What Was Left, What Was Saved: Reflections on Jewish Objects of Migration

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The interior in which one lives is a playground, limiting and framing one's movements. One arranges oneself and the interior by filling it with objects. It is precisely the rearrangement and reordering of objects, furniture, collected knickknacks, books, clothes—their sorting out, placing, moving again, rearranging or not rearranging—that generates one's own living text, which is rewritten over and over again. It is inescapably linked to the resident who is the author of this text. When one moves, the story usually does not start completely from scratch, but certain aspects of the housing texture remain.

When Sigmund Freud has to emigrate from his home in Vienna to London because the SA is already at his door on 15 March 1938, just one day after the Nazis have marched into Vienna, this is exactly what happens. The flight becomes the occasion for an involuntary repetition: Freud has his Vienna rooms photographically documented and attempts to rebuild his "original study," as James Putnam calls it, in London (Putnam 2005, 154). The new rooms in Hampstead, 20 Maresfield Gardens, become a kind of reenactment of the old ones in Vienna, 19 Berggasse. There, he also places his private collection. The founder of psychoanalysis had placed around three thousand antique and ethnological statuettes, vessels and fragments in his practice rooms in Vienna.[1] These things

1 To my knowledge, there has been no research on the colonial context of Freud's collection. The most recent exhibition at the Freud Museum London, *Freud's Antiquity: Object, Idea, Desire*, does not seem to address this either. At the very least,

from the ancient world, primarily Egypt, Mesopotamia, India, and Greece, populated the crowded display cases next to Freud's couch and kept him company on his desk (Fig. 2.1): "My old and dirty gods, so little acknowledged by you," Freud wrote to his friend Wilhelm Fliess in 1899, "take part in the work as manuscript weights" (Freud 1986, 399, translation mine). These are rather inconspicuous artifacts from antiquity, ancient remains, in which Freud's interest in cultural memory structures became apparent and which he even took with him on holiday in part as travel companions (Marinelli 1998b, 11–12). In exchange for paying a so-called *Reichsfluchtsteuer* ("Reich escape tax"),[2] Freud is able to take his ancient Roman, Greek, Egyptian, and Asian figurines and move with them to the new house in London (Davies 1998, 100). Anticipating his approaching death, Freud describes in 1938: "Admittedly, the collection is now dead, nothing more will come to it" (Archive Sigmund Freud Museum Vienna, quoted in Marinelli 1998b, 10, translation mine). In this way Freud points out that a collection must be kept active and alive by constantly changing its objects and therefore its meanings. A year later he dies.

Thus, even before its official musealization, Freud's residence in London is permeated by various stills: by the memory of the old place via photography as a medium of fixation, and by the collection, which per se signifies a form of standing still. It can always be mobilized again, but Freud notices the anticipated end because the collection's order is not set in motion by the acquisition of new pieces. Finally, with Freud's death and later that of his daughter Anna Freud, the transformation of his living space into a museum follows in 1986. The official musealization entails a reordering of the spaces and the things in the spaces. Later on, the curator James Putnam will use these rooms at the Freud Museum in

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Anna Parker (2023) criticizes in her review of the exhibition that it ignores imperial and colonial networks to which Freud's collection owes its existence. I have a different focus in this essay, but I would like to point out this blank space.

2 In total, Freud's family had to pay a "Reich escape tax" of 31,529 Reichsmark, one-third of the assessed value of their possessions (Davies 1998, 100).

London, with their various layers of stills, to present artistic settings that comment upon and reflect these particular objects collected by Freud.

Figure 2.1: Sigmund Freud's writing desk in his office in Vienna as it looked in 1938 before his emigration to England when Germany annexed Austria. Freud's books were labeled "Jewish Science" and burned by Nazis.

Source: Photograph courtesy of The Everett Collection

First of all, it should be noted that with his forced emigration, Freud also takes his objects with him. These are objects that had probably already undergone many migrations,[3] but that migrated again with their owner. On the one hand, these objects include Freud's private collection, which is part of the emigration and is, as such, an object of migration. On the other hand, they also include other objects from his former practice rooms in Vienna. One of the most famous exile objects is also part of Freud's interior: his divan, on which he analyzed his patients. It has

3 See note 1.

entered the visual archive of images that appear when psychoanalysis and the so-called "talking cure" come to mind. However, few people are aware that it is an object of migration, located in London and not in Vienna. Time and again, tourists appear at the Sigmund Freud Museum Vienna and miss the famous piece of furniture. Freud's couch appears de-spatialized and de-timed, and the Jewish perspectives on the object are faded out.

