

Vulnerable Lives: Secrets, Noise, Dust

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# *Vulnerable Lives: Secrets, Noise, Dust*

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MARIANNE HIRSCH AND LEO SPITZER

*“You must not tell anyone,” my mother said, “what I am about to tell you. In China your father had a sister who killed herself. She jumped into the family well. We say that your father has all brothers because it is as if she had never been born.”*

—Maxine Hong Kingston, *The Woman Warrior*

## THE SECRET

“Your aunt Ella committed suicide. She killed herself with pills. That’s the real story.”<sup>1</sup> This my paternal grandmother, Lina, confided to me on the ship off the Pacific coast of South America when the two of us traveled together in 1950 on our emigration from Bolivia to a new home in the United States. My parents, still awaiting their United States visas under the Austrian immigration quota (to which, ironically, they again were subject after the war), remained behind in La Paz. Lina spoke to me in German, and the word she used was *Selbstmord* (“self-murder”), more violent than the Latinate-English *suicide*. “Your Omama Bertha and Opapa Nathan don’t know the truth about this, and they must never be told,” she cautioned me. “Ella killed herself because she was

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FIGURE 1 Ella Wolfinger, Vienna, 1938. Spitzer family archive

so unhappy in Bolivia. Bertha would never forgive herself. She would die if she found out.”

I was indelibly marked by the revelation of my grandmother and the responsibility she placed on me not to divulge the secret to my maternal grandparents. I was ten years old at the time. I was shaken by the intensity of her words and the picture they triggered in my mind: of my aunt’s swallowing tablets that would end her life, an aunt I still vaguely remembered playing with me. Ella had been a phantomlike presence in our family in Bolivia, her death at twenty-three shrouded by silence in our conversations. In the United States, where nearly all our family members who survived the Nazi genocide eventually resettled, discussion of Ella, and especially of her death, was also avoided. “Your father, one time, wanted to tell me things about my sister,” my uncle Julius said to me when I interviewed him in New York decades later, “but I told him, I don’t want to know! I wanted to remember her the way she was in Vienna: lively, good-humored, very good-looking—a wonderful person” (J. Wolfinger). Yet Ella was memori-

alized in the family by an annual *yahrzeit* candle, lit by my grandmother on the eve of the anniversary of her death, and by the fact that my sister, Elly, born in La Paz in April 1944 (almost exactly a year after Ella died), was named after her.

Ella's framed photograph was always prominently displayed on my grandmother's and mother's dressers (fig. 1), and the picture image of her pretty face, animated by large, deeply set black eyes and lustrous, wavy, dark hair, became a familiar icon of my younger years, helping me summon fragmentary memories of her voice and touch, memories almost totally screened by the ominous word *Selbstmord*.

## NOISE

Outside the family circle, the talk surrounding Ella's death must have begun right away. I was aware of it even as a young child—although certainly not of its role both in revealing and concealing the vulnerabilities of her life. "Death from blood poisoning following an infected wound," that was the official explanation my father and mother provided my grandparents and others. Death from a "broken heart," I once overheard my mother tell someone, as though Ella were a tragic character in one of the Grimm fairy tales read to me by my grandmother. Time and again persons in the La Paz refugee community murmured *Selbstmord* within my earshot, but its meaning remained beyond my comprehension. Other, more malicious accusations I would also not understand until much later: "She abandoned her husband, left him abruptly: what an outrage!" "She had lovers . . . was a loose woman . . . rash divorcée . . . slept around . . . home wrecker . . . a scandal. . . ." "Serves her right: she was probably pregnant." "She died from a botched abortion." Chitchat. Blame. Buzzing natter. To my childhood ears these phrases resounded without shape, like repetitive background noise.

## WHAT REMAINS

Few concrete traces of Ella's life remain in the boxes and folders and albums that compose our family archive. Regi, her oldest sister, who escaped to the United States by way of Trinidad, saved only two letters Ella sent, written in Bolivia months apart, in mid-1941 and in early 1942. "Why can't I be granted peace of mind?" the second letter reads. "Why must I suffer so much? Please help me get away from here" (E. Wolfinger).

