

Diaries, Material Memory Holders

Creating a Memory Box

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Memory boxes have a capability to move in time and space. My first contacts with the memory boxes I am going to discuss in this article, i.e. two diaries from the 1940s, took place almost 70 years after they had been created. One of them was sent to me by e-mail in form of scanned documents from Washington D.C. in October 2009. I first came across the other as a published and translated book in 2009. My encounter with the original diary – or its photocopy on the computer screen, to be accurate, since no one is allowed to touch the original – did not happen until October 2010 at an archive in Paris. These moments of opening the memory box differed much from the moments when these memory boxes were created and written. The diaries had a long journey through decades, changing circumstances and, in the case of the diary now archived in Washington, across the ocean before they ended up in my hands. Let's take a closer look at the one I had a chance to read in Paris:

There are two parts in this diary. I can see it now when reading the beginning: I wrote the first part from a sense of duty to preserve the memory of what must be told [...]. It makes me happy when I think that if I will be arrested, Andrée has stored these pages, something of me and of the most precious, since I do not care about anything else material nowadays; what must be saved is your soul and memory.¹

1 “Il y a deux parties dans ce journal, je m'en aperçois en relisant le début: il y a la partie que j'écris par devoir, pour conserver des souvenirs de ce qui devra être raconté [...]. Cela m'est un bonheur de penser que si je suis prise, Andrée aura

This is how 22-year-old Héléne Berr, a Jewish student from Paris, writes in her diary in the autumn of 1943. She is living in the midst of terror and persecution. The hard times have made her realise something very important about the nature and purpose of the diary. Diaries are in essence material memory holders, memory boxes of their time. That thought I am going to tackle and develop further in the article on hand.

In the diary quote above one can see how this particular memory box, Héléne Berr's diary, was born. Its conscious creator was the writer herself and she was also its first audience. Berr going back in time and once again reading her first diary entries can be considered as one of the first moments of opening the memory box. By analysing the motives behind her diary-keeping and noticing that her diary consists of two parts, she immediately started adding new layers to the box. This shows how the memory box's creator and audience, which is what an artefact needs in the process of becoming a memory box, can actually be the same person. However, Berr's diary has subsequently achieved much wider publicity by its publication in 2008 and translation into several languages. When Berr wrote the entry quoted here she had no idea how many people would re-open the memory box she created and give new meanings, add new layers, to it in the future. I, as a researcher and analyser of her diary, am one of them.

Diary as a memory box and its maker

This article discusses the idea of a diary as a memory box. My aim is to show how the concept of a memory box can bring new viewpoints to the analysis of diaries as sources for historical research. The main questions are: How is a diary made a memory box? What kind of levels does this special memory box hold? I am thus concentrating especially on the moment of creating a memory box, and I am not going to specifically touch the further meanings attached to the box by its later openings.

gardé ces pages, quelque chose de moi, ce qui m'est le plus précieux, car maintenant je ne tiens plus à rien d'autre qui soit matériel; ce qu'il faut sauvegarder, c'est son âme et sa mémoire." The diary of Héléne Berr (in the following footnotes BERR, 1942-44), 27.10.1943, Centre de Documentation Juive Contemporaine, Mémorial de la Shoah, Paris (CDJC). All translations by Anna-Leena Perämäki.

My focus is on the diaries written by young Jewish women who lived in the German-occupied Western Europe in the 1940s, during the Jewish persecution and World War II. I am especially going to take a closer look into the diaries of two girls from Paris: H       Berr and Elisabeth Kaufmann. H       Berr (1921-1945) kept her diary between the years 1942-1944. She was a French-born university student who lived in Paris with her parents until she was arrested and transferred into a concentration camp in March 1944. Berr died in Bergen-Belsen in April 1945, only a few days before the camp was liberated. Elisabeth Kaufmann's (1924-2003) diary was written in 1940. Kaufmann was born in Austria, but her family had to leave to France after the German annexation in 1938. She kept her diary – written in her mother tongue German – before and during the German occupation of Paris and during her and her mother's flight from Paris into hiding in the southern French countryside. Kaufmann (later Koenig) managed to survive the war and later moved to the United States where she died in 2003.²

Berr's and Kaufmann's diaries were written in two different styles by two writers of different age and interests. Berr was clearly a very talented writer and had literal ambitions which she expressed and practiced by writing her diary; whereas Kaufmann just wanted to write down what was happening in her life and around her for the purpose of remembering it later and thus might not have paid as much attention to the form of her writings as did Berr. However, these two diaries written in difficult times offer an interesting insight into the concept of memory box.

Like Bernd Roeck,³ I see memory box as an encapsulation and a vehicle of cultural transfer. In this article, cultural transfer means the transfer that already happens when a memory box is created. In the case of diaries, this transfer is related, on the one hand, to the different traditions and conventions of diary keeping and, on the other, to the often varied and complex cultural and historical context(s) influencing the way a diarist sees and represents him/herself. When a diarist writes his/her diary notes, s/he makes these transfers visible. In this article, the diary is thus approached as a memory box that captures both memories and cultural transfer and puts them in a movable form.

A diary is first and foremost an artefactual memory box, but when someone opens this imaginative box, they can see that it has also immaterial dimensions

2 JOB, 2008, pp. 299-305; ZAPRUDER, 2002, pp. 37-41.

3 ROECK, 2007, pp. 11-14.

or layers. This article's structure is based on these different layers⁴. First, I am going to discuss the layers that are material and give the box its form. After that, it is time to look beyond the strictly material questions and take into consideration the other layers telling about the time of diary's/memory box's birth. At the bottom of the box, one can finally find the level of thoughts and ideas of its creator, the diarist.

