

## POSTMEMORIAL IRONY: SECOND GENERATION HOLOCAUST SURVIVORS AND THE CRISIS OF TRUTH

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### Abstract

Este trabajo, basado en entrevistas etnográficas, explora la identidad de los hijos de sobrevivientes de la Shoá en Argentina y Brasil. Con el pasar de los años y el fallecimiento de los sobrevivientes mismos, la segunda generación se enfrenta con la necesidad de articular su propia historia. Se indaga en el fenómeno de llegar a entender mejor el mundo psíquico de sus padres al toparse con las historias no contadas respecto a las experiencias traumáticas y las pérdidas de hijos y parejas anteriores durante la Shoá. Al explorar el impacto del trauma masivo dentro del núcleo familiar y la sensación de cierto exilio y desarraigo para el hijo que nace después del evento traumático mismo de la Shoá, se considera el acto de reivindicación que es llegar a conocer mejor el pasado silenciado. El trabajo incorpora un elemento autobiográfico, ya que la investigación lleva a la autora misma a unos descubrimientos sobre su propia familia.

**Palabras clave:** Holocausto, exilio, memoria, Argentina, Brasil, *Maus*, AMIA, demencia.

**Keywords:** Holocaust, exile, memory, Argentina, Brazil, *Maus*, AMIA, dementia.

## Introduction

The present work began with a pedagogical objective geared toward undergraduate students learning about post Holocaust Jewish migration to Latin America. I sought to gather documents and photos that second generation survivors might share with me as I looked to trace the trajectory of their families from Eastern Europe to South America. What appeared to be the groundwork for a digital mapping activity fit for the classroom grew exponentially. I am indebted to the generosity of the second generation (2G) survivors and their family members with whom I spoke over Zoom and WhatsApp from 2020-2022.<sup>1</sup> In Brazil: Gadi Siwek, his son Daniel and his niece Marcela, and in Argentina: Diana Wang, Aida Ender, Natalia Rus, Susana Grinspan, and Mirta Kupferminc.<sup>2</sup> Presenting my work at the 18th World Congress of Jewish Studies in 2022 allowed me to engage directly with scholars invested in these topics and I am grateful for the encouragement to expand my presentation into an article. While I had intended for this work to be strictly a scholarly project, the professional boundaries I sought to maintain ultimately drifted into personal waters that led me to an unexpected discovery regarding my own family. Stumbling into such knowledge has allowed me to reclaim my own experience as a child of Holocaust survivors. Hence, the urge to include autobiographical elements in this article.

## The Crisis of Truth

Theorists of memory studies and historical trauma grapple with the inaccessibility of the past given the inherent personal cost of fully witnessing a traumatic event. Coming into understanding regarding an

1 Second generation survivors will heretofore be referred to as “2G”.

2 Access to 2G interviewees was influenced by the onset of the covid-19 pandemic. The selection of individuals who became germane to this article was based upon the artifacts shared with me during a limited period as my initial intention was to curate a non-extensive archival resource to guide a digital mapping project for my students.

experience marked by massive trauma is predisposed to belatedness.<sup>3</sup> The latency that has come to define the aftermath of such trauma loads the second generation of Holocaust survivors with a retrospective weight that is elusive in its unconscious manifestation. Having lived the inheritance of Holocaust survival within my own family, working directly on the topic of the Holocaust somehow felt “off limits”. Throughout my career, I have understood that centering the Holocaust as my research focus would also mean trespassing into a deeply hidden and personal experience tied to my parents’ survival and my own existence. Nevertheless, the proverbial past has caught up with me.

Though we couldn’t expressly address the unmentionable in my childhood home, I witnessed my mother’s acting out of her trauma on a daily basis. Her accent and limited English would give her away when out in public and she would repeatedly field questions about her origins. In response, she would always insist she was *not* Polish but Jewish. This inevitably led to follow-up questions, which she could never answer as a knot blocked her airways and tears sprung from her eyes. Witnessing this throughout my childhood engendered an internal struggle. I harbored a persistent need to know the cause of her pain while wishing not to further agitate her.

### Time Flies

I was teaching a class entitled “From Auschwitz to Argentina” in 2019, the semester after my father suddenly died. Though I had taught the course before, I experienced it differently this time. I was grieving and my role as caregiver had become more intense for a variety of reasons. My mother was spiraling into the throes of dementia. Along with the expected physically and emotionally taxing reality of being in the sandwich

3 Cathy Caruth (coord.), *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, Baltimore 1995; Dori Laub, “Bearing Witness or the Vicissitudes of Witnessing”, in Shoshana Felman & Dori Laub (coords.), *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*, New York 1992, pp. 57-73.

generation, now primary caregiver to my mother as well as to my school-aged children, there was something else happening within me that I hadn't yet consciously articulated. As I was preparing for class, where we would be discussing Art Spiegelman's *Maus*, one of the illustrations affected me like never before. I took this in as a private nod, but hadn't ever intended to publicly discuss it. Little did I know at the time, an internal twinge — reminiscent of the recognition of the pain held in my mother's glance — would take root and propel the journey I write about here.

Throughout Art Spiegelman's two-part graphic memoir about his father's Holocaust survival, he draws himself as a mouse alongside his mouse father Vladek.<sup>4</sup> This is consistent throughout Book I of *Maus*, but changes noticeably in Book II when Spiegelman portrays himself *after* his father dies. Book II, chapter II, entitled "Time Flies," opens with Artie at the drawing table when he is trying to continue writing and illustrating (Fig. 1).<sup>5</sup>



Fig. 1

4 Art Spiegelman, *Maus I*, New York 1986.

5 Idem, *Maus II*, New York 1991, p. 41.

We see Artie the illustrator. Rather than a mouse, we see a man wearing a mouse mask. Artie must now intentionally focus in order to access a time and place that no longer belong to him in the same way since his father's death. His own identity has shifted. He revisits his mouse-roots, so to speak, in relation to the memory of his father. Yet, he does not embody the mouse fully any longer. He now wears a mask as he works to inhabit and represent the past. Having no living siblings and both of his parents having died, his mouse attributes — that of being a 2G survivor, of having lived in the shadow of his brother Richiev who did not survive the Holocaust — are invisible to others unless Artie asserts his identity as a child of Holocaust survivors; unless Artie tells the story of his parents' survival and the aftermath. As a now assimilated white man in the U.S., it is an identity that hangs in the balance, one that Artie must choose to perform or risk its erasure. Spiegelman's choice of mouse-face at this junction of his meta portrayal of the artist (auto)biographer is also an acknowledgment of an imposter syndrome children of survivors grapple with upon inserting themselves within the historical and personal legacy of the Holocaust.



