Lists of Things

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Inventory
House without roof, child without bed, table without bread,
star without light.
River without bridge, mountain without rope, foot without shoe,
flight without destination.
Roof without house, city without friend, mouth without word,
forest without scent.
Bread without table, bed without child, word without mouth,
destination without flight.
(Mascha Kaléko 1985, 159; author's translation)

In 1943, a year after being deported to the Terezín (Theresienstadt) concentration camp, the young Helga Weissová (b. 1929) did a watercolor painting of her parents in their Prague flat.[1] Her father, wearing a suit with a yellow star sewn onto his jacket front, hunches over a writing desk. Her mother, behind him, is bent over a chest of drawers full of linens bundled by pink ribbons, which she is piling on a stool and chair. Although the parents have their backs to one another, there is a tension between them as they engage in separate but shared tasks: he, in his scrawling hand, is making lists of the things that she removes from the drawers. List upon list has accumulated on the desk, suggesting that the

1 Following the terminology used by Leo Baeck, Terezín/Theresienstadt, where tens of thousands of people died and whence tens of thousands were sent to be killed, is referred to here as a concentration camp rather than as a ghetto or transit camp.

pair of them have been at it for some time—she sorting, he listing (Fig. 1.1).

Figure 1.1: Helga Weissová, List of Possessions.

Source: Courtesy of Wallstein Verlag

Already precocious with brush and pen, Weissová demonstrates a sophisticated perspective—located not, as might be expected of a child, from below or at head height, but from above. The furniture is angled away from the viewer, situating the vanishing point to the right and outside the frame of the painting so that the viewer's eye is drawn into the disoriented scene. We look, with the young painter, down upon the parents from our vantage in the present, as though through a window into the past where we are made privy to a moment of preparedness. The limited color palette of grey, green, and russet tones suggests that it may be evening. Is it late? Are the couple in a hurry? Are they dressed to leave? All we know is that the painting has captured a moment in which Weissová's subjects anticipate one future—a future in which preparedness will pro-

vide a safeguard against the unknown—while the viewer anticipates another, more calamitous outcome. This example of visual irony points simultaneously backwards and forwards in time, effectively ruling out the possibility that inventories can play a role in managing events that are yet to occur. Rather than functioning as a form of contingency planning, the making of lists merely captures the instant after which everything will irrevocably change.

Weissová's wartime paintings, of which there are some one hundred, depict the mechanics of life and death in three of the concentration camps where she was incarcerated. In her work, arrivals to Terezín can be seen struggling with their bundles of possessions, queueing for food, scavenging, huddling against the cold, crammed into sleeping quarters, cleaning, picking lice and fleas, and succumbing to diseases like typhoid and tuberculosis. As she shows, the camp prisoners also dream of better times, of plentiful food, family celebrations, and the return home; in Terezín, they can be seen celebrating holidays like Chanukah and organizing concerts and operas (Weissová 1998).[2]

The family spent some three years together in Terezín before Weissová's father was put on a so-called *Osttransport*, a transport to the East. Weissová and her mother would soon follow, being transported first to Auschwitz, and then to concentration camps in Freiberg and Mauthausen (Vaughan 2014). After the war, mother and daughter would return to Prague. Their possessions—inventoried by the parents and the inventorying inventoried by the daughter—had in the meantime been confiscated, stolen, destroyed, lost (Vaughan 2014). Mother and daughter returned to the emptied apartment, where Weissová eventually married and raised her own family, and where she continued to live into advanced old age. The apartment came to be filled with new things, not of the past but redolent thereof. As before, there was a piano; there

2 On cultural life in Terezín, see Adler (2017), chapter 19. Specifically, on artwork produced by children in the camp, see Rogoff (2019) and Dutlinger (2001), and on the role played by the artist Friedl Dicker-Brandeis in teaching art to the camp's children, see Wlaschek in Weissová (1998, 148), according to whom Weissová was not taught.

were rugs and paintings and a vase of flowers (photograph, Vaughan 2014). "I am attached to the apartment," she said in a 2014 interview, explaining her decision to remain living there. "Nothing was left, none of our possessions. But the memories were here" (Vaughan 2014).

In relation to her painting "List of Possessions," Weissová explained that preparedness was important. "It's better to be ready and not go anywhere than to get the transport unexpectedly." She went on to describe what this preparedness entailed:

> And so Jewish flats are turning slowly, or actually quite quickly, into warehouses of things needed for the journey. All the Jewish flats have been turned upside down, and ours is no exception. Everywhere—on tables, the chairs and the ground—are stacked suitcases, rucksacks, haversacks, sleeping bags, warm underwear, sturdy shoes, flasks, mess tins, torches, pocket first-aid kits, canteens, solid alcohol, candles… Everyone is getting ready for travel. (Weiss 2014, 21–22)

If her parents were concerned mainly with practicalities, for the child artist, decisions centered on toys. She and her friend agonized over which dolls to choose and how to prevent them being lost or confiscated. Favorite dolls were best hidden in her friend's coat pockets, they decided (Weiss 2014, 26).