Material memory box – the artefactual layers in a diary

A diary⁵ usually has a cover, a back and pages that one can feel and touch (if an archivist allows this⁶). If the diary in question is not written by typewriter or computer, one can also try to analyse the diarist's handwriting. In some cases, the research stops there because it is impossible to actually read and understand the workings of his or her pen. But this material level – book covers (if any), the quality of the paper and pen used, handwriting – can already tell us a lot about the time and place when a certain diary was written. Therefore, even if our focus is on strictly material questions, a diary can be seen as a memory box that holds the traces of its time in its cover and pages.

The diary of Elisabeth Kaufmann, who was the younger of the Jewish diarists discussed here, consists of three small notebooks. The first notebook has a French word "Cahier" – meaning a notebook in English – printed on its cover. Under this rubric there are four lines with printed "de" – probably leaving space for a notebook owner to write her/his name on the first line – and "à M" – apparently directing the owner to specify to whom (*Madame/Monsieur*) the notebook is dedicated. This might refer to a teacher, which indicates that this notebook was probably originally meant to be a school exercise book. Kaufmann has left these lines empty. Instead of the diarist's name, for instance, there are some very unclear drawings on the cover. It is hard to say what they depict. The cover looks ragged and shabby and its

4 I am interested here in the layers that were put in the memory box when it was made.

5 My focus here lies on handwritten diaries. I am thus not going to discuss the modern electric or online diaries.

6 In the case of Héléne Berr's diary that is held at the Shoah Memorial Museum in Paris, researchers are only allowed to see the photocopy of the original diary.

edges are not sharp, as they most likely used to be, but rounded and curled by time.⁷ In addition to the influence of time, careless preservation prior to being handed over to the archive and/or a sloppy diarist, one possible explanation to this worn-out cover is that the owner of the notebook has lived through some rough times. One can also speculate solely by looking at the cover – although it can indeed be nothing but *speculation* at this point – that this notebook might have been very important to its possessor and it is likely that she carried it everywhere.

The pages inside Kaufmann's first notebook are of very simple lined paper with thin red margins printed on the right side of the paper. Her large text, written with black ink, goes across the margins and fills every line, but she has not written on the white space before and after the lined area. It seems that this diarist did not worry that she could run out of paper – maybe Kaufmann's notebook had not cost much and she thought she could easily buy a new one after coming to the last page or she had got it for free from school. On the last page, she does not refer in any way to the fact that this notebook is full now and she needs more paper but simply continues her notes in the next notebook that is very similar to the first in terms of paper and lining.

The last notebook of Elisabeth Kaufmann is different from its two predecessors. It does not have anything printed on its hard cover but has been originally empty. However, Kaufmann has filled the empty space with a stylised "Isabeau" written on it. Above the name she has drawn a neat picture of a maiden, a decorated cone-shaped hat with a veil on her head, flowers and a castle silhouette in the background.⁸ There are also a much smaller and lighter pencil drawing of a female face and even lighter sketches of flowers on the cover, not to mention some unrecognisable drawings similar to those on the first notebook.⁹ Kaufmann's passion for art and drawing is apparent here – she studied at an art school in Paris, after all.¹⁰ When one flips through her notebooks one can also find many other sketches that usually illustrate her written diary notes. During her flight to the countryside she has pictured the

7 The diary of Elisabeth Kaufmann (in the following footnotes KAUFMANN, 1940), United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Washington (USHMM).

8 *Isabeau* might refer to Isabeau of Bavaria, the Queen of France (the wife of King Charles VI) of German origin, who was called Elisabeth before she became queen at the end of the fourteenth century. See for example ADAMS, 2010.

9 KAUFMANN, 1940, USHMM.

10 ZAPRUDER, 2002, p. 39.

big crowd of people and cars leaving Paris when the German troops were about to occupy the city, for example.¹¹

Like in the case of the first notebook, the cover of Kaufmann's third notebook is worn-out but somehow still slightly better preserved-looking than the older notebooks. This is interesting because she started her flight from Paris at the time of this last notebook. It might tell something of the importance of diary keeping to Kaufmann. It is possible that the true value of her notes became clearer to her through the worsened circumstances and she started to take greater care of the notebooks during the flight.

However, the traces of Kaufmann's dangerous flight are apparent, if not on the cover, on the graph paper pages of the last notebook. The flight has left its mark on her texts. Kaufmann's handwriting is not the tidiest, but the notes written during the flight are even messier and harder to read than the writings at the beginning of the diary.¹² Both Kaufmann's physical and mental condition, not to mention the lack of proper places to write, had an effect on her handwriting. She had more important things to worry about than the readability of her diary entries at the time.

Unlike Elisabeth Kaufmann's, Hélène Berr's diary¹³ was not written in notebooks but on the loose sheets of simple, unlined paper that resembles stationery. Berr used a bigger paper folded around the sheets as a cover. On this – then possibly white, now yellow – “cover” she has written, probably shortly before she was arrested and deported: “Ceci est mon journal. Le reste se trouve à Aubergenville.”¹⁴ When Berr started keeping a diary in 1942, two years after Elisabeth Kaufmann, the war and the German occupation of Paris had already been going on for a long time and there was shortage of almost everything. Paper was not an exception.¹⁵ That might be a reason Berr used loose paper sheets instead of purchasing a notebook. On the other hand, these sheets appear to be in better condition than Kaufmann's notebooks.

It is maybe too far-fetched to make any comparisons considering these two diarists' living conditions merely based on the condition of their diaries – and

11 KAUFMANN, 1940, 13.6., USHMM.

12 See for example KAUFMANN, 1940, 13.6., USHMM.

13 I have seen the original only as a photocopy. I cannot thus describe the material side of Berr's diary in much detail.