Fig. 2

When we pan out to observe the four panels atop this page, we see Artie jumping between timeframes. He lists the significant events in his life, which seem rather trivial as he weighs them against the immensity of his father's survival of the camps (Fig. 2).<sup>6</sup> On the lower half of the page, the weight of Artie's responsibility is evident. As time passes, the cleverly dubbed "time flies" are pestering him and crumpled drafts of sketches appear as corpses beneath his desk. Despite the positive press linked to the publication of *Maus* Book I, Spiegelman's illustrations expose the dissonance Artie feels within: rather than relishing his success, he's depressed.<sup>7</sup> The central issue at the heart of his work is one of trauma and complicated grief. He ultimately confesses a personal and irreconcilable trauma: the haunting of his mother's suicide and the ongoing sense of abandonment he carries.

In the pages that follow, we visualize Artie's internal crisis as he physically shrinks before the media who interrogate him about profits and whether writing *Maus* was cathartic for him. The illustration emphasizes his child-like stature as he climbs up the armchair in his therapist's office. When his therapist — also wearing a mouse mask to make evident his own status as Holocaust survivor — asks how he's feeling, Artie replies: "Completely messed up. I mean, things couldn't be better with my 'career' or at home, but mostly I feel like crying".<sup>8</sup> The trope of his diminishing physical size is repeated when we see Artie become small upon listening back to recorded interviews with his father where he grapples with guilt and shame in hearing how insistent he was that his father speak of Auschwitz (Fig. 3).<sup>9</sup>

6 Ibidem.

7 Ibidem.

8 Ibidem.

9 Ibid., p. 47.



Fig. 3

To the viewers' and readers' relief, we then see Artie gradually grow back into his full-sized adult self after talking with his therapist (Fig. 4).<sup>10</sup>



Fig. 4

10 Ibid., p. 46.

This visual representation is striking in its deceptive simplicity. The 2G survivor studies these images with a relatable emotional investment and finds them self-affirming in the way they render how our own identity formation is tied to a past that we can never fully access. Whatever bits of truth we can come into knowing are integral to developing a more secure sense of belonging; to developing a more true-to-life-sized self. I had ignored how this was playing out in my own lived experience until I was literally blindsided by these illustrations in 2019 and felt myself mirrored by Artie in crisis at the drawing table. By December 2018, I was the sole heir of my family's history. With the relatively recent death of my only sibling and the sudden absence of my parents, came an intense realization: my identity as a descendant of Holocaust survivors became something I would need to explain all on my own.



Fig. 5

This is the family I was born into (Fig. 5). This photo predates me. My parents, my grandmother, and my brother. It was sometime between 1968-69. They were essentially stateless while fleeing Poland amid a violent resurgence of antisemitism. They spent nearly a year penniless in Rome, awaiting visas for the United States where they ultimately resettled in the Bronx.

### **Ania Frenkiel**

Only my mother Ania is currently living. She still recognizes me, but her dementia has reduced her speech to mere babble. Over the past several years, her use of language has ushered me on a journey I never could have anticipated. When her cognitive decline impacted her language significantly, some four years earlier, I rushed to acquire a textbook and met with a tutor so as to more fully understand a Polish that went beyond the day-to-day speech I had heard decades earlier in my childhood home. Ania was fully educated in Poland where she finished nursing school, practiced nursing, and was a highly esteemed instructor (Fig. 6).



Fig. 6 (Ania at far right in darker uniform).

She never intended to leave Poland, but when pushed out by antisemitism marking the mass departure among the “Generation of ‘68,” she worked hard at starting a new life without looking back.<sup>11</sup> The resentment she bore toward her once beloved Poland led her to muffle her mother tongue. I never expected that her dementia would offer me anything but literal and figurative grief. And yet, aspects of my mother’s earlier life performed themselves while I became her most attentive audience. As I was losing the mother I had always known, I was also being afforded an entry point into a part of her world that predated me; a world full of rhymes, lyrical poetry, and songs I hadn’t heard before.

While some of the psychic barriers have fallen away, allowing my mother to release into a fond past she left behind, she has also been re-exposed to a primal trauma linked to her early childhood during the Holocaust. For what other past would inspire an 80-year old woman of petite stature to remove her top dresser drawer full of clothing and haul it across her bedroom to blockade her door?; to tiptoe the public areas of the senior home, finger in hushed position while hiding behind furniture?; for what other past would have her pilfering napkins, cutlery, and hiding food in the recesses of her closet?; would cause her to meet me at the exit of her building, eyes wide in terror, insisting “they want to kill me” and then bathe me with gratitude for coming to get her as if she were being rescued? This all comes flooding in while looking at the panel of Artie at the drawing table. I hadn’t consciously realized that I too needed to articulate the story of my parents’ survival and reckon with our family story.

### **A Sort of Exile**

The interviews I began conducting with 2G survivors living in Argentina and Brazil during the pandemic became a lifeline that far surpassed my initial objective of creating a digital mapping project for my students.

11 Leszek Gluchowski & Antony Polonsky (coords.), *Polin: Studies in Polish Jewry Volume 21: 1968 Forty Years After*, Liverpool 2009.

