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THE TILE STOVE

MARIANNE HIRSCH & LEO SPITZER

My emotions peaked when I approached the tile stove, next to which my divan once stood. It was a kind of upright floor-to-ceiling ceramic tile stove, the same one where Papa used to warm the eiderdown to cover me on cold winter nights.

I opened the creaky door. To my astonishment inside was a gas burner instead of the coal or wooden logs we used in my time. Still caressing the cold tile stove, as if merely by touching it I could reproduce the feelings of a pampered and sheltered infancy, I collapsed into a nearby chair. The river of tears would not stop flowing for several minutes, overwhelmed as I was by this physical contact with my past.

I stared lovingly at the French crystal-paned doors and the parquet floors we used to walk on. I could almost see Mama meticulously polishing it with the two brushes mounted on her shoes. I got goose bumps as I touched . . . the horizontal iron bar on which everyone used to beat the dust out of the rugs and on which we children exercised our athletic prowess.

—Ruth Glasberg Gold, *Ruth's Journey: A Survivor's Memoir*

Chernivtsi, Ukraine, 1998:

When we accompanied our parents/parents-in-law, Lotte and Carl Hirsch, on their walk through the city of their youth in 1998, we realized how predominant critical and traumatic memories had become for them in the long period of their exile and emigration. Our visits to the public squares and central streets of the former Austrian Czernowitz enabled broad historical narratives to emerge. Walking, we heard accounts of the Romanian takeover of the city and province from the Austrians after World War I; of the process of Romanianization in the 1920s; of the Soviet annexation of the province in 1940, followed by the war and return of fascist Romanians with their Nazi allies; of the establishment of a Jewish ghetto in the city and deportations of Jews in 1941 and 1942. At relevant spots, we also listened to the stories of Carl and Lotte's marriage in the Jewish ghetto, their avoidance of deportation, their survival dur-

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ing wartime, and the many dangers they succeeded in evading. Even though they had come on this return trip with powerful attachments and nostalgic reminiscences of the city in which they had spent their childhood and youth, in the place itself, they were time and again drawn to the sites where the Jewish community suffered humiliation and persecution. And we encouraged the visits to these sites as well, eager to deepen our own historical knowledge of the war period in Czernowitz/Cernăuți with on-site reminiscences and evocations.

But when we walked along the city's streets toward the houses in which they had spent their childhood and youth—when we entered the building where Lotte had lived the first twenty-seven years of her life and where, except for a brief period in the ghetto, she and Carl had survived the war—the two of us also expected to hear their more unambiguously positive recollections of home, friendship, and community that had provoked their return trip in the first place. Lotte had described this apartment in detail over many years and had made it clear that many loving memories of home and family life were associated with its spaces and the objects it had contained. We envisioned the visit there as one of the highlights of our journey. We were as eager to see the apartment itself as to observe Lotte and Carl's reactions to their ability to view, touch, and smell the sites from their youth once again. For us, such participatory witnessing—offering some potential insight into a private lifeworld preceding (or resisting) the persecutions and deportations that came to eviscerate the city's Jewish community—was what a visit to our parents' former home had promised to convey.

The present occupant of the second-floor apartment on the former Dreifaltigkeitsgasse 41 (now Bogdana Khmel'nitskogo ulitza, 63), a tall, arresting Ukrainian woman in her mid-forties, introduced herself to us as Nadja; she was slightly taken aback when we rang the doorbell, but was welcoming when, in halting Russian, Lotte explained her desire to revisit her childhood home. "Somehow it was much more beautiful," Lotte whispered to us in her native German as she walked through the rooms, finding familiar spaces, pointing out differences. Under her breath, she recalled some of the objects she remembered vividly and pointed to where they used to be—the large, blue Smyrna carpet, the brown leather couch and chairs in the sitting room, the walnut dining table. We learned from Nadja that the apartment had been subdivided for two families during the Soviet period after the war. The old dining

room had been split up into two rooms and an extra wall had been built there—a disorienting change for Lotte. Recently, Nadja and her husband, Yuri, and their two sons had been able to reunite the two units.