14 “This is my diary. The rest is at Aubergenville.” BERR, 1942-44, CDJC. Aubergenville refers to family Berr's summer house near Paris.

15 See more about the conditions in Paris and France during the war, POZNANSKI, 2001, pp. 471-475; WEINBERG, 2001a, pp. 213-222.

the wear and stains on Kaufmann's notebooks might also be the result of later years – but their situations were indeed different. Berr lived at her childhood home in Paris the entire time she kept a diary. Kaufmann on the other hand, whose family felt more threatened already in the beginning of the war because they were foreigners and not native Frenchmen like Berr, fled from Paris even before the German occupation of the city had officially begun.¹⁶ Author Virginia Woolf – as mentioned by cultural historians Maarit Leskelä and Ritva Hapuli – as well as researchers Suzanne L. Bunkers and Cynthia A. Huff, have emphasised the importance of the material conditions for writing.¹⁷ Berr's writing conditions were better than Kaufmann's even in the midst of the persecution and are reflected on the well preserved pages of her diary.

Also, Hélène Berr's handwriting is much clearer than that of Kaufmann. Her tidy notes written with blue ink are always arranged in almost straight lines, although the sheets have no lining. However, also Berr's handwriting style varied with her moods and the overall state of affairs. For example, her handwriting is different than usual when she writes about a card from her father, who spent three months under arrest at the Drancy transit camp¹⁸ in 1942. In that card, Berr's father is expecting to be deported soon and says his goodbyes to his wife and children. Berr's note on the card shows how worried she is about her father's situation, although she only mentions her mother's distress. Her handwriting suddenly becomes very small in size, and she has not written the whole page full like usually.¹⁹ Changes in handwriting can reveal the writer's feelings even when s/he does not actually write about them.

The material aspects of a diary can tell a lot about its writer and when and where the diary in question was written. Already the first layers brought to daylight thus show what kind of interesting encapsulation of a specific time and place a diary is as a memory box. However, there is much more to uncover beneath the artefactual side in the box. Next, I am going to analyse the motives

16 Foreign Jews living in France had been treated worse than native-born citizens already before the war. However, the German occupiers turned out to be more lenient towards them in the beginning than they had expected. The harsher anti-Jewish measures were introduced not earlier than in summer 1941. WEINBERG, 2001a, pp. 215, 217f.

17 See for example HAPULI/LESKELÄ-KÄRKI, 2005, pp. 69, 71f.; BUNKERS/HUFF, 1996, pp. 6, 20.

18 Drancy was situated in a Paris suburb. Approx. 70,000 French Jews were sent to this camp during the course of the war prior to their deportation to the extermination camps in Poland. WEINBERG, 2001b, p. 159.

19 BERR, 1942-44, 22.7.1942, CDJC.

and traditions of keeping a diary that can be found behind the handwriting of my diarists – the layer of conventions.

The encapsulation of western and Jewish – the motives and conventions of diary-keeping

The researcher who uses diaries as their source material and is able to read and understand what is written in these memory boxes from the past, will find other layers hidden in the diary pages and between the lines that reveal further details about the situation in which the diary was born. Here we come to the cultural transfer in diary writing. In the case of the young Jewish diarists analysed in this article, their diary notes were the children of two traditions of keeping a diary. On one hand, they followed the Western tradition of confessional diary, *journal intime*²⁰. On the other, the effect of these diarists' Jewish background is also apparent in their notes.

Like Maarit Leskelä-Kärki has argued in her dissertation on the writing of the Krohn sisters, a diary is not only something private but always at least on some level dependent on the conventions of its time, a culturally constructed phenomenon.²¹ That is noticeable also in Hélène Berr's and Elisabeth Kaufmann's diaries. The conventions of a traditional, western type of diary-keeping have had a strong influence on the diarists' way of constructing their notes. They knew how diaries are usually structured and followed that convention. Both of the young women almost always started their notes with a date, in some cases also with the time of the day, and Kaufmann sometimes with a place, too, especially during her flight. On the other hand, they did not stick to another common feature in a traditional diary, especially in the case of younger diarists: to start every diary note with a greeting like "Dear diary".²² The best known young Jewish diarist and also an example for many teenage diarists after her, Anne Frank, even gave her diary a name and greeted it with "Dear Kitty".²³ Frank also read girl books that were written in diary form and were very popular among young people in the first half of the twentieth century, which probably influenced her considerably when writing her own

20 See for example MAKKONEN, 1993, p. 363.

21 LESKELÄ-KÄRKI, 2006, pp. 36, 73f.

22 MAKKONEN, 1993, pp. 364-369; see also LESKELÄ, 2000, p. 215.

23 PERÄMÄKI, 2009, pp. 28f.

diary.²⁴ It is not known if Berr or Kaufmann had ever read those kinds of books. However, many features of their diaries fit well into the picture of a traditional, conventional diary.

As mentioned earlier, Berr's and Kaufmann's diaries are characteristic western type diaries not only in their structure, but also in their content. In many ways they can indeed be seen as classical examples of confessional diaries (*journal intime*). That type of personal diary including much self-examination has its roots in religious diaries kept by English Puritans in the 1600s and became popular during the nineteenth century. This can be interpreted as diachronic cultural transfer: the puritan way of keeping a diary in early modern England – although somewhat different in its motives and purpose – was transferred through centuries and applied to the needs of subsequent diarists. At the same time, a diary became an especially feminine way of writing and a tool to examine oneself and observe one's own moral, considered suitable for young girls in particular.²⁵ Berr and Kaufmann used their diaries as a private channel to pour their feelings onto paper and write about things that they could not discuss with anyone else.