Rosie, my mother, also saved two of her younger sister's letters from 1942, as well as a poem written in Vienna in 1937, and over twenty loose pages from a journal Ella kept the year before she died. In addition, she

saved more than a score of photographs of Ella taken in Austria, in Switzerland, on the ship crossing to South America, and in Bolivia. And she preserved the telegram my father sent to her and my grandmother Lina in Cochabamba informing them of Ella's death in La Paz:

Elly se ha ido de nosotros queda fuerte estoy con los padres en la Paz  
Eugenio. (E. Spitzer)

Elly has left us stay strong I am with the parents in La Paz Eugene.  
(our trans.)

A few photographs of Ella's grave in the Jewish cemetery in La Paz survive as well. Oral histories I collected from family members and other Austrian refugees for my book *Hotel Bolivia* provided additional stories about Ella. Recently, in response to that book, I received several e-mail messages and two newspaper articles about Ella and Jewish refugees in Switzerland from a grandson of the family with whom Ella briefly found refuge before deciding she had to move on to South America. They add a few telling details, previously unknown.

From this small archival trove we could extract several plausible narratives explaining Ella's life and death. Suicide, however, even suspected suicide, is an impact event that resonates across time and generations. Its definitive sense of closure directs the force of narrative backward, to a search for clues to an inevitable outcome. It tends to shut out alternative strands. Even where the evidence is scant or inconclusive and thus open to imaginative investment and fabulation, the archive, and perhaps the family archive especially, lends itself to just such a closed reading. But when so much is shrouded in mystery, suicide can also provide the ground for other, more open, interpretations and alternative tellings.

## DUST

Archival remains, Carolyn Steedman has suggestively argued, are encrusted in "dust"—"the immutable, obdurate set of beliefs about the material world, past and present . . . with which modern history-writing tries to grapple" (ix). Dust, in this hardened form, envelops and restricts the stories that can be told about the past, delimiting explanations, sequences, recognizable plots—beginnings and endings.

But archival dust, as Steedman suggests as well, may also be yielding and revealing. As the organic by-product of slowly decomposing archival remnants and their unfiltered storage, it confirms "a grand circularity of nothing ever, ever going away" (166). It is imperishable matter, waste that

does not disappear. Hovering cloudlike in the air—stirred into motion by a breath, a breeze, the vibrations of a sound—the amorphous and nebulous particles of this dynamic dust carry much that may yet be unthinkable about the past. Instead of defining and restricting narrative explorations of archival materials, these particles bear enabling elements for multiple echoes and interpretations.

In Ella's story, it is the encrusted dust of obdurate beliefs, conjoined with the power of an alleged suicide, that shapes our understanding both of what brought her to Bolivia in the first place and of what might have made it impossible for her to live there. Yet other dust particles, unformed and persistent, surround that story. In their circulating movement and formless opacity, something beyond the closed narrative stream leading to *Selbstmord* can be discerned. If, as historians and critics, we permit ourselves to consider this ambient archival dust through the aural resonances and dissonances that stir it into motion, we can disrupt the interpretive limits associated with suicide and reveal dimensions that might otherwise remain unexamined. Jettisoning the desire to determine precisely why and how Ella died—an aspiration that in any case cannot be satisfied—we may envision other life trajectories for her, trajectories that in better times she might have been able to navigate. We might then begin to perceive her life as part of a broader cohort of vulnerable lives—lives hovering (to borrow Ariella Azoulay's description) "on the threshold of catastrophe" (28).

A caveat, of course, is necessary if we take up this challenge. Even a speculative reading and telling of Ella's story cannot avoid the interpretive influences and explanatory sway of a number of well-known narrative scripts: the spunky young girl with a zest for life who is constrained by circumstances beyond her control, the dutiful daughter and self-sacrificing rescuer, the disappointed lover and promiscuous woman, the resentful daughter, the sister filled with rage and despair. We may find ourselves looking in these narratives for the moment when things first went wrong for her and for a clear-cut set of causes of and explanations for her death. But we will struggle to disrupt determinant scripts and engage the grand circularity of the archive: in considering the threshold of catastrophe, we hope to discover a threshold of possibility.