The historian of Terezín H. G. Adler shows that regulations stipulated what could be taken on the transports ("only items of practical use," weighing up to 50 kg), while other regulations specified what was to be included in the owner's "hand luggage" (personal documents, passports, ration cards, IDs, bank books, jewelry, and insurance policies) (2017, 57–59). All remaining household possessions had to be listed on an extensive "Property Declaration" form that included "Home Furnishings and Household Items" (Adler 2017, 57–59). It is this that Weissová documents in her painting when she recalls that Jews were forced to submit an inventory of their property to the authorities (1998, 19). Having been forced to turn these inventories over to the authorities prior to leaving ("The property left behind in the homes of the evacuated Jews will be confiscated after their deportation") (G. Weiss, cited in Adler 2017, 795),

by mid-1942, all "accompanying luggage" on the transports was being confiscated and plundered as well (Adler 2017, 229, 608). These lists were no trivial thing. Adler concludes that the property declarations were instrumental in dispossessing Jews of their property, while the lists "registering" Jews were preparatory to the deportations (2017, 11), and so, by extension, preparatory to their deaths.

In some sense, then, equivalences were struck between things and people in the totalizing logic of the National Socialist system: people and their possessions were subjected to lists from which narrower selections could be made concerning what was to be retained and who was to survive. The sorting, listing, labeling, and documenting created an illusion of an object's history of rightful ownership—its provenance—as well as of existential continuity. To be listed was potentially to be preserved and to survive. Conversely, when officials in a Nazi extermination camp like Stutthof issued documents stating that no belongings had been transferred ("Keine Effekten übersandt") (Kwiet 2019), it was a cynical pronouncement on the fate of their owners in an extermination camp, where the non-transferal of personal effects signified the likely murder of their owners. For Weissová, the listing of household goods created a rupture: what had been meticulously catalogued by her mother and her father ensured neither continuity of ownership nor guarantee of survival. To the contrary, the list only expedited a certain kind of fate. "No, we never learned what happened to [my father]," Weissová would tell an interviewer in 2014, "because after the war we looked at all the lists, but we never found his name" (Vaughan 2014).

The importance of lists in Weissová's visual and literary accounts of the Holocaust warrants a closer look at what is meant by her term "inventory." By definition, the inventory is a list of a person's property, their "goods and chattels, or parcels of land" (*Oxford English Dictionary* 2023). According to conventional definitions, the inventory includes a determination of each item's purpose, meaning, and worth. Since the early modern period, making inventories has thus been associated with wills and testaments and hence with the transfer of property between heirs or between the individual and the state. More figuratively, the inventory is associated with cataloguing people's things and their properties. Travelers

to foreign places, for instance, were enjoined to compile "inventories" of those places by surveying a place's natural resources, its peoples and their practices (*Oxford English Dictionary* 2023). As a kind of proto-apodemic, or set of travel instructions, the inventory was not only a way of cataloguing what was potentially useful and exploitable but also a means of systematizing knowledge making. In formal terms, the inventory attempted to capture the totality of all that was worthwhile and materially valuable. Significantly, according to early definitions, the inventory was made "after [a person's] death or upon their conviction" (*Oxford English Dictionary* 2023). Preserved in the etymology of the word, then, is the sense that the inventory not only has an epistemological status in so far as it helps systematize knowledge making; it also connects to an ontological category that marks a change of state—whether from liberty to incarceration and life to death or, for the purposes of this analysis, from being settled to itinerant and emplaced to displaced.[3]

It is the inventory's relation to shifts in place, time, and being that is useful for our analysis of cultural production associated with flight and migration.[4] In contradistinction to studies of things in themselves, of material culture, and of objects' biographies and their imputed agency in the world (Appadurai 1986; Thomas 1991; Brown 2015), under discussion here is the representation of people's things in novels, memoirs, and art work dealing with forced migration and exile.[5] The things that are described and catalogued in these works stand in for the fullness and roundness of people's lives. These works thematizing the inventory show that to list things is to distill from a much broader set, the subset of what was meaningful and which constituted the owner's peculiar view on the world. The present inquiry into the depiction and function of inventories picks up on an idea in the novelist Abdulrazak Gurnah's *By the Sea*

3 On emplacement versus displacement, see Agnew (2020).

4 On the choice of the term "inventory" by artists Massimo Ricciado and Thomas Kilpper for their installation archiving objects taken by refugees across the Mediterranean, see Kittner (2021).