Amid the isolation imposed by the pandemic, our conversations transcended geographic and temporal boundaries, creating empathic spaces and connections both painful and enriching. Argentine 2G survivor, Aida Ender, said something that has become central to my inquiry: “crecimos con la cicatriz de la herida de nuestros padres” (We grew up with the scars of our parents’ wounds). Aida’s statement about the physical manifestations of ambiguous loss: the metaphorical wound and scar speaks directly to the constant reminder of an event that has left an indelible mark for 2G survivors who hadn’t experience the wound “in the flesh” so to speak. This begs the following questions: What does it mean to bear the scar, to embody its known and felt consequences, but never fully know its source? Since a 2G survivor has never fully experienced the wound, how do descendants of survivors reconcile with this ambiguity? In historian Nadine Fresco’s groundbreaking article from the 1980s elucidating her interviews with 2G survivors in France, she concluded that the identity crisis experienced by descendants of survivors is not unlike the experience of exile:

Born after the war, because of the war, sometimes to replace a child who died in the war, the Jews I am speaking of here feel their existence as a sort of exile, not from a place in the present or future, but from a time, now gone forever, which would have been that of identity itself.<sup>12</sup>

Expressions of this sentiment are repeatedly evoked in testimonies by descendants of survivors decades later. A quintessential example is expressed by Psychologist Diana Wang when discussing her own 2G experience in the TEDx talk she delivered in 2015. She underscores her own identity as being shaped by what her family experienced prior to her birth:<sup>13</sup>

12 Nadine Fresco, “Remembering the Unknown”, *International Review of Psychoanalysis* XI (1984): 417-27

13 Diana Wang is Board member to the Holocaust Museum of Buenos Aires, founding member of *Generaciones de la Shoá en Argentina*, and facilitator of two invaluable projects geared toward preserving the memory of Holocaust survivors: *Cuadernos de la Shoá* and *Proyecto Aprendiz*.

Yo no viví la Guerra, pero siempre tuve la sensación que lo más importante de mi vida había pasado antes que yo naciera: la Guerra misma; la milagrosa supervivencia de mis padres; la pérdida de Zenus, su primer hijo. Mi hermano mayor que nunca conocí.<sup>14</sup>

Exile is not generally what first comes to mind when one thinks about Jewish life and communities in the first quarter of the twenty-first century. Popular representations in film, television, literature, and the media generally cast Jews in a prosperous and thriving light. 82 years have passed since the Warsaw Ghetto uprising. It's been nearly 86 years since Nazi established Jewish ghettos were formalized throughout cities in Poland, followed by mass extermination. This history is relatively distant, so why do some of us cling to it? Or does it cling to us?

Beneath the veneer of a prosperous and thriving Jewish life, whether in the U.S., Israel, Argentina, or elsewhere in the diaspora, there is a pervasive and phantom-like sense of void and homesickness, a solitary and persistent ache of loss that resides within an already porous sense of self. In addition to hearing it from others and seeing its representations in literature, art, and film, I also live with this ache and can relate to the sweeping impact of exile described by Alexandrian author André Aciman: "An exile is not just someone who has lost his home; he is someone who can't find another, who can't think of another. Some no longer even know what home means. They reinvent the concept with what they've got".<sup>15</sup> The reinvention Aciman describes is a perpetual act of compensation so that the proverbial scars of our parents' wounds are almost imperceptible.

While reinventing the concept of home with "what they've got", descendants of tragic wars, genocide, the mass killing of our families and loved ones, the pillaging and destruction of our homes and cities, the attempted erasure of our languages, our cultures, our belief systems, our memories, continue to live uprooted in our diasporic realities of reinvention. Without secure attachments to places, to languages, to home, and oft times,

14 Diana Wang, "Los aprendices de la historia", *TEDxRiodelaPlataED*, < [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OeNvaToNv\\_k](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OeNvaToNv_k) > (access: 29.08.2023).

15 André Aciman, *False Papers: Essays on Exile and Memory*, New York 2000, p. 39.

due to the inflicted trauma, to family, only one thing remains certain in our sense of identity: the violence endured by our families. The violence that has forever marked us and molded us breeds an inheritance of angst that beckons to us in the way of two magnets whose like poles cause resistance. We try to join them, pressing them together, and they repel. At some point in our lives, some of us come into truth finding that eases the resistance so we can begin the process of coming into a greater understanding of self.

### **Betrayal of Preconscious Ethics**

There are catalysts that play into the shift in our self-understanding. In my conversations with several 2G survivors, the catalyst is a particular life event, such as a birth or a death, a newly discovered photo, or something that shakes one's sense of safety in their own skin. When one eventually comes upon unintentionally disclosed fragile knowledge about their family's Holocaust survival experience, they are also made consciously aware of their own complicit role in having unknowingly hushed the past. Eva Hoffman describes the acute awareness children have of their parents' suffering and an acquiescence around not knowing more than what their parents disclose as a preconscious ethics:

[P]erhaps it is more accurate to say that the early awareness of suffering, created an unconscious, or preconscious, ethics, and that in this system, just as war was the ground of being, so pain was the ground of personhood. The presence of suffering was powerful enough so that it had to be absorbed; but there was also an imperative to remain loyal to it, to make up for it, to provide solace.<sup>16</sup>

This very phenomenon is also dubbed by Marianne Hirsch as characteristic of postmemory, which describes "the relationship of the second generation to the experiences of the first, their curiosity and desire, as well as their

16 Eva Hoffman, *After Such Knowledge: Memory, History and the Legacy of the Holocaust*, New York 2004, p. 13.

ambivalences about wanting to own their parents' knowledge".<sup>17</sup> Among the cases I will share, the catalysts disturb the "preconscious ethics" and a shift in one's understanding is thrust upon descendants unexpectedly. And though this begets painful knowledge that was otherwise suppressed or hidden, ultimately due to a desire to shelter or protect; and though its fragility was handled with such care so as not to leak it to the next generation, the result of it finally seeping out is essentially generative.

### Gadi Siwek

Gadi Siwek describes this unexpected learning in his mid-70s as a "gift". Gadi, whose birth name is Fiszel Alter Siwek, was born in Fulda, Germany in 1947. He has been living in Brazil since he was 16. Gadi's parents, Baszia Sher and Abram Siwek were both from Łódź, Poland. After having survived several concentration camps, meeting each other in one of them, they were reunited at the end of the Shoah and resettled in Germany. In 1948 they moved to Israel, where Gadi's sister Bluma was born (Fig. 7). In 1957 they left for Uruguay to join relatives and then eventually made their way to Brazil in 1963.



Fig. 7

17 Marianne Hirsch, "Surviving Images: Holocaust Photographs and the Work of Postmemory", *The Yale Journal of Criticism* XIV (2001): 5-37.