### OBDURATE BELIEFS

Ella was the first in the family to flee Vienna. In late summer of 1938, five months after the Austrian Anschluss to Nazi Germany, she and a female friend crossed the Austrian border illegally to Switzerland, near the town of Hohenems in Vorarlberg. Swiss authorities had clamped down on the

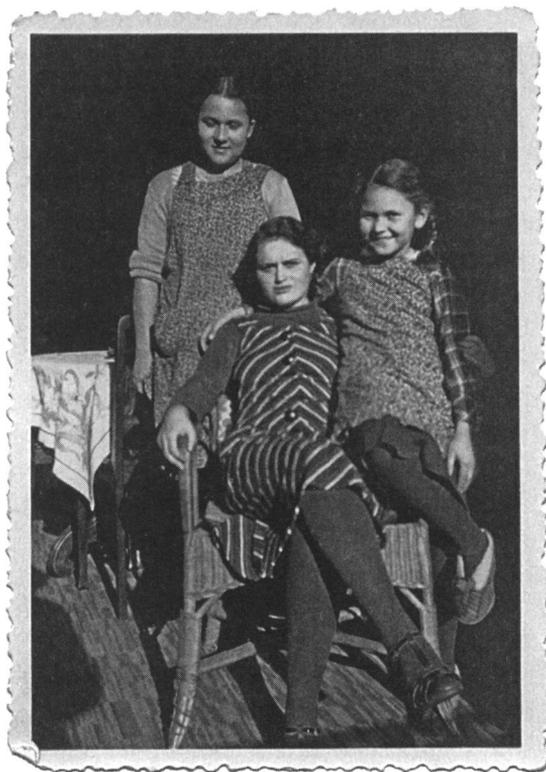


FIGURE 2 Ella in Switzerland with Emma (standing) and Dora Reichle, 1939. Spitzer family archive

influx of illegal refugees following the Anschluss, and they stiffened their laws shortly before Kristallnacht in November 1938, in time to head off the panicked flight of Jews that ensued during the months just before and after the outbreak of war in Europe. Swiss authorities apprehended many such refugees. Some of them, in the process of acquiring visas elsewhere, were allowed a brief residence in internment camps or in specifically assigned housing and were made to work in labor details. But most were returned to Nazi territory (L. Spitzer 38–40).

Ella had a somewhat different and for a brief period more fortunate fate. Shortly after her arrival in Switzerland, she suffered a mild attack of appendicitis, which required her brief hospitalization. Her hospital stay brought her to the attention of the Swiss authorities but also allowed her to make contact with the Swiss-Jewish Union for Refugee Aid, an organization that, in what was put forward as a provisional arrangement to enable her recovery, placed her in the modest home of a working widow with two

young daughters. Once there, Ella, lively, warm, with an ability to joke and entertain, quickly became a favorite of the girls and was invited by their mother to stay on as their nanny (fig. 2). Indeed, to ensure Ella's permanent residence in Switzerland, the widow offered to adopt Ella legally. During this time, Ella met a young Swiss man, fell deeply in love with him, and considered marrying him. She was quite happy, she wrote her oldest sister, Regi, who was still in Vienna at the time. Ella was pleased to be among nice people, grateful for the relief from the fear that had darkened her previous months.

Her happiness, however, was quickly overshadowed by family worries. First, her younger brother, Julius, then her parents entered Switzerland illegally, but all three were almost immediately apprehended near the border. Temporarily interned in a refugee transit camp, they managed to get word to Ella about their plight. If they did not receive entrance visas to another country soon, they might be sent back across the border, into Nazi Greater Germany.

At that juncture, Ella was presented with a solution to their dire situation—one, however, that required the nineteen-year-old woman to make a drastic choice.