Jewish Objects

Yet can Freud's private collection and his divan be considered Jewish objects of migration? To address this question, it is first necessary to clarify what a "Jewish object" is. Cilly Kugelmann notes critically that not every object that belongs to a Jew automatically becomes a Jewish object (*Jüdische Geschichte Kompakt* 2022). What Gertrud Koch says about films as an object of Jewish studies possibly applies to objects with Jewish connotations: it matters less whether the producers or possessors "belong halakhically,[4] culturally, or ethnically to Judaism; see themselves as Jewish; or are attributed to Judaism by others" (Koch 2021, 429, translation mine). Rather, what is significant is whether the objects "focus on aspects of Jewish life, historical constellations that were decisive for the life of Jewish collectives and individuals" or bring them to the fore in a significant way (ibid.). Therefore, it is essential to make the history of the concrete object transparent and to make clear why this object is in this place at this time and in no other. The fact that Freud's divan and his private collection are in London and not in Vienna is the consequence of his persecution as a Jew and his resulting forced migration. Due to his prominence as an intellectual and the assistance provided by numerous other people, including Marie Bonaparte, he was able to save his life in exile, along with a large portion of his objects. The materiality and the

4 Rabbinic Judaism established the halakha, the code of conduct for observant Jews. According to the halakha, a Jew is one who is born by a Jewish mother. Ancient Israel did not know this definition. See von Braun (2021, 15).

history of the objects reveals itself differently in this new living context, even if the auratic power of something like the divan, on which many patients had already lain in Vienna, resonates too.[5] Only by bringing in a Jewish perspective is it possible to perceive the object in all its facets.

In another object from Freud's private collection, by contrast, the Jewishness seems to stand out very clearly: the medieval Hanukkah candelabra, an oil candelabra that hung on the wall (Marinelli 1998a, 153). Like a lot of the objects of his collection, however, it is marked with an inventory number, suggesting that Freud did not understand it as a ritual object but as part of his collection (Marinelli 1998b, 10).

Ceremonial objects like the Hanukkah candelabra that are part of Jewish sacred rituals are usually very decisively perceived as Jewish objects. Yet even here, according to Kugelmann, it is less about the object than about the ceremonial action performed with the object (*Jüdische Geschichte Kompakt* 2022). This is also due to the fact that Jewish culture—with its objects—is deeply routed in experiences of diaspora. The word "diaspora" crystallizes an essential feature of Jewish history: a complex dialectic of exile and domicile (Feierstein 2021, 101). Jewish culture is based on the text as well as the law, which is not territorially anchored. Even a space like the synagogue, according to Feierstein, does not become Jewish through certain characteristics, but through what happens in it, through action: "Doing instead of being, text instead of space" (ibid., 109, translation mine). Accordingly, it is not only the notion of a "Jewish object" that is difficult to grasp, but even the attribution "Jewish." When Jewish culture is regarded as a diasporic one that is less oriented toward space than toward ritual and actions, the question of which objects belong to it can be answered very differently. Various answers are provided by the Jewish museums themselves, which exhibit ceremonial objects as well as objects from the secular Jewish world. Their answers to the question of what is Jewish are also the subject of heated debate (Kugelmann 2021, 500). Thus, what can and cannot be defined as "Jewish" is constantly being renegotiated. This applies equally

5 According to Andreas Grote (1994, 14), the "auratic object" refers to a context of meaning and symbolizes a context.

to objects that are not in Jewish museums and yet are located precisely at the interface between the Jewish and non-Jewish worlds—an exchange in which Jewish objects are permanently engaged anyway (*Jüdische Geschichte Kompakt* 2022). For this reason, when we talk about Jewish objects of migration, we are moving in a field that is not clearly defined.

Objects of Migration / Objects of Belonging

The dimension of migration with regard to Jewish objects, by the same token, is clearer. As the products of a diasporic culture, Jewish objects have per se been marked by diverse migrations since the destruction of the Second Temple in Jerusalem in the year 70 CE. For the German context and the twentieth century, it is of course relevant that countless objects of Jewish culture were destroyed or dispersed during the Shoah. This is a double loss of things (*Jüdische Geschichte Kompakt* 2022). Especially after the end of the war in 1945, material evidence of Jewish culture in Germany was almost nonexistent (Kugelmann 2021, 499). This is because, with the Nazi takeover and the persecution and murder of the Jews, as well as the destruction of Jewish culture, the holdings of Jewish museums in Europe were "looted or destroyed, and what remained was distributed to Jewish centers overseas" (ibid., translation mine) This may lead to strange situations in which one has to go to South America, for example, in order to learn about a German-Jewish shoemaker (*Jüdische Geschichte Kompakt* 2022). Jewish museums in Germany are thus faced with the problem of often having too few or even no artifacts relating to Jewish history and culture. Therefore, it is important to search for objects that still exist but hitherto have not been on display.