When Gadi speaks of his parents, he acknowledges that he never asked them what it was like in the camps. His parents hardly spoke of the Shoah and Gadi felt he shouldn't ask out of respect for them and the pain they exhibited. He specifically recalls his mother's depressive episodes and his father's nightly bouts of sobbing.

Era un asunto que yo me parecía que yo no tengo por qué tocar. Tiene heridas profundas, a pesar de que mis padres, la vida entera, tenían secuelas. Mi papá lloraba todas las noches en la cama. Nunca le pregunté por qué lloras. Nunca. Mi mamá tenía crisis de depresión. Eran personas sufridas, pero que supieron enfrentar la vida con todos los dolores que tenían. Y de vez en cuando ellos me contaban por cuenta propia. Pero yo nunca iba muy profundamente en el asunto. Nunca. Pero tuve informaciones. Mi mamá, cuando entró al campo de concentración, ella tenía trece años y salió con dieciocho años. Cuando salió estaba sola. No tenía a nadie en el mundo.

My connection to Gadi stemmed from a 25-year friendship I have maintained with his son Daniel who I met during our six-month ulpan at Kibbutz Beit-Hashita, Israel, in 1996. Up until I began interviewing his father in 2020, Daniel and I were unaware that our grandparents were from the very same city in Poland. We both made discoveries about our families through this process. For instance, I was able to relay to him the story of the mysterious plate that sits atop his parents' kitchen cupboards in Curitiba, Brazil (Fig. 8).

Eversince Gadi can remember, his mother ate from her own designated plate. She ate out of the same dish every single day, even when hosting gatherings where others ate from elegant plates on special holidays. It wasn't until Gadi was already married and had children of his own that he finally asked her about it. Baszia told him it was the plate



Fig. 8

she used in the concentration camp; that when she ate from it she could truly appreciate the taste of food.

In a follow up conversation with Gadi, he shared something deeply personal about his father Abram Siwek, something he hadn't learned until his father was already dying. When Abram Siwek was gravely ill, Gadi's uncle Manela, also a Holocaust survivor, felt it important that Gadi finally know about an extremely painful and humiliating episode that his father had endured in the Łódź ghetto: Abram had been forced to aid in the public hangings of fellow Jews. While learning this news, even so many years later, was excruciating, Gadi admits that knowing this has been invaluable to understanding his father's pain. This knowledge was also integral to bridging significant gaps after his father's death. When going through Abram's belongings, Gadi came upon old medical records and learned about his father's suicidal ideation in the late 1950s. Gadi had no conscious recollection of those episodes from his childhood. As he came into this information, many unanswered questions about his present yet absent father were resolved.

### **Diana Wang**

Psychologist Diana Wang was born in Poland in 1945 and arrived in Argentina with her parents in 1947 at the age of two. Diana has been instrumental as a founding member of descendants of survivors groups in Argentina and has spearheaded projects to preserve the testimony of survivors and their descendants. She has published several books on the topic, including *Los niños escondidos* (2004), *Hijos de la guerra* (2007), and *El silencio de los aparecidos* (2008). She is currently a member of the Buenos Aires Holocaust Museum's Board of Directors. Diana's dedication to these topics only began after the 1994 terrorist attack on the AMIA.<sup>18</sup> The bombing rattled her own sense of identity and shook her from the

18 Natasha Zaretsky, *Acts of Repair: Justice, Truth, and the Politics of Memory in Argentina*, New Brunswick 2021, pp. 31-33.

assimilation she had inhabited. *Hijos de la guerra* opens with a phone call from her mother on the morning of July 18, 1994. Diana's mother pleads: "¡Perdóname! ¡Por favor perdóname!!"<sup>19</sup> Diana didn't know the reason for her mother's exasperation. Diana writes "Y ella seguía con su cantinela que parecía un rezo, con su perdóname, perdóname, yo no sabía, nos quieren matar, creía que aquí estaríamos bien". Finally, when Diana could interject and clarify what had happened, her mother responded: "¿No sabés? Bombardearon la AMIA, nos quieren matar, otra vez".<sup>20</sup> For Diana, this moment was a catalyst to interrogating her own sense of identity. She writes:

La bomba que destruyó la AMIA despertó los viejos fantasmas que mamá había guardado prolijamente acomodados en el fondo del placard. Su hondo dolor abrió en mí una puerta inesperada, una puerta que no sabía que estaba, que parecía que había quedado escondida tras capas y capas de adaptación exitosa que de pronto crujía, me estremecía, me dejaba amarmotada de estupor. *Nos quieren matar*, decía mamá otra vez. El disfraz que me había cubierto todos esos años, la apariencia de una vida igual a la de cualquiera, se hizo pedazos en esos instantes[...]. Entre los escombros de la AMIA encontré un pedazo de mí misma que había estado sepultado hasta ese momento.<sup>21</sup>

The piece of herself that Diana refers to as "sepultado hasta ese momento" was tied specifically to her own family's Holocaust survival and the fact that her parents could never recover their firstborn child Zenus who they had given over to a Polish family for safe hiding during the Shoah. Though these facts hadn't been kept from Diana, they would inextricably link her personal experience and her professional work in the aftermath of the AMIA bombing. Bearing witness to her mother's experience of a "second Holocaust" awoke Diana's agency to reclaim her past.

Since her family would not have been granted entry into Argentina as

19 Diana Wang, *Hijos de la Guerra: La segunda generación de sobrevivientes de la Shoá*, Buenos Aires 2007, p. 23.

20 Ibid. p. 28.

21 Ibidem.

Jews in the years immediately following WWII, they claimed to be Catholic on their migration papers and entered Argentina illegally while their visas stipulated arrival in Paraguay.<sup>22</sup> Though amnesty was granted to all who arrived illegally some two years later and they then were considered legal immigrants, it wasn't until 2005, some 58 years after Diana's arrival to Argentina, when the anti-semitic *Circular No. 11* from 1938 was finally abolished, that she took steps to correct her identification papers and officially document her Jewish identity. She also initiated the process of reclaiming her Polish citizenship.