5 On the terminology "things of exile" and "objects in/of exile," see Bischoff and Schlör (2015) and Rossetto and Tartakowsky (2021).

(2001),[6] in which the main character describes himself in "not simple" terms as a "refugee, an asylum seeker" who, like many others, has arrived in a strange place "carrying little bits of jumbled luggage and secret and garbled ambitions" (4). In his encounter with the immigration official inspecting his one precious thing, a box of incense, the character imagines himself subjected to a "hermeneutics of baggage that is like following an archeological trail or examining lines on a shipping map" (7).

Following Gurnah's observation that the border arrival's things are subject to scrutiny and meaning making, this introduction—and, by extension, this volume—asks what a capacious, non-securitized "hermeneutics of baggage" might look like in relation to the forcibly displaced. In dialogue, rather than being at odds with the displaced, interpreting people's things holds a promise of reconstructed refugee routes, as well as possibilities for a deep dive into personal history, as Amy Lind shows of her relative in her chapter on the art historian and photographer Amy Conger's "double exile" from Chile and her home country, the United States. In the proposed hermeneutics of baggage lies a possibility for interpreting that extrapolates from the things people carried or intended to carry. Such a mode of interpreting looks backwards and forwards, examining the life that came before and the death, or possibilities for life, in what came after, all mediated through lists of things. For Alma-Elisa Kittner, writing in this volume about Freud's collection of ethnographic artifacts and classical antiquities, it is the continuity of his inventory taken from Vienna into London exile that allows intellectual work to go on, even while, by implication, the inventory in exile marks a double break from the things' yet-to-be-investigated colonial origins. As Gurnah's "jumbled luggage and secret and garbled ambitions" make clear, however, in any hermeneutics of baggage the possibility of fixing meaning remains elusive: "It was not my life that lay spread there," says the main character of *By the Sea*, "just what I had selected as signals of a story I hoped to convey" (2001, 8).

In what follows, this volume presents a series of case studies, ranging from Nazi Europe (Kittner) to Cold War conflicts in Vietnam (Kim

6 I am grateful to Debarati Sanyal for having drawn my attention to this work.

Huynh) and Chile (Lind) as drivers of refugeeism and exile. In the present, global conflict and persecution by authoritarian governments continue to force people from their homes and to frustrate creative and intellectual production ("Exile Things"; Gisela Ecker). As Kate Bonansinga shows, however, artists and makers are using creative work to build community, reshape public perceptions of migrants and refugees, and contribute to a different kind of economic model for artistic production, one based on collaboration. Examining the relation of people's inventories—their baggage—to their intellectual and creative production, the volume tracks their "signals," in Gurnah's words, of untold, or partially told stories. The larger investment in such a project comes from what these inventories tell us not only about individual lives wrenched apart by war and displacement, but also about larger political struggles for democracy, academic and creative freedom, racial justice, economic equality, and gender and sexual diversity and inclusion. As a marker of rupture that demarcates the end of one mode of being and the beginning of another, the inventory, so deeply personal, is also diagnostic. The inventory is conditioned by displacement in space, time, and being. Through its interpretation, we better understand the meaning of that displacement and the possibilities that displacement holds for the future.

What We Brought with Us, the project co-curated by the author and Annika Roux, and photographed by Jobst von Kunowski, involved interviewing scholars who had been forced into exile in Germany on account of their intellectual and creative work in repressive countries around the world. Here inventories have been reduced to single, self-selected, and representative things, the significance of which is conveyed in accompanying narratives. Other than by country of origin, contributors are not identified. This is due to the ongoing precarity of their situation, whether as continued potential targets of state-directed harassment or because of their insecure employment and migration status in their host country. Gisela Ecker, writing about this body of work, sets out the various theoretical contexts for interpreting what she refers to as their "objects of transition." Following a material cultural studies approach, these range from "telling objects" (Daston 2004), which have both literal and sym-

bolic meaning, to anthropological ones like Arjun Appadurai's (1998) and David Parkin's (1999), in which things liberated from their original contexts are resettled elsewhere to contribute to a "production of locality."

If creating inventories attempts to regulate the future, inventorying also attempts to manage the past. The pared-down inventory—a shirt and spoon—at the center of Huynh's family story returns us to Gurnah's "signals" of a larger, more complex tale in which possessions have different meanings to different people. Huynh's piece comparing and contrasting the at-odds interpretations of his mother and father serves as an important caution about the overdetermined way in which scholarship sometimes deals with material culture. Objects might stand in for belief systems and human relationships, but they are not the beliefs and relationships themselves. There is value, Huynh implies, in seeing things, literal and figurative, in more than one way.