Initiatives such as the project "Unboxing Past" by Helgard Haug / Rimini Protokoll, often linked to artistic research, are working on making these visible. In cooperation with the Jewish Museum Frankfurt, the Archaeological Museum Frankfurt, and its archaeologist Thorsten Sonnemann, 513 archive boxes labeled "Synagogue" or "Judengasse" ("Jews' lane") have been opened since mid-2020. They have been in storage at the Archaeological Museum Frankfurt since 1987 and 1990, when the founda-

tions of the synagogue that was destroyed by the Nazis in 1938 and finds from the former "Judengasse" were uncovered during construction work.

After quickly being archived, these objects were not further processed and thus fell into oblivion. The artistic project has now triggered active work on the archive again and accorded it a visual and communicative form. "Unboxing Past" is accompanying the opening of the archive boxes. It initiates public conversations in real or virtual space that deal with questions of personal memory linked to objects. In the course of these conversations, one approaches the objects in the archive box. The work of the archaeologist, who normally works in secret, thus becomes part of a shared social process of remembrance. The forgotten objects of Jewish origin are given a public space again and are remembered.

However, the shards, the tiles, the brutally destroyed Torah shrine, the everyday objects are not so much objects of migration, even if they indirectly point to the forced migration, the flight and deportation of the Jews. Rather, they are objects of belonging. They are things that share a common history with their place of origin: German-Jewish objects from Frankfurt. Violently expelled and destroyed in the past, archived but forgotten for decades, they are now reasserting their place and becoming present. At the same time, they continue to carry their history of destruction with them.

Other objects are also currently becoming present again, especially those from everyday culture that are shaped by Jewish perspectives and histories of migration, even if they cannot be described as "Jewish" per se. Especially in the recent past—such as with the migration of Jews from the former Soviet Union to Germany—a great many everyday objects whose stories are Jewish have migrated with them. Since 2017, the Jewish Museum Berlin has dedicated itself to these objects through the "Object Days" project, under the motto "Show us your story!" So far, more than seventy people have told their stories to the Jewish Museum through objects. "The objects they took with them to Germany—photographs, letters, ceremonial items, dishes, clothing, etc.—illustrate their very personal stories and connections to Judaism" (Gromova, Lewinsky, and Ziehe 2018). Interestingly, it is the declared aim of the

Jewish Museum Berlin to expand its holdings in this way: "The Jewish Museum Berlin intends to acquire more objects related to migration because it has been a constitutive element of the Jewish community in Germany since 1945" (ibid.) The objects are often photographs, items of clothing, pictures, books, and household items such as crockery. They bear witness to former homes, professions, love relationships, friends, and family members. Frequently, they are linked to the history of the Shoah. For example, Viktoria Shtivelman, born in 1940 in Zaporizhzhia (USSR, now Ukraine) and living in Germany since 2002, shows a photo and a wedding cloth:

> The photo shows our family in Omsk during the evacuation in 1944. My parents, my brother, and me. I remember when survivors of the Siege of Leningrad were transferred to Omsk. They couldn't get used to throwing out potato peels. They would wash them and dry them on windowsills. My mother always kept a bag of bread rusks under a bench, which she replaced from time to time, and a bundle of documents. So we could run away with the essentials at any time. The wedding cloth was embroidered by my friend. She gave it to me as a going-away present. This summer, I passed it on to my grandson, to the next generation. A wedding cloth bearing the words "bread" and "salt" is a national [Ukrainian] custom, not a Jewish one. (Ibid.)

The objects take on their meaning through their owner's story. They tell of memory, origin, belonging, of lack and persecution. The "Object Days" project has initiated the significant process of giving voice to the memory of a part of the migrated Jewish community. It is an active attempt to prevent repression and to ensure that important stories are not forgotten and repressed again.

Artistic Readings of the Objects of Migration

Figure 2.2: Sophie Calle, The Wedding Dress, *Appointment with Sigmund Freud, Freud Museum London, 1999.*

Source: © VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2023

Sigmund Freud's concern was to use psychoanalysis to create spaces in which something repressed is allowed to come to the fore. He argued that if this does not happen, effective disturbances occur, because the repressed always makes itself felt. Freud's project also had a much larger dimension in mind. He aimed to dissolve not only individual repressions and disturbances, but also social defense mechanisms through the memory work of psychoanalysis. Many artistic positions refer to his concepts of psychoanalytical memory work. Since 1988, the French artist Sophie Calle has been engaging in an artistic form of memory work in her series called "Autobiographical Stories," which she often shows in text-

image installations. Her supposedly personal stories become alien stories that are combined with those of other people (Kittner 2009). In an object version of the "Autobiographical Stories," she combines the short, sober texts with mementoes that seem to have personal connotations. With these objects, she also challenges museum displays, such as the Freud Museum in London in the 1999 exhibition "Appointment with Sigmund Freud," curated by James Putnam.