### Aida Ender

Aida Ender's parents, Jankiel "Jakob" Jurkievitz and Henia Kopper, also crossed illegally into Argentina, by way of Brazil, and had survived the Holocaust by fleeing the Warsaw Ghetto and heading eastward. They were arrested during the war years and taken to labor camps in Irkutsk, Siberia. Their firstborn child died there after falling sick with typhus. Jankiel and Henia were permitted to leave the forced labor camps in the middle of 1944 along with other prisoners. They made their way by foot to Kirgistan, then walked on to Kazakstan, and then finally to Tashkent, Uzbekistan. Aida was born in Bukhara in December 1945.

Aida was nearly four years old when her family arrived in Buenos Aires and she quickly worked at learning Spanish and assimilating into the Argentine culture (Fig. 9). As a teenager, she never spoke of being a daughter of Holocaust survivors and she would hush her parents when they spoke Yiddish in public. Though she did send her own children to Jewish

22 Haim Avni, *Argentina y las migraciones judías. De la Inquisición al Holocausto y después*, Buenos Aires 2005; Leonardo Senkman, "Etnicidad e inmigración durante el primer peronismo", *Estudios Interdisciplinarios de América Latina y el Caribe* III/2 (1992): 5-39; Ariel Raber, "La migración de los sobrevivientes del Holocausto a la Argentina a través del Paraguay", in Emmanuel Kahan, Ariel Raber, Wanda Wechsler (coords.), *Hacer Patria: Estudios sobre la vida judía en Argentina*, Buenos Aires 2020, pp. 141-172.



Fig. 9

schools, it wasn't until her parents passed away that Aida began to speak about them as Holocaust survivors. She suddenly felt a need to uncover everything that had been hidden for years. She describes her life as being divided into a before and an after: "Mi vida se divide en un antes y un después, porque estaban ellos para contar, para saber... y yo no quería saber nada de eso, no quería, no quería".

In 2006, at the age of 60, Aida traveled to Poland to see where she would have been born were it not for the Shoah. She calls it an "acto de reivindicación" a restorative act or an act of recovery; a vindicating act in which her own truth and her family's truth is asserted and resists erasure. During this trip, Aida recovered the names of her 87 relatives murdered in Treblinka.

During our interview via Zoom, Aida showed me a photo that was the catalyst for a standoff she had had with her parents when she was about fifteen years old. Her family was in the process of moving. Aida found a black and white photograph of a woman holding a child in her arms (Fig. 10). Her mother was almost unrecognizable: gaunt, covered in soot,



Fig. 10

and Aida puzzled over the identity of the child. The mystery brought she and her parents to an impasse. Each time she asked, she was met with silence. Her parents would shut the bedroom door and Aida could overhear them arguing in Polish, a language she did not understand. Such was their resolve in not speaking to her about the photo, and such was Aida's need to know, that she went to the home of friends who had also survived the same labor camp. Despite their attempts to maintain the secret, they eventually admitted that the young boy was her older brother Marek whose existence had been kept a secret from her.

In my conversations with Aida, she has spoken of the gaping holes of unanswered questions, *agujeros negros* that she has continued wondering about over the years and how learning of her brother Marek has aided in her understanding, even so many years later, that the ongoing tension she witnessed between her parents throughout their lives was likely due to Marek's tragic death and the unresolved feelings of fault and blame that burdened them.

## Mirta Kupferminc

The discovery of older siblings, half siblings, and previous families before the Shoah is not uncommon. And yet, as we learn the stories of how these truths are uncovered, we are left with the harrowing reality of the countless murdered first loves, first spouses, and first children who are never named. We are also left questioning the fragility of such knowledge. Born in Buenos Aires in 1955, Mirta Kupferminc, is an internationally recognized artist whose work explores themes of memory, the limits of language, traumatic history, exile, and diasporic realities. She has received the highest artistic distinction in Argentina.

Mirta is a child of Auschwitz survivors. Her father Aron Kupferminc was born in Łódź, Poland. Her mother Agnes Mandl Mero was born in Sarosd, Hungary. The couple met in a displaced person's camp. Mirta was unaware of her father's pre-war wife and child until sometime after her father had already passed away. When she named her first-born son Daniel, her mother revealed to her that Daniel happened to be the very same name of her father's first son. Mirta had already engaged explicitly with her mother's survivor experience in her art.<sup>23</sup> The discovery of her father's first family generated a more recent etching entitled "Fantasmas en el Ghetto de Łódź" dedicated to the memory of her father's first child (Fig. 11).<sup>24</sup>



Fig. 11

23 Daniela Goldfine, "Deshilando el entramado de la memoria en el arte de Mirta Kupferminc", *Ámbitos Feministas* (2012): 59-74.

24 Mirta Kupferminc, "Fantasmas en el Ghetto de Łódź (en memoria de Daniel Kupferminc)", etching aquatint 0.60 x 0.90 m., 2000.

When such sensitive and significant information is revealed so many years later, one wonders about the complicity of truth keeping and shielding among family members. The paper trail of testimony submissions to Yad Vashem, the World Holocaust Remembrance Center, holds a sheet of testimony signed by one of Mirta's aunts living in Israel. It is dated 1999, leading one to question whether family members initially resisted creating documentation.

More recently, Mirta's art was once again directly informed by unexpected news. Mirta considers this work a personal diary (Fig. 12).<sup>25</sup> When discussing "The Esterhazy Castle, July 1 1944" she states: "Es una obra, es un diario personal hecho para mí. Está hecho para que no se descubra".



Fig. 12

Its style is uncharacteristic among Mirta's other work from the period. We are confronted by symbolism and visual euphemism; notable fragmentation in the split of frame and the unmatched lines; an Orwellian nod, perhaps, ripe with pigs, a zebra, and other animal figurines; a patch of color in a decorative Hungarian plate within what appears to be an

25 Ibidem. "The Esterhazy Castle, Sarosd, July 1 1944", intervened photolithography, 43.30 x 44.5 inches, 2018.

intervention with several black and white photographs. In this instance, the artist is the one concealing something. This time, it is Mirta who shields her mother from the sensitive information.