Three sentences in an oral history interview made decades later in New York with Julius summarize his sister's response but give no account of what must have been her hesitations and emotional costs. "She was the first in the family to reach Switzerland successfully," Julius stated. "But then she decided to go to Bolivia. And it is thanks to her we survived."

The potential solution was a marriage offer, not from her Swiss suitor but from Willi B., a man with whom she had been involved for some months in Vienna before his departure. Willi had managed to acquire a visa to Bolivia, one of the last countries in the world in the late 1930s still open to larger-scale Jewish refugee immigration. Bolivia ended up admitting about 20,000 Jews from Austria, Germany, and other parts of Nazi-controlled Central Europe. Not long after arriving in La Paz, he found a way to "purchase" four additional immigrant visas (*llamadas*) for "relatives left behind" (J. Wolfinger). One of these he reserved for his mother, who had stayed in Vienna; the other three he offered Ella and her parents. But the offer, seemingly so generous, carried a nonnegotiable condition: the visas for Nathan and Bertha could be used only if Ella used hers as well. She would have to join him in Bolivia as his wife.

Julius's simple observation, ". . . she decided to go to Bolivia . . . and it is thanks to her we survived," suggests the expected, matter-of-fact response of a dutiful daughter acting in extreme circumstances. Acceptance



FIGURE 3 In La Paz, Bolivia, 1941, with Rosie Spitzer on left, helping with construction work. Spitzer family archive

of Willi's proposal meant for Ella the forfeiture of everything that a new life in Switzerland promised. But by agreeing to leave and marry Willi, she was able to save her parents and eventually also her brother, as well as her sister, Rosie (figs. 3 and 4), and Rosie's husband and his parents from persecution, deportation, and probably murder. In making it possible for a core segment of the family to reconstitute and reconnect in a safe haven, she behaved according to moral obligations she had internalized, to conventions—familial as well as gender-based obdurate beliefs—that were broadly accepted in the Central European Jewish community in which she was brought up.

Within a year of her arrival in Bolivia and her marriage to Willi, when she was barely twenty, Ella left him and initiated divorce proceedings. Why this happened we will never know. We can surmise that the emotional pressure that Willi had employed to compel Ella to marry him, and her perhaps reluctant acceptance of his demands, may eventually have provoked resentment, regret, and even profound anger within her. The family



FIGURE 4 With Rosie, in background. Spitzer family archive

silence about Ella's story, the unwillingness to talk about her death and what might have led to it, can in this light be seen as a reflection not only of sorrow over the loss of a beloved child but also of guilt and denial about having put her in a position in Switzerland that left her no choice but to agree to Willi's terms.

Ella's unhappiness in Bolivia is revealed in all that remains in the family archive—her letters, her journal fragments, her photographs. It is clear from these, and from recollections recorded years later, that the role into which she had been cast shifted after she left Willi: the good girl and dutiful daughter became a loose woman, an attractive young divorcée, preyed upon by some, but also dangerously at large in a small refugee community where the protection of family stability was of immense importance. She found herself a twice displaced stranger in a new land.

In envisioning alternatives, Ella turned to the plot of romantic love—a sanctuary, perhaps, from the petty rumor and gossip as well as from the

dire news from war-torn Europe, where family members, subject to an uncertain fate, had been forced to remain. She had two love affairs: first with Fredl H., then with Ludwig C., the latter a man separated from his wife. Ella hoped to marry Ludwig despite the opposition of his parents, but she became disillusioned with him because of his compulsive need to gamble. She writes passionately about both men in her letters and journal, expressing delight and desire but also her frustration about Fredl's demanding job and repeated absences from La Paz and her disappointment with Ludwig's character flaws. At times she expresses self-doubt and dejection. In the surviving fragments of her journal, which she addresses to Ludwig, she writes, "I will always remain the 'whore' because I did not have the good fortune to live in peace and love with my husband. . . . I feel worthless. . . . As you see I'm not free of people's prejudice and I fear their malicious tongues."