Especially Hélène Berr acknowledged that writing often made her feel better. Having opened up about a certain relationship that she is trying to end and feels very upset about, she concludes: "*It sufficeth that I have told thee*, my piece of paper; everything is already better."²⁶ Berr did not want to bother her mother with her troubles – although she sometimes yearned for it – but she could tell all to a "piece of paper". That was her solace. Berr herself states in the diary that she writes because she does not know with whom to talk.²⁷

However, Berr had a long break from her diary, lasting from autumn 1942 until autumn 1943. During the break, the persecution of Jews in France had intensified and come closer – many of Berr's friends had been arrested and she herself had narrowly escaped a roundup at her workplace UGIF.²⁸ When Berr

24 See more about the literature Frank read LEE, 2011, pp. 237, 418f.

25 LESKELÄ, 2000, p. 214. See also VATKA, 2005, pp. 39-57; MAKKONEN, 1993, pp. 362f.

26 "*It sufficeth that I have told thee*, mon bout de papier; tout va déjà mieux." BERR, 1942-44, 11.4.1942, CDJC. Italics in the original.

27 BERR, 1942-44, 15.4.1942, CDJC.

28 UGIF (l'Union générale des israélites en France) was established in November 1941. It worked as a legal mediator between the occupiers, the Vichy government and the Jews. UGIF's most important task was to help the French Jews and their families. Hélène Berr volunteered as a social worker in the organisation from

began to write again, it appears that she understood even better than before the true value of keeping a diary. Clearing her thoughts and feelings by writing soothed her so much that she decided not to hold back any longer and to tell everything troubling her to the diary from that moment on.²⁹

Unlike H       Berr, Elisabeth Kaufmann does not explicate in her diary what keeping it meant to her. However, also Kaufmann appears to have used it as a channel to confess and share her deepest feelings and thoughts – just like so many western diarists before and after her. By keeping a diary, Kaufmann had a chance to open up about things she did not want the others to know. She wrote what she really thought about her schoolmates and was also very open about her opinions on politics. The following quote from March 1940 is a good example:

Nothing else at all is done at school than talked about politics. Even more there, where the most different political opinions are gathered. [...] If the girls were serious and thought at first through what they say would it surely be very interesting. But they are all unlearned in politics and simply pass on the things that they catch at the dinner table without forming their own opinion. I love political debates. However, it would be meaningless to participate in these and so I take an eminent mediating position between the fighters in the class, even though it wouldn't otherwise conform to my character.³⁰

Kaufmann thought that her schoolmates were foolish and did not actually know anything about politics, but she did not want to take part in their debates. What she hid at school she shared with her diary.

Sometimes the diary was also Kaufmann's only comfort and company, so at her sixteenth birthday, for instance, when she was alone at home and it

summer 1942 until the raid. MODIANO, 2008, pp. 12f., 99, 215, 241; KADOSH, 2001, p. 368; MICHMAN, 2001, p. 373.

29 BERR, 1942-44, 10.10.1944, CDJC.

30 "In der Schule wird   berhaupt nichts anders gemacht, als politisiert. Umso mehr, da die verschiedensten politischen Meinungen versammelt sind. [...] Wenn die M       seri     w    , und zuerst durchd    ten, was sie redeten, w     es ja recht interessant. So sind sie aber all politisch uninstruiert und reden einfach nach, was sie beim Mittagessen aufschnappen ohne sich selbst eine Meinung zu bilden. Ich liebe politische Debatten. Sich aber an diesen zu beteiligen, w     Unsinn und so nehme ich in der Klasse einen ausgesprochen Vermittelnden Posten zwischen den Streitenden ein, wiewohl das sonst nicht meinen Charakter entspr    e." KAUFMANN, 1940, 17.3., USHMM.

seemed that no one would come to celebrate with her: “I sit in the kitchen now, write in the diary and am sad.”³¹ The diary also kept her company during the flight from Paris. Even then, Kaufmann kept writing whenever she had a chance to do so. That must have alleviated her excitement and fear. The western tradition of the confessional diary thus proved to be a very helpful survival tool for these young Jewish women when everything else around them was about to collapse. They passed on this tradition in the memory boxes they created.

The diarists discussed here were not, however, only influenced by the western conventions of keeping a diary. Their Jewish background must not be forgotten. It is common to many diaries kept by Jews during the Holocaust that the diarists had a strong need to testify about the persecution of their people, a desire to remember. According to James E. Young, this need to testify is in essence based on the texts and background of the Jewish holy writings. There is a profound idea of literary testifying or the will/testament behind them.³² It can be criticised how well Young’s thoughts fit to younger and often quite secularised diarists who were not necessarily as aware of this long Jewish tradition of testifying as the older generations. Perhaps it was only the hard times and fear of death in the near future which naturally induced even young Jews to see the potential of their diaries as important testaments of the terrifying events during the war and persecution. However, the diaries analysed in this article fit very well into that category, especially in the case of Hélène Berr, who was the older of the two diarists.

Just as Young states about the writing Jews, one of Hélène Berr’s motives for keeping a diary was the idea of a wider public to which she wanted to testify about her suffering and the suffering of Jewish people in general. Berr wanted to remember the persecution of Jews and show also to the later generations what happened during that time. She often writes about that in her diary. She even thought it was her downright duty to tell about these things, as this entry from October 1943 makes clear: “[W]riting is a duty that I have to fulfill since the others must know. [...] [T]he others don’t know, [...] they don’t even imagine others’ suffering and the evil certain people inflict on others. And I always try to make this hard effort to tell. [...] I should thus write

31 “[J]etzt sitze ich in der Küche, schreibe im Tagebuch und bin traurig.” KAUFMANN, 1940, 7.3., USHMM.