When Agnes survived Auschwitz and returned to Sarosd, Hungary after the Shoah, a neighbor told Agnes that her parents Gitta Kellner Mandl and Imre Mandle had died by suicide to avoid being massacred by the Nazis and that they were buried in the outskirts of a local cemetery. Unconvinced by her parents' choice to end their own lives, Agnes would return to the cemetery for several decades on her many return trips to Hungary without ever finding their grave marker. Finally, the absence of their graves was unexpectedly cleared up when journalist Sacha Batthyani reached out to Mirta upon reading diaries belonging to his late grandmother. His grandmother was the daughter of the Count of Esterhazy Castle. The Count had been a revered friend and protector to Agnes' family before the Shoah. At least, that is how Agnes always spoke of him. In the diaries, however, Batthyani's grandmother confessed repeatedly to having witnessed a disturbing event. She, who had been Agnes' childhood playmate, had witnessed her own father, the Count, order the murder of Agnes' parents. When Batthany later published his memoir, *A Crime in the Family* (2018), Mirta did tell her mother that there was a new discovery, that Agnes' parents' death was in fact not by suicide, that they were killed by the Nazis, but Mirta never revealed the names of the assassins for fear that it would worsen her mother's already compromised health.<sup>26</sup>

Once able to be more forthright about the truth some years later, Mirta's art has engaged directly with this fragile knowledge. Italian contemporary artist Maurizio Cattelan convened a collective exhibit entitled "Eternity, un cimiterio temporal para los vivos" as part of a public art project curated by Art Basel Cities where any artist over the age of 18 could submit an entry portraying a tombstone of a living person. Mirta Kupfermenc's tombstone, marking a death preceding her birth, took the form of a seat to represent her inability to rest peacefully (Fig. 13).

26 Sacha Batthyany, *A Crime in the Family: A World War II Secret Buried in Silence and My Search for the Truth*, Boston 2018.



Fig. 13



Fig. 14

She listed her first death as the date of her grandparents' murder: July 1, 1944. She also reclaimed her Hungarian Jewish family name Mandl (Fig. 14). The plaque reads:

Aquí descansa sentada MIRTA ESTER KUPFERMINE MANDL Buenos Aires, Argentina 16/03/1955 - Sarosd, Hungría 01/ 07/ 1944 Primera muerte, acontecida el día en que sus abuelos maternos, (siendo prisioneros de los nazis), fueron asesinados por el Conde en el Castillo de Esterhazy, Sarosd, Hungría.

This piece is emblematic of the experience of 2G Holocaust survivors unpacking what Nadine Fresco terms “the compact void of the unspeakable”, and the continued work that is to be done to unearth acts of truth finding and truth telling. For descendants, each and every discovery is a piecing together of fragments that validate the burden of being receptacles of a historical legacy, the intimately witnessed pain and suffering while living a sort of exile.

## Stumbling into Truth

Gadi, Diana, Aida, and Mirta were telling of experiences that rung all too familiar. Gadi's and Mirta's stories were guiding me back to the very city my own family was from. I longed to trace their parents' whereabouts in Łódź and I was also reckoning with knowing so little about my own relatives' whereabouts. Yet, I did not intentionally set out to learn more about my family. The lack of information that Gadi had about his mother's survival experiences stirred me to do some digging in the USHMM Victims and Survivors Database.

| Id. Nr. | Name und Vorname:     | Geburtsdatum: | Geburtsort: |
|---------|-----------------------|---------------|-------------|
| 628.    | Symel Jurel           | 1. 11. 1924   | Łódź        |
| 630.    | Szmerek Perla Łajla   | 20. 4. 1920   | Łódź        |
| 1.      | Szwarcz Małka         | 29. 1. 1919   | Łódź        |
| 2.      | Tauba                 | 19. 12. 1921  | Łódź        |
| 3.      | Symel Szymon          | 1904          | Łódź        |
| 4.      | Samiraj Idel          | 1904          | Łódź        |
| 5.      | Skorkowski Jakub      | 24. 1. 1924   | Łódź        |
| 6.      | Szmerek Ruchla Łajla  | 15. 3. 1926   | Łódź        |
| 7.      | Sier Chana-Gala       | 1. 3. 1922    | Łódź        |
| 8.      | Sieradska Ajdel       | 1. 3. 1922    | Łódź        |
| 9.      | Szmalewicz Jakob-Isak | 20. 1. 1925   | Łódź        |
| 640.    | Szmalewicz Chaja      | 17. 5. 1907   | Łódź        |
| 1.      | Jankiel               | 1907          | Łódź        |
| 2.      | Sedzińska Dacha       | 1. 10. 1915   | Łódź        |
| 3.      | Rajala                | 1920          | Łódź        |
| 4.      | Siwek Tauba           | 1920          | Łódź        |
| 5.      | Szarkman Basza        | 1923          | Łódź        |
| 6.      | Szmalewicz Jakub Aron | 25. 7. 1891   | Łódź        |
| 7.      | Bajla                 | 15. 2. 1925   | Łódź        |
| 8.      | Dreśla                | 21. 2. 1923   | Łódź        |
| 9.      | Chaja                 | 18. 8. 1914   | Łódź        |
| 650.    | Sieradski Perla       | 18. 8. 1914   | Łódź        |
| 1.      | Ita                   | 8. 4. 1919    | Łódź        |
| 2.      | Isak                  | 25. 12. 1925  | Łódź        |
| 3.      | Rojza                 | 1. 8. 1923    | Łódź        |
| 4.      | Salomonowicz Samul    | 2. 9. 1923    | Łódź        |
| 5.      | Ganetla               | 15. 6. 1910   | Łódź        |
| 6.      | Szlama                | 1918          | Łódź        |
| 7.      | Symel Chaim           | 14. 12. 1895  | Łódź        |
| 8.      | Estera                | 1906          | Łódź        |
| 9.      | Szendzińska Fajga R.  | 1. 3. 1924    | Łódź        |
| 660.    | Strykowska Krajndia   | 15. 8. 1917   | Łódź        |
| 1.      | Sieradska Frywa       | 10. 7. 1916   | Łódź        |
| 2.      | Szwarcz Małka         | 28. 3. 1920   | Łódź        |
| 3.      | Szymczewicz Rajala    | 1927          | Łódź        |
| 4.      | Sztukowska Ciwla      | 8. 11. 1912   | Łódź        |
| 5.      | Tobiasz Eli aus Ber   | 1911          | Łódź        |
| 6.      | Toporek Jozef         | 21. 4. 1912   | Łódź        |
| 7.      | Moszek                | 1890          | Łódź        |
| 8.      | Blima Jenta           | 1925          | Łódź        |
| 9.      | Lajb                  | 25. 1. 1907   | Łódź        |
| 670.    | Moszek                | 1. 11. 1917   | Łódź        |
| 1.      | Joszek                | 5. 3. 1895    | Łódź        |
| 2.      | Ryżka Ruchla          | 20. 11. 1921  | Łódź        |
| 3.      | Łajla                 | 1. 3. 1924    | Łódź        |
| 4.      | Lajser                | 3. 12. 1919   | Łódź        |
| 5.      | Tenenbaum Cezza       | 15. 12. 1924  | Łódź        |
| 6.      | Gołda Rajala          | 5. 7. 1921    | Łódź        |
| 7.      | Tobiasz Blima Małka   | 24. 8. 1924   | Łódź        |
| 8.      | Tenenbaum Szymon      | 22. 11. 1912  | Łódź        |
| 9.      | Tenenbaum Hinda       | 1917          | Łódź        |
| 680.    | Tenenbaum Moszek      | 12. 2. 1912   | Łódź        |
| 1.      | Chaja                 | 1. 8. 1921    | Łódź        |
| 2.      | Trubka Isak           | 15. 8. 1920   | Łódź        |
| 3.      | Łajla                 | 1. 9. 1914    | Łódź        |
| 4.      | Tenenbaum Szlama      | 1907          | Łódź        |
| 5.      | Tenenbaum Majlech     | 17. 1. 1905   | Łódź        |
| 6.      | Tauba                 | 1916          | Łódź        |
| 7.      | Unikowski Isak        | 15. 1. 1925   | Łódź        |
| 8.      | Urbach Isak           | 16. 11. 1908  | Łódź        |
| 9.      | Towja                 | 16. 11. 1908  | Łódź        |