Two large tile heating stoves—*Kachelöfen*—a white one in the bedroom and a green one in the former dining room, stood out amid the unfamiliar furnishings. “They’re the same.” Lotte smiled as she bent down to open the two small hinged doors of the white one to peek inside its dark interior. “When the bad times came,” she told us, ignoring the change to gas burners that were clearly visible behind the open door, “this stove was heated with wood, and when the fire was going out, cakes were baked here.” She was eager to translate this story for Nadja and called her into the room to show her where this had taken place.

When refugees and exiles return to a past “home”—to the interior spaces where they went about their daily lives—they attempt to make contact with and to recover the qualities of that dailiness. “Habit,” Paul Connerton writes, “is a knowledge and a remembering in the hands and in the body, and in the cultivation of habit it is our body which ‘understands’” (1989, 95). And when the displaced revisit old homes and reencounter the material objects associated with them, they can indeed recover habits and embodied practices along with incorporated knowledge and memory. In bourgeois, turn-of-the-century apartment houses in East and Central Europe, such as the one in which Lotte grew up, several spaces and objects can provide striking continuities across the space of decades. When Lotte put her finger on the old doorbell, turned the external doorknob, ran her hands over the indentations of the wooden banister and the cast-iron decorations of the staircase; when she touched the iron rod in the backyard where carpets were beaten and children used to swing and play; when she walked up the well-trodden stone stairs; and when she opened the doors of the two *Kachelöfen*, she reanimated body memories—deeply absorbed habits of long ago.

But unlike many other such objects of habitual use, the white tile stove in which “when the bad times came . . . cakes were baked” is overdetermined. It possesses historical, as well as memorial and post-memorial, dimensions. And it carries powerful symbolic associations. Historically, energy-efficient *Kachelöfen* can be traced back to the fourteenth century in the Germanic world (see “A History of Traditional Tile Stoves” n.d.). They became popular in Czernowitz in the nineteenth

century, during the city's long, prosperous stint under Hapsburg rule, when it had been the capital of the imperial province of the Bukowina. Heated with wood or coal and, later, with gas, the stoves' richly colored exterior tile—the *Kachel*—generally reflected the fashion of the period of their creation. They could be Gothic, rococo, Biedermeier, art nouveau, or modernist in style. They were almost always custom built, and their aesthetic appearance and size were indicative of class background and affluence. Their built-in permanence, moreover, enabled them to endure through historical continuities and radical discontinuities: changes in family life, furniture fashion, and decor, to be sure, but also, more significant, the political shifts that led to the persecution, deportation, and displacement of German-Jewish and Romanian populations in the 1940s and their replacement with Soviet and Ukrainian populations after the war. The stoves' endurance even to this day testifies to the minimal modernization undertaken during Soviet and now Ukrainian rule in such cities as Chernivtsi.

If the *Kachelöfen* mediate the memory of returnees, they not only do so through the particular embodied practices that they reelicit. They also act as a medium of remembrance by invoking primal associations with home, comfort, and security—with a childhood world of familial warmth and safety, of privacy and interiority. These associations persist, or perhaps even increase, when war and deprivation interrupt normal familial life and break incorporated practices. Lack of heating materials during wartime did change the habitual functionality of the stoves: in Lotte's case the dying embers in the bedroom stove had to be used for cooking and baking. But as her apartment visit and reverie shows, returnee journeys can recover and convey the duality of nostalgic and negative associations through the imbrication of deeply ingrained habits with the fractures of extraordinary circumstances. In telling her story, Lotte used the German impersonal pronoun "man" to describe what took place in the room—"Man hat Feuer gemacht"; "Man hat Kuchen gebacken" (translating into the passive voice in English: "Fire was made"; "Cake was baked")—eschewing agency, and thus allowing the ghosts from the past to drift into the present room like gentle spirits. Conjuring up the smell of cake and the fading fire in a wartime of want also enabled her to overlay conflicting memories unto an alienating present, without resolving the contradictions between them. As she walked through the apartment searching for the remnant traces of past lives and for cues to remem-

brance, she recovered body memories both of comfort and warmth and of extreme scarcity and threat. And amid these contradictions, she found resilience, adaptability, and small pleasures—ingredient elements that enabled survival. She found these things, and was able to transmit them to us, by means of a testimonial object, the tile stove in which “cakes were baked.” The stove both bears witness to events and elicits the testimonial encounter between generations.