Increasingly, as her life spun out of control, she looked to the family in Bolivia for stability, grounding, and support. Paradoxically, that very effort seemed to restrict her in and bind her to the confines of parental oversight and familial judgment. What she must have experienced as bitterness, anger, and betrayal she may well have translated into self-blame, a sense of worthlessness, despair. "Today I am happy I have you," she wrote in her journal to Ludwig, "but I'm nevertheless all alone in the world and have to fend for myself."

In one bold, independent move, Ella did strike out on her own, opening a small leather-goods shop that she furnished, decorated, and installed with great pleasure and care. After a few months, however, she sadly realized that she lacked the capital to keep it going.

Did she become pregnant and have an abortion? Did she take her own life? Close to the end of the surviving pages of her journal, she wrote:

As I wait for you in the evening, I look at the street lamps on the corner and wish with all my heart to fall and no longer to feel anything. I would like so much to shut my eyes as a happy person. . . . But my life is ruined. Unfortunately, I took the wrong course. I no longer see a way to lead what I would consider to be a normal life. (E. Wolfinger)

## RESONANCES

Except for the pages of her journal, her poem, and her few letters, accounts of Ella are mediated by the grief, guilt, denial, and self-justification of family members and fellow refugees. Suicide, the cause of Ella's death disclosed by Grandmother Lina, was a secret with the power to kill. "Bertha would never forgive herself. She would die if she found out," Lina had

stamped on a grandson too young to understand. “I don’t want to know,” Julius admitted decades later. In emphasizing that her revelation was the “real story,” Lina acknowledged the existence of “other stories” but used suicide to limit explanatory exploration. Ella may indeed have committed *Selbstmord*, but no death certificate or medical report can be found in the family records or in La Paz; there is no suicide note, no definitive statement in a letter or personal document. Ella’s journal is inconclusive, as though it were a figure for the ambiguity at the center of her story. Its entries end abruptly, in mid-sentence, but perhaps only because pages with additional writing were lost.

This very impossibility of knowing, however, frees us to think beyond obdurate beliefs and consider the narrative and affective resonances stirring into motion the persistent unformed dust of the archive. Resonance is an aural term for the reverberation of sound across time and space. But sound, whether registered as information or as dissonant, discordant noise, is always the opposite of silence. As we listen for the resonances that influence what we can speculate about Ella, we must remain open to silence too—to the absence of sound and narrative. Silence may reflect a willful act on Ella’s part, her choice not to reveal, or it may be the ultimate secret of a death without meaning.

For those who try to account for it in the family archive, Ella’s life resonates temporally, backward and forward, but also spatially, across, in relation to other, contemporary lives perched, like her own, on “the threshold of catastrophe.” What if, instead of reading her life backward from the inevitability of suicide, we attempt to read it forward and more open-endedly—not toward catastrophe but to the threshold of possibility she herself envisioned at various turns? Doing that, we can find elements in her story of courage, spirit, a will to adventure, and a desire to escape from the strictures of family and convention. At age seventeen, for example, living in Vienna, she wrote a lengthy, humorous poem, “Unser Los” (“Our Fate”), bemoaning the exploitative working conditions of the apprenticeship she had just begun in a tailor shop. The poem is about her family’s impoverishment, which demanded her continued employment there. The last stanza reads:

Wir wollen euch noch sagen,  
Lasst eure Kinder nicht so plagen,  
Das raten wir euch auf Ehre,  
Geht in keine Lehre.

And this advice we still impart,  
Don’t let your children work so hard,

This on our honor we do mentor,  
An apprenticeship, never enter.

We see in the whole poem her sense of irony, her sharp wit, her light-hearted but devastating indictment of the unfairness and mean-spiritedness inflicted on young women in circumstances like hers. The resistant and accusatory tone is powerful in the complicit circle the poem draws around bosses, overseers—and parents. No sign at all in it of the melancholy and plaintive despair she was to voice so strongly three years later in Bolivia. Similarly, her 1938 flight to Switzerland with a friend and her ability to find refuge there, to fend for herself and act to help safeguard her family, highlight her independence, initiative, and courage.