Fig.15

In the thicket of documents, I came upon a list of Łódź ghetto occupants with the name of Baszia Szer (Fig. 15). Baszia is third from the top, #630. As I looked more closely, I could confirm the correct birth year and an address. Upon reading the names carefully, I also noticed another Szer on the list, the tenth one down, #637, Chana Gela. Chana is listed at the same address as Baszia, a detail that likely links them as sisters. I immediately shared this with Gadi. Up until this moment, he did not know the name of his mother's sister. He half-jokingly commented that this finding was more healing than any therapy he had ever experienced. He described it as a gift.

As I returned to the list and skimmed the remaining names, I unexpectedly came upon my grandmother's maiden name: Tenenbaum. Seeing my grandmother's surname and the number of Tenenbaums listed one after the other was jarring. I read them aloud to myself. Though my grandmother raised me, I could not recall the names of any of her relatives. I only knew the name of her mother, Helen, as my middle name was given for her. I was overcome by a strange sensation of wanting to quickly adopt each and every Tenenbaum as my own.

### **Ita Frenkiel (née Tenenbaum)**

My grandmother Ita had raised me and we were very close. And yet, I could never know her fully. We never spoke of her life before coming to the U.S. I understood that she had gone through something that defied language. Or at least, it defied our language. We communicated in gestures and quiet understanding. As a child, my summers consisted of extended stays in modest bungalows in the Catskill Mountains of upstate New York, just my grandmother and me, and fellow Holocaust survivors. No other children. When I now reflect on this past, I am drawn again to Fresco's assertions regarding the unnamable past for descendants of survivors who gain more clarity regarding the pervasive silence with the passage of the years:

Putting a name on what the silence of others had made strictly unnameable

generally remained impossible for the child — and only a reconstruction of the past enabled him or her, years later, to regard that time as one of a world of silence, occasionally interrupted by clues to a drama that one was forbidden to witness.<sup>27</sup>

What seemed “normal” at the time is now something I am finally beginning to articulate. The story, as I’ve known it, was that Grandma Ita somehow escaped Łódź, Poland before the ghetto became an impenetrable funnel to extermination. She made her way to Krasnodar, Russia. I don’t know if there were other stops along the way or whether she was pregnant while fleeing, but I do know that my mother Ania was born in Krasnodar in May 1941. I was told that my grandfather Szmuel Frenkiel had been called to the battlefield and my mother never met her biological father. Which army and when exactly he was drafted, I simply don’t know. This is the only photo I had ever seen of him, pictured on the left with my grandmother (Fig. 16).



Fig.16

27 Nadine Fresco, “Remembering the Unknown”, *International Review of Psychoanalysis* XI (1984): 417-27.

This photo was taken in Łódź with their friends Helen and Joel Wolraich who departed for the U.S. in 1936. At the time of the photo, Helen and Joel were newly married and had honeymooned in my grandparents’ modest apartment.

In January of 2021, after encountering the list of Tenenbaum’s on the Łódź ghetto registry, I felt a renewed sense of agency to know more about my family’s past. Realizing that my grandmother was already married at the time of Nazi occupation, I revisited the Yad Vashem database and typed in her married name, Ita Frenkiel. Up came a page of testimony stating that a one Ita Frenkel from Łódź, born in 1910, was presumably murdered (Fig. 17). It is not uncommon to find testimony of this sort if no one has been able to attest to an individual’s survival or death. It wasn’t her birthdate of November 24<sup>th</sup>, though it’s not uncommon for these dates to be altered.

ITA FRENKEL

Ita Frenkiel was born in 1910. Prior to WWII she lived in Łódź, Poland. During the war she was in Łódź, Poland.

Ita was presumably murdered in the Shoah (according to this source).

This information is based on a List of Łódź ghetto inmates, found in Łódź Names - List of the ghetto inhabitants 1940-1944, Yad Vashem and the Organization of former residents of Łódź in Israel, Jerusalem 1994.

Map

The overwhelming majority of the Jews imprisoned in this ghetto were murdered in the Shoah.