32 YOUNG, 1988, pp. 17-19.

in order to be able to later show the people what kind of era this was.”³³ Berr thought that her gentile contemporaries did not know enough of what was happening to the Jews and felt it was thus her task to write the truth about her time. However, she also thought that she did not have time to write a book in the midst of it all and found it important that she would at least note her every experience in the diary for the later.³⁴ Berr had thus a strong desire to testify. That connects her diary to the long Jewish tradition of testimonial writing, although it does not become clear in the diary how well she knew this tradition herself.

Elisabeth Kaufmann’s diary is not so clearly meant to be a testimonial about the Jewish persecution for later generations as is Berr’s diary. However, it seems that also Kaufmann thought it important to write down what was going on around her. She appears to have felt that she must note everything exciting and unusual, even unpleasant that she experienced because of the persecution. Especially the diary entries written during the flight sometimes resemble an adventure novel, the self-evident heroine being Kaufmann herself. It is typical for diarists to colour their life events.³⁵

Already at the beginning of her flight Kaufmann seems to have wanted to write down her experiences throughout in great detail. She even mentions the time and weather, in a dramatic tone: “So they were not in Paris anymore. It was about ½ 11 before noon, Wednesday the 12th of June 1940. The weather was unchangeably murky. They both wandered, a windy journey in the great chain of plight, rousing a silent lament in the midst of the great suffering.”³⁶ Kaufmann’s diary entry about a night under arrest at a police station is an especially apparent example of this diary’s significance in documenting important events. In that entry, Kaufmann writes that she has just explained to

33 “[J]’ai un devoir à accomplir en écrivant, car il faut que les autres sachent. [...] [L]es autres ne savent pas, [...] ils n’imaginent même pas les souffrances d’autres hommes, et le mal que certains infligent à d’autres. Et toujours j’essaie de faire ce pénible effort de raconteur. [...] Il faudrait donc que j’écrive pour pouvoir plus tard montrer aux hommes ce qu’a été cette époque.” BERR, 1942-44, 10.10.1943, CDJC.

34 BERR, 1942-44, 10.10.1943, CDJC. See also BERR, 1942-44, 18.7. and 12.9.1942, 10. and 25.10.1943 and 14.-15.2.1944, CDJC.

35 KAGLE/GRAMEGNA, 1996, pp. 38, 41.

36 “So waren sie nicht mehr in Paris. Es war zirka ½ 11 vormittags, Mittwoch den 12 Juni 1940. Das Wetter war unverändert trübe. Sie zogen beide, ein windiges Glied in der großen Elendskette, bildend, ein unbeklagter Jammer im großen Leid.” KAUFMANN, 1940, 12.6., USHMM.

a curious man also arrested at the station that an experience like this must be written down.³⁷ Kaufmann thus understood the importance of a diary – if not as a direct testimony about the persecution of Jews – as a preserver of memories and her own past, at least. The diary was a memory box to her, the memory box that she had made herself.

Literature researcher Rachel Feldhay Brenner, who has written about the diaries of young Jewish women, argues that diaries offer their writers an opportunity to read “backwards” and write “forwards”. A diarist can compare the present moment with the events s/he has described before and thus form an insight into the historical course of their life.³⁸ It was especially important to the young diarists described here to understand themselves as historical agents who leave their traces in the past because, being Jews, their right to their own history was under threat.

The extreme living conditions under which these diarists wrote their notes make their diaries not only part of the more common western tradition of confessional diary-writing, but also part of the tradition of Jewish testimonials. These diaries can be seen as memory boxes that encapsulate the cultural transfer and exchange from and between different cultures of diary-keeping. In the following chapter, I am going to look into the deepest layer in these boxes analysed here that is also closely connected with the concept of cultural transfer. It is the layer of identity.

Beyond the material and conventions – identity building written in a diary

As it has become clear in this article, diary as a memory box consists of various different layers that are, however, closely intertwined. The last layer examined here does not make an exception. Keeping a diary is not just about notebooks, handwriting, conventions and writing traditions – it is also a channel to construct and represent one’s identity. The level of identity is therefore an important layer attached to this memory box already at the time when it was made. It can be analysed by looking at the box’s creator’s

37 KAUFMANN, 1940, 13.6., USHMM.

38 BRENNER, 1997, p. 139. Quotation marks in the original.

individual thoughts and ideas expressed behind the common and recognisable conventions of diary writing.

The concept of identity is, first and foremost, understood here as cultural identity. It is the aspect of a person's identity that is connected with belonging to some distinct ethnic, linguistic, religious or national culture. Cultural researcher Stuart Hall argues that no one receives that kind of identity at birth, but they are formed and change their shape as part of and vis-à-vis the meaning systems, representations, attached to them. That is related to the question of symbolic communities. National culture, for instance, is merely a discourse – a way to build meanings that direct and organise our actions and perceptions of ourselves.³⁹ Being a Jew can be seen as this kind of cultural and constantly shape-changing part of one's identity.