In the resonating dust of the archive, we can thus find a young woman who is both funny and feisty, with a sense of drama and a desire for independence—someone able to stand outside the dire situation in which she finds herself and comment on it with justified bitterness but also with humor and irony. Even in her journal, in the final remaining pages, she writes that she is ready to confront “the true struggle for life: I am ready to fight.” Her tone there, resistant and determined, rails against the criminality of expulsion and the brutality and oppressiveness of Nazidom’s reach.

Yet we certainly also find the sarcasm and barely suppressed anger of someone thwarted time and again, someone who may have wanted to run or hide. “With *our* luck, all doubts are justified,” Ella comments to her brother-in-law, Eugene, in a letter written either toward the end of 1942 or early in 1943. “Have no fear, everything will go wrong.”

As we note and search for such contradictions—for the mooring Ella’s family offered her and at the same time for its confining claims; for her forays to seek a more independent economic and emotional existence despite repeated frustration—we can reach beyond her particular narrative to the vulnerability of the lives of other women and men who were her contemporaries. Her two older sisters, Regi and Rosie, were subject to similar familial strictures and responsibilities: care for infants, parents, and parents-in-law in the midst of persecution, flight, and relocation. Her eighteen-year-old brother, Julius, routinely gave to his parents the bulk of his earnings from his job as a waiter in La Paz. Her mother, Bertha, an excellent cook and baker, hired herself out as a private chef to supplement the family income. All lived hand to mouth, sharing meals, income, even cramped physical space during the earliest and most difficult refugee years in Bolivia.

Back in Europe, less fortunate relatives were deported and killed. Frieda,

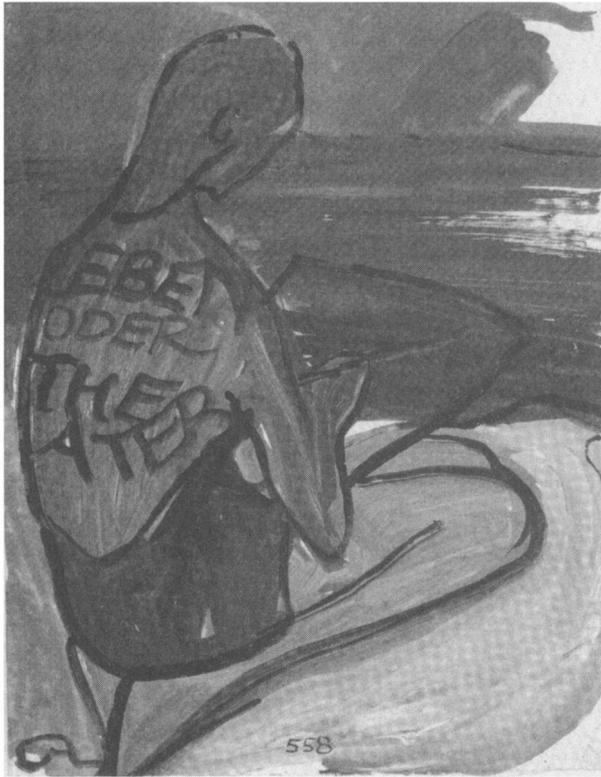


FIGURE 5 Charlotte Salomon, *Leben? oder Theater?* (“Life? or Theater?”). Reprinted courtesy of Collection Jewish Historical Museum, Amsterdam. © Charlotte Salomon Foundation

who survived but witnessed the selection leading to the murder of her parents and younger sisters in Riga, forever remained silent about abuses she herself suffered in concentration and slave labor camps.

Beyond the confines of the family archive, one can place the complexity of Ella’s life alongside some of the better-known accounts of other young girls and women and, in a similar manner, read their stories both along and against the grain. The lives of Anja Spiegelman in *Maus* (the absent mother of the cartoonist Art Spiegelman) and the artist Charlotte Salomon, the creator of the autobiographical series of paintings *Life? or Theater? A Play with Music*, are illuminating in this regard.

