-presents them as mothers' ways of saving and bonding with daughters across space and time. Furthermore, before the war and before they were passed on to the next generation, these objects were in many instances an expression of women's agency and power as consumers, urban subjects, and independent daughters or wives. In short, they were meaningful objects before becoming Shoah relics, material traces of a connective sensory chain that enables remembrance. They are not fossils but very much part of the survivors' living landscape and as such they change according to the shifting perspective of the owner (or writer). For instance, Roth's relationship to the things salvaged from the catastrophe has gradually evolved from denial to acceptance and even closure. She admits that she has not always been psychologically capable of looking at them and acknowledging their meaning, but nevertheless they are "the background wallpaper of my life."¹³¹

Although I agree with Nora's idea that "modern memory is, above all, archival,"¹³² I also believe in the productive power of the archive—in the constructive force of a text (especially a memoir) to function as a *lieu de mémoire*, and one in which other *lieux de mémoire* can be deposited and held, like the example Nora cites of the French revolutionary calendar of 1789. Nora includes memoirs as possible *lieux de mémoire* only when they do not simply present memory but interrogate it.¹³³

An example of a memory object that needs literature in order not to disappear (because it couldn't easily be assimilated into the traditional storytelling space of a Shoah museum) is Kofman's fountain pen (chapter 3). It is so intensely an object of her memory that, as she declares, it alone allowed her to write all that she did during her career. To put it another way, everything she wrote was indirectly about it. What would it mean to exhibit such a pen in a glass case of a museum? The mausoleum of Rabbi Kofman's pen is his daughter's text—that is, all of her texts.

The fountain pen, Roth's letters, Bruck's photos, and even the original copy of Anne Frank's orange-checked diary do not merely delegate memory, they are memory. And to use Nora's wording, they interrogate memory, not merely display it. The maternal and feminine legacy that defines the specific objects I have discussed here makes them especially valuable to the historical record because women's activities are difficult to represent and therefore remain largely unillustrated in the documentary archives.¹³⁴ The Kindertransport, the maternal objects that the refugee children contribute to our prosthetic memory of the Holocaust, and the women's memoirs that embrace the material world and invest objects with specific narratives subvert established expectations about Shoah

representation and Shoah memory making. Writing memoirs, as well as writing their mothers and the mothers' materiality in those memoirs, is a compelling site of appearance for women survivors: a comfortably furnished room, or a highly sensory archive, of their own.

[English workingmen] are not so selfish as to be unsympathetic towards the victims of circumstances or oppression. They do not respond in any marked degree to the anti-Semitism which has darkened recent Continental history, and I for one believe that they disavow an attempt to shut out the stranger from our land because he is poor or in trouble, and will resent a measure which, without any proved necessity, smirches those ancient traditions of freedom and hospitality for which Britain has been so long renowned.



WINSTON CHURCHILL, quoted in Martin Gilbert, *Churchill and the Jews*