I suffered, there, at that sunny court of Sorbonne, in the middle of all my study mates. I suddenly felt that I wasn't myself anymore, that all had changed, that I had become a stranger, like I would be in the middle of a nightmare. I saw familiar faces around me but I sensed everyone's sorrow and astonishment. It was as if I had a mark of a red branding iron on my forehead. On the stairs, there were Mondolini and Mrs Bouillat's husband. They looked aghast when they saw me. [...] I was natural, superficially. But I was living a nightmare.⁴⁰

This is how Hélène Berr describes one of her first visits to the university with a yellow Star of David on her chest in June 1942.⁴¹ Berr had apparently not talked much about her Jewish background before – it seems that many of her study mates and teachers had not even known that she was a Jew. When the law about the yellow star came into effect, she had to face her Jewish identity and others' reactions to it in a dramatic way. The feelings of being labelled and an outsider are strongly presented in the quote above.

39 HALL, 2002, pp. 19, 46f., 227-229.

40 "J'ai souffert, là, dans cette cour ensoleillée de la Sorbonne, au milieu de tous mes camarades. Il me semblait brusquement que je n'étais plus moi-même, que tout était changé, que j'étais devenue étrangère, comme si j'étais en plein dans un cauchemar. Je voyais autour de moi des figures connues, mais je sentais leur peine et leur stupeur à tous. C'était comme si j'avais eu une marque au fer rouge sur le front. Sur les marches, il y avait Mondolini et le mari de Mme Bouillat. Ils ont eu l'air stupéfaits quand ils m'ont vue.[...]J'étais naturelle, superficiellement. Mais je vivais un cauchemar." BERR, 1942-44, 9.6.1942, CDJC.

41 An order that forced the Jews to wear the yellow star came into effect in France on 29.5.1942. See for example BERR, 2009, 42 (note 8).

Deborah Dwork, who has researched the fates of persecuted Jewish children, states that many children and young people became fully aware of their own Jewishness only when their separation and labeling started. Especially the forced use of the Star of David, which also Hélène Berr had to experience, had that kind of effect.⁴² The system that oppressed the Jews had the power to make especially the younger of them see and feel themselves as somebody Other. As a reaction to that, some young people even wanted to deny that they were Jews.⁴³ The force from above to face one's own Jewishness was thus sometimes very traumatic to the youngest Jews. It was traumatic even to already 21-year-old Hélène Berr.

The Jews of Western Europe were tightly integrated into the secular society in the beginning of the twentieth century. They were often from wealthy and well-educated families. They supported western liberalism and aimed at an individual identity beyond religion and nationality. The young people did not necessarily know much about their Jewish roots.⁴⁴ This applies also to the two diarists analysed here. Based on their diaries, at least, one can assume that their families were relatively secularised. Elisabeth Kaufmann's diary includes no reference to Jewish traditions or religious festivities. Even if her parents practiced their religion, their daughter did not think that Jewish traditions were worth mentioning in her diary.

Hélène Berr, on the other hand, did not remain completely silent about her Jewish background in the diary, although she did not necessarily talk about it to her gentile acquaintances. Berr even writes about her visit to a synagogue once, although she had not enjoyed the visit much because there were no young people and she knew only few persons attending the service.⁴⁵ She also mentions the Jewish fest Jom Kippur in autumn 1942 but does not describe how her family celebrated it. It seems, however, that the Berrs did not fast before and during the fest that year according to the tradition. At least Hélène herself opted out of fasting because, according to her own words, she rather

42 DWORK, 1991, pp. 20-27. See also BRENNER, 1997, p. 8.

43 HALL, 2002, p. 228; ZAPRUDER, 2002, p. 68. Hall's example is about the effect of colonisation on the identity of the black indigenous people.

44 BRENNER, 1997, pp. 8, 17; TURTAINE, 1995, p. 26. Philosopher Hannah Arendt argues, however, that the Jews were never fully accepted as members of the European society. In spite of their efforts to assimilate, they always remained outsiders and could not wholly escape their roots, whether they wanted to do so or not. See ARENDT, 1978 (1944), pp. 67f.; FELDMAN, 1978, p. 18.

45 BERR, 1942-44, 11.9.1942, CDJC.

wanted to help others. She names her fasting work mates at UGIF in her diary, though.⁴⁶ Although she did not always follow all its rules, Jom Kippur must thus have been a somehow meaningful fest to Berr. Maybe her family had celebrated it more properly before the war and persecutions.

Nevertheless, Berr also mentions Christmas – but not Hanukkah – in the diary in December 1943. She writes about Christmas trees she has decorated to delight the – at least partially – Jewish children whom she helps.⁴⁷ One can also read between the lines that Berr and her family possibly ate pork that is forbidden in the Jewish religion.⁴⁸ The Jewish traditions and festivities appear to have been a bigger part of Berr's identity than they were to Kaufmann but even the Berrs were not very strict with their religious practices. One can see the effect of the eating habits of western gentiles and even Christianity in Berr's writings – synchronic cultural transfer from western culture to a girl with a Jewish background.

Berr's stance on the Jewish part of her identity was very complex. This complexity is already apparent in the diarist's thoughts about wearing the Star of David. At first, she plans not to obey the new law at all because wearing the star would be a shameful sign of submitting to the German orders. However, Berr finally decides to obey the law since doing the contrary would be cowardly towards the other Jews. "But if I wear it, I always want to be very elegant and dignified so that people see what it means."⁴⁹ Berr was thus able to feel at least a little proud about her Jewish background. On the other hand, it appears that she had hidden her religion even from her new, catholic boyfriend before the yellow star revealed the truth.⁵⁰ Berr's diary does not tell why she did that, but it seems that she was afraid that he would start treating her differently if he knew about her Jewishness. On the whole, she wanted people to see her as herself, not as the representative of all the suffering Jews who must be commiserated. Berr notes in her diary that wearing the star has turned walking on the streets into a constant, forced representation. She must have

46 BERR, 1942-44, 20. and 22.9.1942, CDJC.

47 IBID., 22.12.1943.

48 IBID., 16.6.1942. The family Berr had an own farm in Aubergenville. According to the diary, they got their fruit and vegetables from there but brought also pig meat to the city. Berr does not clarify, however, whether the meat was sold or the family ate it themselves.