Chernivtsi, summer 2000:

A question arises: We have been arguing that the contact made by first-generation returnees with objects and spaces from their own past reflects an attempt by returnees to work through multiple and discordant layers of lives interrupted by war, genocidal threat, displacement, and emigration. But what rewards do journeys and narratives of “return”—physical contact with places and objects with which they have had no previous tangible connection—promise those, like us, in the second or subsequent generations?

We’ve already noted that for the two of us, traveling to Chernivtsi for the first time with Lotte and Carl in 1998, the sharp edges of ambivalence and ambiguity were dulled by a deeper need to make contact with the daily world of their *before*—with what we posited as a safer world of home in which the Holocaust had not yet intruded. In the summer of 2000, however, we made a second journey to Chernivtsi in the company of two other second-generation visitors—Florence Heymann from France and Israel, and David Kessler from Israel and the United States. They traveled there to find material traces of their family’s past in the place itself—documents, grave markers, addresses—and they were especially eager to identify and enter the very houses and apartments where their parents and grandparents had lived. By entering these dwellings, they were seeking to anchor the free-floating postmemories that had shaped their conception of that *before* through concrete, physical touch. And yet street names had changed, houses had been renumbered, and multiple entrances to apartment buildings confused easy access.

In the absence of parental guides to usher them through the city and verify sites, they (as well as we) became engaged in a kind of detective work using flimsy clues. Here again objects, specifically tile stoves, came to play a powerful mediating role—but this time in a postmemorial

dimension. For the descendants of refugees and emigrants who had been able to bring only very few objects along with them to their new homes, the discovery of solid, deeply resonant, and long-enduring objects such as tile stoves in the very places where they presumed their families to have lived had potentially tremendous reparative value.

In her journal from this trip, Florence Heymann writes:

I remember a photo taken from a window in the apartment from which the house across the street is visible. I think I recognize it. The Residenzgasse and [it] is now the University Street. . . . I feel that I have discovered the right house. I have a curious feeling of familiarity. A very strange impression for a place that is totally phantasmal to me. . . . The second floor has three apartments. . . . We ring on the right and a young Ukrainian woman in a pajama top answers the door. . . . “Of course, come in.”

The apartment, if it is the right one, probably does not have a great deal in common with the one where my father spent his childhood. In one room, the green tile gas stove is probably of recent vintage. . . . But, in the other room, another white ceramic one is older. . . . In the garden, the walnut tree that Martha Blum (a cousin who grew up in the same house) describes in her novel *The Walnut Tree*. From that I deduce that I am in our familial home. . . . Later I will see that other very similar gardens are adjacent to many other houses, and that the city is full of walnut trees.

The Ukrainian furnishings do not stop me from imagining another apartment, another stairwell. . . . I imagine my father as a child in these rooms, coming home from school and going up the stairs two by two or four by four, his brother Leopold going down to meet his friends on the square in front of the temple or in one of the cafés on the Herrengasse. . . .