Freud's list, his reconstructed study in London exile, with its exotic bits and bobs, is predicated on other kinds of lists—the ethnographies and colonial collections that divorced things from their original contexts and removed them to metropolitan centers. For Kittner, of concern is not only the definition of what constitutes a "Jewish" object, but what allows objects of migration to be liberated from their invisibility in the archive or fixity in unchanging collections, and thereby come to "speak." It is through the artist Sophie Calle's engagement with Freud's things, she argues, that Freud's "musealized collection" is finally set in motion.

Lind, in returning to Chile, deals with the most elemental thing of all, human matter, the substance of the person who in exile and as an "inner immigrant" was stripped of the connections to place, social ties, and liberation struggles that were important to her. Conger's inventory has been distilled from a large corpus of photographs, documents, writings, and possessions that had to be abandoned, hidden, and given away when she escaped detainment and torture by the military coup. As against the disappearances practiced by that regime, what Lind returns to Chile to make visible again are vestiges of the self, her aunt's ashes.

Conclusion

If inventories belong to the dead, imprisoned, and displaced, managing the inventory is the preserve of the living and free. What to take? The question fills the imagination of those who have never been forced to leave their home. Listing and packing are, after all, activities familiar to anyone who has traveled or been inclined to worry about the unforeseen. Making lists hedges against imagined eventualities: the absence of a bed, the need to remain clean, the question of how to navigate new surroundings or find solace in difficult circumstances. With list in hand, packing becomes manageable and, with that, the apparent manageability of an unknown future. Just as the inventory seems to regulate the future, it also invites conjecture. One interview subject, asked about what they would pack were they forced to flee, cast themselves as a *débrouillard*, someone capable of dealing with the exigencies of a life displaced.[7] They would take things useful to survival and conducive to comfort. "Having proper papers with you is also important," they would add, "because getting them replaced is really difficult" (Anonymous 2020), failing to recall that the possession of identifying documents can be a liability in an age of biometric data gathering (known formally in Germany as "Integrated Identity Management") and a securitized asylum process (Federal Office for Migration and Refugees 2024).

What the displaced take with them is thus not necessarily what the emplaced imagine they would take, nor do the things that accompany people correspond to lists made in advance. The lists were too long, things too heavy or impractical; the playing out of possibilities was overtaken by mental anguish and the accelerated time of impending departure. In the end, what was packed was a mish-mash of intention and happenstance. And it is this mish-mash that washes up on the beaches of Dover, Lesbos, Lampedusa, and Possession Island—life jackets, flip-

7 Lisa Fittko, the resistance worker who led Walter Benjamin over the Pyrenees in 1940, described the philosopher as lacking a certain adaptability. Schlepping a too-heavy briefcase, he was, she said, "no *débrouillard*" (2022, 154–55). See Taussig's discussion (2006).

flops, fishing tackle, the drowned; it is this mish-mash that can be gathered up in the Sonoran Desert—clothing, ID papers, water bottles, shoes, bones (Undocumented Migrant Project n.d.; De León 2015). For the living, to reconstruct inventories of people's things is to attempt to reconstruct the world as others experienced it. While it is necessary, as Kittner (2021) points out, to preserve the distinction between archives of documented migration and those of undocumented flight, equally important are distinctions between whether things are assumed to have independent agency, speaking for themselves, whether they are spoken about, or, as is largely the case in this volume, whether their meanings are narrated by their owners. As Tiya Miles reminds us, scholarship can draw on multiple types of evidence and archives be read against the grain. Though the lists be short and things few, histories can be compiled even when little remains. From the fabric sack embroidered with its one-time contents and handed from generation to generation, a thick description of an African American family's experience is pieced together in *All That She Carried* (2022) to tell rich stories about slavery and Black women's history.

Even so, perhaps there are also other possessions that were never inventoried and that appear on no lists. In Mascha Kaléko's telling, the inventory is a catalogue of the litotic, describing all that is lost in exile (1985, 159). For those perpetually displaced within Gaza, likely, there are no lists. Compounding the mass loss of life, and creating a condition for genocide, is the destruction of Palestinian cultural heritage in violation of the 1954 Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict (Millender and Lyubasky 2024). What possessions are left to take? For those who do survive, possibly all that remains is intangible heritage, things that are not things, and lists that are not lists of memories, songs, and thoughts.

> "We did not weep when we were leaving—for we had neither time nor tears, and there was no farewell." (Muhammed Ali 2006)

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