49 "Seulement, si je le porte, je veux toujours être très élégante et très digne, pour que les gens voient ce que c'est." BERR, 1942-44, 4.6.1942, CDJC. See also BERR, 1942-44, 9.6.1942, CDJC.

50 BERR, 1942-44, 8.6.1942, CDJC.

found that particularly problematic. Elsewhere in the diary, she often points out that Judaism is just a religion, nothing else. Berr strongly resisted an idea of Jews as a unified nation, not to mention as a race.⁵¹ Nevertheless, the law about the Star of David forced Hélène Berr to re-construct her identity. As everyone could now see her background, being a Jew also became a bigger part of her own perception of herself.

However, being a Jew was only one side of Berr's and Kaufmann's cultural identity. It appears in their diaries that a sense of belonging to some nation and having a home country was at least as important to them, if not more, as their Jewish background. They transferred the idea of national identification to their texts. It is important to an individual to be able to identify him/herself as a part of something bigger – as a member of a certain group, state or nation, for instance. As noted by Hall, social anthropologist Ernest Geller has stated that the absence of the feeling of national identification would cause a deep sense of subjective loss.⁵²

Especially Elisabeth Kaufmann, whose family had fled to France after the annexation of Austria, seems to have based her identity strongly on her Austrian roots. She saw herself first and foremost as an Austrian, not as a Jew. In fact, she never even directly mentions that she is a Jew in her diary. One of the rare cases when Kaufmann uses the word Jew is when she compares her friend Vilma to the Jews fleeing from Egypt. Even there, she does not give any hint about her own Jewish background but writes as if she were an observer from outside.⁵³ She writes about “us Austrians” instead, with whom she identifies herself and distinguishes from the others, especially from the Frenchmen. She describes her family's flight from Vienna to Paris with the word “emigration” – she seemed to think, or wanted to think, that they were emigrants, not Jewish refugees.⁵⁴ Kaufmann also often expresses her longing for Vienna and the good old times, when her family, although not so well-off as the previous generations, could still hold on to the bourgeois lifestyle:

How can [...] these girls understand that I can indeed ice-skate and own also skates that I still have from Vienna but don't have the money to pay the entrance fee? [...] When I lived in Vienna I wasn't aware of it, but it becomes

51 BERR, 1942-44, 29.6. and 27.7.1942, 9.11. and 31.12.1943, CDJC.

52 HALL, 2002, pp. 45f.

53 KAUFMANN, 1940, 11.6., USHMM.

54 IBID., 26.2., 10., 17. and 24.3., 13. and 22.5., 6. and 13.-14.6.

clear to me now that we were living much beyond our incomes even then and still permitted us the pleasures that didn't meet our material situation. [...] [H]ere in the emigration the attempt to maintain the culture and tradition doesn't die out, yet the means have shrunk from minimum to nothing. [...] [W]e still try, with all the possible and unlikely means, to cut out the so called "Luxus" [...] as little as possible. So [...] I couldn't refuse to go skating.... to some extent as a social duty.⁵⁵

The group Kaufmann identified herself with and felt pride for was the Viennese well-off bourgeoisie. Even in the "emigration", her family, who had almost completely lost their incomes, still tried to live like they used to in Vienna. Kaufmann tried to keep up especially with her school mates at the art school and did not want them to notice the poor state of her family.

Kaufmann emphasises her Austrian identity in the diary but the years in Paris had an effect on her, too. Although Kaufmann's diary is written in German and she uses Austrian expressions like "Servus" in it, there is also some French in the diary.⁵⁶ Before the German occupation of Paris, she often expresses her support to and trust in the French army and the allied forces. She even once refers to France with the pronoun *wir* (we) in that context.⁵⁷ In addition to the language and the country at war, also the city influenced and inspired Kaufmann. She learned to love Paris and describes its beauty with great enthusiasm: "The broad alley [...] gives me certain euphoria through its beautiful green area [...]. It's difficult to decide what I love the most in Paris.

55 "Wie können [...] diese Mädchen verstehen, dass ich zwar eislaufen kann und auch Schlittschuhe besitze, die ich noch aus Wien habe, aber nicht das Geld mir den Eintrittspreis zu zahlen? [...] Als ich mich in Wien lebte wusste ich es nicht, aber jetzt wird es mir klar, dass wir schon damals recht weit über unsere Verhältnisse hinaus lebten und uns immer noch Vergnügungen leisteten, die unserer materiellen Lage nicht entsprechen. [...] [H]ier in der Emigration das Bestreben Kultur und Tradition aufrecht zu erhalten nicht erloschen, die Mitteln jedoch von einem Minimum zum Nichts vertrocknet sind. [...] [W]ir versuchen noch immer mit allen möglichen und unwahrscheinlichen Mitteln möglichst wenig von dem alten, sogenannten 'Luxus' [...] aufzugeben. So [...] ich es mir nicht versagen konnte Eislaufen zu gehen.... gewisser Massen als gesellschaftliche Pflicht." KAUFMANN, 1940, 5.5., USHMM. See also KAUFMANN, 1940, 4.4., USHMM.