I feel myself both excited and at peace. The children play hoola hoop in the yard and wonder why this stranger is filming and photographing their house. (2003, 374, 5)

Florence’s account demonstrates that her desire to find the actual place was so strong that it circumvented contraindications and present-day appearances. She could screen out the furnishings and the sounds

and smells of the present, the changes and doubts. She zeroed in on the older of the tile stoves. As the only object likely to have survived the ravages of time, it offered the most direct palpable connection to the familial past; further, it functioned, once again, as a synecdoche of home. It could effect what she most wanted: her reanimation of this alien place with the spirits of long ago—her grandmother, her father as a child, her uncle as a young man. Her “feeling” of being “at home,” however, could only barely submerge her nagging doubts. How did she allay them? It is here that we note how photography and video serve as prosthetic devices substantiating a tenuous postmemorial intuition. For second-generation “returnees” encountering places and objects associated with the past, still and video cameras are vehicles of choice for knowledge, documentation, and memorial transmission. “I film and I photograph,” Florence Heymann writes. She filmed and had herself photographed in front of and inside the apartment that she believed to have been the one in which her family had lived. David, our second travel companion, was equally eager to have his picture taken in what, on fairly thin clues, he deduced to have been his parents’ first apartment and his grandparents’ home. Triumphantly, he too posed in front of impressive tile stoves.

The impulse to frame a scene through the viewfinder and to freeze such a moment of encounter in a photograph can certainly be understood, especially since photographs can easily be transported home. Even in miniaturized, two-dimensional form, these photos, like other souvenir images, could serve as a proof of the visit and the quest (“I was there” and “It was there”). But given the uncertainty about what they depict, the photos’ content demands confirmation that “it was *it*.” For most descendants, such an imprimatur of authenticity is not available. And yet, highly *symbolic* and thus interchangeable, objects such as tile stoves might still be able to generate the evocation of mythic worlds of origin even without particularized authentication or, in Susan Stewart’s terms, a “proper name” (1993, 138).

But once an object (or a place) has been photographically transformed into a simulacrum and is stripped of its materiality in the process of analog or digital reproduction, is it not also purged of its testimonial value and thus of its capacity to elicit particularized embodied memory? If photos of such objects as those discussed here are no more than memorial prostheses, what value other than the abstract and symbolic do they

ultimately have for those who bring them back, and for others who may simply view them in family albums or archives? If indeed such objects and the images of them are interchangeable, why show them, distribute them, digitize them, and post them on the Web, as so many second-generation returnees tend to do? (For example, see “Czernowitz-L Discussion Group Website” n.d.). What kinds of narratives do they spur? Stewart suggests that the “narrative of origins is not a narrative about the object; it is the narrative of the possessor” (1993, 136). In this case, it is the narrative of the returnee’s own interiority and nostalgia, spurred by an image that can merely allude to the loss and the longing for a mythic “home.”

In our past work on testimony, we have argued that the study of what we termed “testimonial objects”—personal and familial remnants from the past, carried materially or in memory across space and time—calls for an expanded understanding of testimony as a genre (Hirsch and Spitzer 2006). Such remnants carry memory traces from the past, we have said, but they also *embody* the very process of its transmission. At a moment now in Holocaust studies when, with the passing of the first generation, we increasingly have to rely on the testimonies and representations of members of the second and third generations, we will have to scrutinize the “acts of transfer,” as Paul Connerton has termed them, by which memory is transmitted (1989). In such acts of transfer Connerton would include narrative accounts, commemorative ceremonies, and bodily practices—but we have also added the bequest of personal possessions, and the transmission and reception of their meaning, to his categories of analysis. Indeed, for anyone willing to subject them to informed and probing readings, material remnants can serve as testimonial objects enabling us to focus crucial questions both about the past itself and about how the past comes down to us in the present.

Massive stationary objects that refugees and exiles leave behind, such as the tile stove, cannot be bequeathed by their owners to descendants. The moment of transmission occurs through the testimonial encounter such as the one we experienced in 1998 or through encounters whose indexicality and authenticity are much more tenuous, such as our “return” visit of 2000. For second- and subsequent-generation members, the “touch” of the objects or the spaces cannot, of course, spark the habit memory of incorporated practices. And yet intergenerational testimonial transmission becomes evident: in the site of return and the touch of

the material object, Florence and David came to discover the quality of “home” that their parents had brought along with them and had, through narrative, affect, or behavior, transmitted to them as they were growing up. In the most profound sense, it is that quality that each of us set out to find as we opened the little doors of the tile stoves in Chernivtsi, Ukraine.

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