Both Spiegelman and Salomon, like thousands upon thousands of Jews, who included Ella’s cousins, aunts, and Viennese neighbors, were deported to Auschwitz. And “After Auschwitz”—after our knowledge of its brutality,

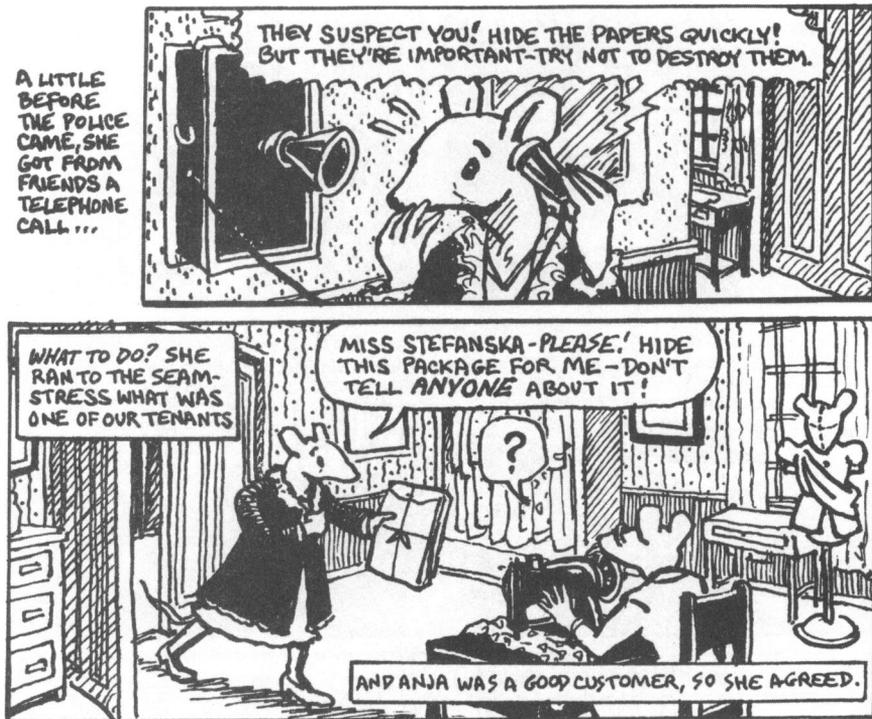


FIGURE 6 Anja Spiegelman working for the Resistance. From *Maus I: A Survivor's Tale: My Father Bleeds History*, by Art Spiegelman, copyright © 1986 by Art Spiegelman. Used by permission of Pantheon Books, a division of Random House, Inc.

inhumanity, and finality—it is difficult to regain a full appreciation of the promise of lives lived before the devastating spread of its overpowering shadow. Scholars who commented on the lives of victims of deportation and extermination have shown how impossible it is to interrupt what Griselda Pollock, writing about Salomon, has called the “arrow of teleology, the logic of a known historical narrative” that leads from 1933 to 1945 (39). Although, as a refugee, Ella herself interrupted that arrow, she lived under its threat as a teenager in Vienna throughout the 1930s, and she continued to feel its menace afterward. Her before life, like that of Salomon, Spiegelman, and other deportees, is similarly overwhelmed by an untimely death that becomes a lens to its meaning. Beyond this boundary and in the context of a more widespread generational cohort, Jewish vulnerability to Nazi persecution can be seen as leading to multiple forms of improvisation—to small as well as larger acts of daring and resilience. These forms of resistance shape stories of survival. They also enjoin us to

acknowledge the instances of refusal, the mysteries and silences—death as the absolute secret—that stories such as Ella’s evoke.