56 KAUFMANN, 1940, 13. and 28.5., 10. and 14.6., USHMM.

57 IBID., 18. and 24.5., 5.6.

It's just clear that I love it. [...] [T]he charm of Paris doesn't end [...]. It gives me joy...⁵⁸

Based on her diary, Elisabeth Kaufmann built her identity especially on her former home country Austria and still wanted to live like the members of the Viennese well-off middle class. However, two years in Paris had already started to shape her identity into new direction. Belonging to a certain nation appears to have been more important to her than being a Jew, though. Nevertheless, it must be pointed out here that Kaufmann's diary is from the year 1940, when no Jew in France had to carry the labeling Star of David yet. Being in exile, or an emigrant, as Kaufmann wanted to be called, the feeling of otherness was, then again, already familiar to her.

Whereas Elisabeth Kaufmann identified herself with the Austrians, Hélène Berr's beloved country was France. It appears in Berr's diary that being French was at least as important a part of her identity as being a Jew, if not more. She started to hate and despise the Germans she had to face on the streets of Paris every day and who thought that she, a native French, did not belong in her own home country. One of those encounters made Hélène open up in her diary: "[T]hose men there, those *foreigners* who would never understand Paris or France, claimed that I wasn't French and considered that Paris belonged to them, that rue de Rivoli was their property."⁵⁹ The presence of the occupiers strengthened Berr's national feelings. How some foreigner dared to march proudly through her home town like its owner and, at the same time, denied her nationality only because she happened to be a Jew? Berr also uses an expression "by us in France" and wonders why the Germans do not seem to realise how much the deported Jewish families miss the country where many of their ancestors have already settled themselves centuries ago. Based on the diary, also Berr's parents had a strong French identity.⁶⁰ Belonging to the French people thus formed a firm basis in Hélène Berr's identity. Even though

58 "Die breite Allée [...] gibt mir durch ihre schöne Anlage ein gewisses Hochgefühl [...]. Es ist schwer zu bestimmen, was ich an Paris zum meisten liebe. Fest steht, dass ich es liebe. [...] [D]er Charme von Paris hört nicht auf [...]. Ich habe meine Freude daran..." KAUFMANN, 1940, 28.5., USHMM. See also KAUFMANN, 1940, 8.4., USHMM.

59 "[C]es hommes-là, ces *étrangers* qui ne comprendraient jamais Paris ni la France, prétendaient que je n'étais pas française, et considéraient que Paris leur était dû, que cette rue de Rivoli leur appartenait." BERR, 1942-44, 30.10.1943, CDJC. Italics in the original.

60 BERR, 1942-44, 9. and 14.11.1943, 13.12.1943, CDJC.

the persecution made her also think more about her Jewish background, national identity was still very important to her.

The analysis of these two Jewish diarists' identity, as they express and present it in their diaries, has brought to light yet another layer of cultural transfer written in the memory box discussed in this article. The cultural identity of a persecuted young Jew was very complex and flickering – a combination of a fortified, partly forced identification with the fellow Jews and, on the other hand, often strong sense of national identity. Being in exile from one's home country, as in case of Elisabeth Kaufmann, made identity building even more complicated. When one approaches a diary as a memory box, the encapsulation of this complex process of identity construction becomes apparent in its pages.

Conclusion

I have used the concept of memory box as a tool to analyse diaries in this article. I argue that the diary fits well to this concept. It has an easily identifiable agent or creator (a diarist), it is in a form that has great potential to become public and it has its own audience (the readers) – even if only the diarist him/herself is the public. This audience attaches different, specific meanings to the diary by reading and interpreting it from their own perspectives and starting points. If one approaches memory boxes in a less abstract way, the diary as a concrete artefact that you can open and touch, carry and move, is very easy to picture as a box. It is a box that encapsulates and makes movable the memory of the time and place in which it was created, in all its complexity and variety.

Approaching the diary as a memory box opens up new possibilities and viewpoints to a researcher. It is a tool that can be very helpful for the historical and cultural analysis of diaries. Imagining a diary as a box that has many different layers inside is an eye-opening experience. It is a very concrete and, at the same time, in-depth way to approach one's source material. In case of the diaries analysed in this article, I have taken three specific layers into consideration: I started from the material side of the diary and looked at the cover, paper and handwriting, continued with the layer of conventions and motives behind diary writing and, finally, picked the layer of cultural identity of the diarists from the box. Already this short glimpse has showed how many-

sided diaries can be. All their dimensions deserve to be taken into consideration.

As mentioned earlier, memory boxes are vehicles of cultural transfer. The makers of the memory box discussed in this article, Hélène Berr and Elisabeth Kaufmann, made their memories into a movable form by keeping a diary. The other thing made movable, more or less unconsciously, was the cultural transfer in diary writing and in diarists' evolving identities. Thinking of a diary as a memory box helps to see the cultural transfer present in all its dimensions. The young diarists living in the middle of war and persecution were influenced from both western and Jewish cultures and ways of life. That is apparent already in their ways and motives of keeping a diary and, above all, in their identity construction process analysed through their diary notes.

In this article, I have mostly concentrated on the time when the diaries analysed here were written – the memory box was created – and given voice to the diarists. However, it is not only the agent or creator of the memory box that gives meanings to it. Also the subsequent openers – the public of the box – have an important role in filling it. It should not be forgotten that the publicity that constantly shapes and modifies a certain memory box can include also academic research. Berr's and Kaufmann's diaries moved in time and were displaced into my subjects of analysis. I, as a twenty-first century European reader, approach a Jewish diary from the 1940s with retrospective eyes. That affects the reading. The diarist did not know what their fate would be – the reader knows. Today's reader also has more general knowledge about the persecution of Jews and the Second World War than the diarist living those events could have. I am aware that I look at this memory box from a different perspective than its creator. Even the process of writing the article on hand has thus added yet another layer to the box.

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