In the form of a wedding dress, her autobiographical story "The Wedding Dress" occupies the most prominent place in the house: the Freudian divan (Fig. 2.2). An old-fashioned white wedding dress can be seen, spread out in full length on the divan. Almost literally, the narrator lies down on Freud's couch as a client. She stages a role-play in a disguise without a body. For this dress, this shell, is the skin of her phantasm, so to speak, as becomes clear in the accompanying story, in which the female protagonist encounters the long-awaited childhood hero in a wedding dress when she becomes his lover:

> I always admired him. Silently, since I was [a] child. One November 8th—I was thirty years old—he allowed me to pay him a visit. He lived several hundred kilometres from Paris. I had brought a wedding dress in my valise, white silk with a short train. I wore it on our first night together. (Calle 2005, 79)

The typological link between childhood and adulthood is specific to Calle's autobiographical narrative perspective. The viewers here are witnesses to a double role-play: the bridal gown of the beloved repeats in adulthood a childhood fantasy, namely the fantasy of appropriating the symbol of femininity that the woman wears at the rite of passage, the wedding and the first night. The symbol of this female metamorphosis now occupies Freud's divan as a client. The autobiographical role-play becomes a cast, the artistic setting a session. The game tips over into an agonal figure: a competition of autobiographically connoted collections emerges and, with it, a competition of authorship. In her appropriation and exaggeration, Calle uses Freud's narrative to establish her own all the more strongly. The frame of his autobiographically coded interior

and collection exhibited by the museum, and its authorship, becomes the springboard to install Calle's own authorship. For not only does the artist fit into the Freudian narrative, but the narrative of the psychoanalyst—of which his collection is a part—now always finds its vanishing point in Calle's narratives. On a meta level, however, the typological narrative also thematizes the reciprocal illumination of the present by the past, inspired by Freud. The narrator of Calle's stories acts out her desire to bring the past, which is not past, into the present. The past asserts its place in the installation, literally: the phantasm occupies the divan as a garment cover. In its presence, the object takes the space it needs and is thus metaphorically released to the psychoanalytic pattern of interpretation.

Like many of the artist's object-text installations, the story revolves around the void, the absent: in this case, the absent refers to the artist's body, the body of the lover. This can be interpreted in different ways in the context of visual autobiographies: for example, as the autobiographer's blind spot in her view of herself, as the impossibility of writing, or as showing her own end/death. But through the divan, it is also about the absent Freud and thus indirectly about the Jewishness of the exile object. Calle's story, superimposed on this prominent Jewish exile object, revolves around the very desire whose existence Freud brought to light through psychoanalysis in the first place. It revolves around the mutual illumination of the present by the past and vice versa.

Sophie Calle is not explicitly concerned with the loss of people, places, and objects through the Shoah. Nevertheless, something interesting happened in 2021 when she published the German edition of the "Autobiographical Stories," an artist's book entitled *Wahre Geschichten* ("True Stories"). The book appears to be dedicated to four people: "For Nichouma Krajka and Hélène Sindler, for Szoel Szyndler and Charles Sindler" (Calle 2021). Yet the artist explains in an interview:

> Nichouma Krajka was the name of my Polish-Jewish grandmother, Szoel Szyndler that of my French grandfather. During the war, they changed their names to Hélène and Charles Sindler in order to hide.

> I wanted to dedicate this book, this first German edition,[6] to their two identities: the one before the war and the one after. They never got rid of the fear. When I took the Trans-Siberian railway, they asked me not to set foot in either Poland or Germany. I complied and did nothing in Germany for a very long time. Not because of me, I have no problem with that at all, but because of them. For me, dedicating this book to them now is a way of telling them: you don't have to be afraid anymore, it's over, a lot of time has passed, we're going there together now. (Hirsch 2021, translation mine)

Calle herself, the master of playing between facts and fictions who always keeps the audience guessing, openly lays a trail to her Jewish origins here. From this Jewish perspective, her stagings of various voids and absences, her play with identities and maskings could be reinterpreted: behind this lies a specifically Jewish historical experience that corresponds with Freud's experience of persecution and flight. Thus, Freud's object and Calle's object begin to talk to each other. They talk about sexual desire and about the childlike joy of disguises, and at the same time about the absence of loved ones and the need to mask. Calle's "Wedding Dress" makes the divan visible in a new way and sets Freud's musealized collection in motion again. Her artistic intervention shows that objects of migration can be made to speak. However, the reference to their specifically Jewish context leads to other conversations. They unfold the complexity of the objects and show how they connect history and the present.

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6 This was not the first German edition of the "Autobiographical Stories." In 2004, Calle published *Wahre Geschichten* at the Prestel publishing house. At the time, however, there were only thirty-six stories, while the edition published by Suhrkamp in 2021 contains sixty-five ("Autobiographical Stories" is an ongoing project). The dedication to Calle's grandparents is not present in the earlier edition. It was not until 2021 that Calle felt it was important to make her Jewish origins visible.

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