To be sure, the work of Salomon, like that of any artist murdered by the Nazis, cannot easily be read from the perspective of a before. The difficulty, in her case, is especially compounded by the particular family story she lived and represented in her *Leben? oder Theater?* (fig. 5). As a daughter, niece, and granddaughter of women who committed suicide, Salomon seemed predetermined to end her life. While her work emerges from these confining family circumstances and the added burdens of Nazi persecution in Germany and her exile and refugeehood in France in the early 1940s, it also speaks to her creative ability to transcend everything that was closing down around her. In writing and drawing her life in the form precisely of theater, she shows herself able to step outside her destined role. Her work is a remarkably layered and complex document of western European Jewish existence before Auschwitz, seen through the eyes of a young woman able to reimagine and transform the horror in which she found herself and, repeatedly, to refuse death in favor of life. It is this creative spirit we need to highlight and not the finality of the transport—the last out of France—that took her to her murder in Auschwitz.

The journals of Anja Spiegelman might have revealed forms of improvisation that could have enabled us to see her in a way unlike the one provided by her husband, Vladek, and interpreted by her son, Art, in his graphic narrative *Maus* (*Complete Maus*). But Vladek burned the journals, leaving her story as opaque as Ella’s (fig. 6). “She went through the same what me,” Vladek at one point tells Artie, and he adds, “terrible” (160). But did Anja go through the same “what me”? What was her experience, and what led to her suicide in 1968? In her story, too, family functioned both as a haven and as an institution of strictures, constraints, and demands. Was she really as chronically depressed, fragile, and helpless as Vladek makes her out to be when he evokes her nervousness in prewar Poland and describes how he heroically sneaked bits of food to her in the camp to keep her alive? One fragment of her story suggests a more resilient and engaged Anja: she worked for a Communist resistance group before the outbreak of war and despite Vladek’s threat to leave her if she did not stop. In another fragment, she risked her life to meet Vladek near a fence in Auschwitz, kept her wits and survived after she was found holding a package of food that he had passed to her. Her suicide in the United States, observed through the prism of “after Auschwitz,” and the absence of her own voice in *Maus* leave few traces of this other Anja.<sup>2</sup> But, as with Charlotte Salomon and Ella Wolfinger, those traces are nevertheless there.

## STORIES

“The story,” Hannah Arendt wrote in an essay on Karen Blixen, “reveals the meaning of what otherwise would remain an unbearable sequence of sheer happenings.” She was commenting on Blixen’s observation in *Out of Africa* that “all sorrows can be borne if you put them into a story or tell a story about them” (xix). But which story?

Perhaps, where vulnerable lives like Ella’s, Anja’s, or Charlotte’s are concerned, it is best to take events out of the sequence of one story, as we have tried to do here, and allow them to shape themselves into a number of possible stories, stories that may or may not cohere. We cannot change their tragic endings, but perhaps, in reviewing and recounting these lives in a less predetermined, less fixated fashion through their multiple resonances, we can liberate them from the one trajectory that leads to tragedy, enabling a multiplicity of possible meanings to emerge. We might also refuse to recuperate their lives by remaining open to a different possibility, one that emerges not from sound but from silence—from the very absence of story and meaning.

In “A Conversation with My Father,” Grace Paley disagrees with Arendt. Why can’t you write a story like Maupassant or Chekhov?, her bedridden eighty-six-year-old father asks her. “Just recognizable people, and then write down what happened to them next,” he requests. Paley wants to please him but finds such stories intolerable: she hates traditional plot, “the absolute line between two points . . . not for literary reasons but because it takes all hope away. Everyone, real or invented,” she insists, “deserves the open destiny of life” (232).

## NOTES

1. For an earlier account of Ella’s story in a different context, see L. Spitzer. The first-person voice in this essay is Leo Spitzer’s. We are grateful to the members of the Engendering Archives working group of the Center for the Critical Analysis of Social Difference at Columbia University for their insightful comments on this essay.

2. See Spiegelman’s *MetaMaus* for the artist’s attempts to find out more about his mother through interviews with her friends and fellow Auschwitz inmates and to understand what qualities enabled her to survive in the camps.

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