Submit Additions/Corrections

|                                |                                                                                                                                              |
|--------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Last Name                      | Frenkel                                                                                                                                      |
| First Name                     | Ita                                                                                                                                          |
| Gender                         | Female                                                                                                                                       |
| Date of Birth                  | 10/05/1910                                                                                                                                   |
| Permanent Place of Residence   | Łódź, Łódź, Łódź, Poland                                                                                                                     |
| Address of permanent residence | ALEJA 1 MAJA 4                                                                                                                               |
| Place during the War           | Łódź, Ghetto, Poland                                                                                                                         |
| Wartime Address                | BLECH GASSE (ul. Towiańskiego), 12 FLAT 8                                                                                                    |
| Status according to Source     | prisoner of a ghetto where most of the population was murdered in the ghetto or elsewhere                                                    |
| Source                         | Łódź Names - List of the ghetto inhabitants 1940-1944, Yad Vashem and the Organization of former residents of Łódź in Israel, Jerusalem 1994 |
| Type of material               | List of Łódź ghetto inmates                                                                                                                  |
| Item ID                        | 4499875                                                                                                                                      |

Fig. 17

| LISTE DER BEWOHNER IN OSTO |               |             |                                   |                      |
|----------------------------|---------------|-------------|-----------------------------------|----------------------|
| Nachn.                     | Vornamen      | geboren     | alt. Wohnnachr. fröhliche Adresse | neue Adresse         |
| Agnew ki                   | Geok Saja     | 6.11. 1876  | jos. -ple                         | 10-strasse 10/12     |
| Albinow                    | Abren         | 1884        | "                                 | 10 " 10/19           |
| Albinow                    | Chana         | 1884        | "                                 | " 4/7                |
| Albinow                    | Schneke       | 16.11. 1918 | "                                 | "                    |
| Albinowrajch               | Sajima        | 28.11. 1888 | "                                 | Sulzfelderstr. 25/28 |
| Albinowrajch               | Ljuba         | 28.11. 1888 | "                                 | 11-strasse 4/25      |
| Albinow                    | Chaja -ura    | 1871        | "                                 | 16-strasse 4/4       |
| Albinow                    | Schaja        | 1911        | "                                 | "                    |
| Albinow                    | Marjam Gittel | 7.6. 1878   | "                                 | 7-strasse 13/38      |
| Albinow                    | Sajim         | 16.6. 1880  | "                                 | 4-strasse 1/17       |
| Albinow                    | Lika          | 1888        | "                                 | Sulzfelderstr. 8/82  |
| Albinow                    | Abren         | 28.11. 1878 | "                                 | Hofmeisterstr. 7/15  |
| Albinow                    | Chaja         | 1884        | "                                 | 5-strasse 22/23      |
| Albinow                    | Chil          | 16.6. 1888  | "                                 | 20/6                 |
| Albinow                    | Marjam        | 16.6. 1888  | "                                 | 20/61                |
| Albinow                    | Mordka        | 1888        | "                                 | 8-strasse 10/32      |
| Albinow                    | Marja         | 28.6. 1887  | "                                 | 8-strasse 8/31       |
| Albinow                    | Ljuba         | 28.6. 1887  | "                                 | 20-strasse 8/22a     |
| Albinow                    | Gitta         | 16.11. 1888 | "                                 | 5/45                 |
| Albinow                    | Sajim         | 28.6. 1888  | "                                 | Hofmeisterstr. 11/8a |
| Albinow                    | Ljuba         | 28.12. 1887 | "                                 | 11/2                 |
| Albinow                    | Chaja         | 28.6. 1887  | "                                 | 20/6                 |
| Albinow                    | Ljuba         | 28.6. 1888  | "                                 | 26-strasse 22/23     |
| Albinow                    | Lia           | 1910        | "                                 | Elektrogasse 12/6    |
| Albinow                    | Rina          | 16.6. 1888  | "                                 | "                    |
| Albinow                    | Sapra         | 28.7. 1884  | "                                 | "                    |
| Albinow                    | Ljuba         | 1888        | "                                 | "                    |
| Albinow                    | Sachla        | 15.6. 1894  | "                                 | "                    |
| Albinow                    | Chana         | 10.6. 1890  | "                                 | "                    |
| Albinow                    | Saja          | 15.7. 1918  | "                                 | "                    |
| Albinow                    | Sachla        | 10.6. 1890  | "                                 | "                    |

Fig. 18

In this case, Ita's date of birth isn't listed. What struck me was that there are names of children at the same address: Nina and Marja. My mind began racing. Did my mother have older siblings she never knew about? At the time of their births, Grandma Ita would have been 24 and 29 respectively. I had always puzzled at the fact that my mother was her only child, birthed at 30, a rather mature age considering the context.

I looked the girls' names up on the Yad Vashem database to see if I could find any more information, but this is all there is: "they were children living in Łódź during WWII and they were presumably murdered in the Shoah". A pang of grief sat in my belly and I was dissatisfied with the lack of material evidence. The notion of "presumably" frustrated and angered me. I soon found myself hauling boxes of photo albums up from the basement. They had been down there since packing up my parents' home in 2019 and

I was suddenly urged to comb through them. They were never hidden from me, but neither had they been shared. I could not believe what I found and continue to ponder why I had never seen these photos before.



Fig. 19



Fig. 20

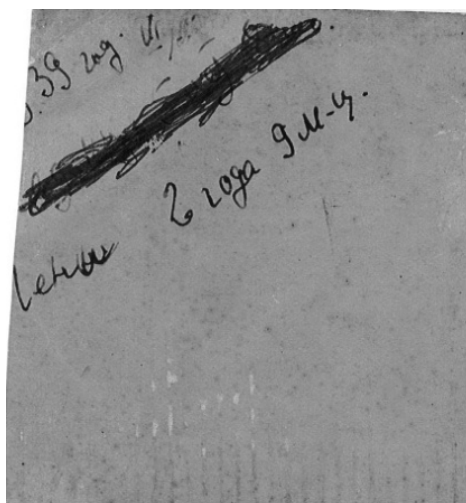


Fig. 21

I came upon a few photos of my parents as toddlers: a photo of my mother that must have been taken in Krasnodar, and a photo of my father, Leon Prekker, with his mother Basia that must have been taken in Nizhniy Tagil (Figs. 19 & 20). Leon's photo is oddly cropped and looks as though it must have been purposefully cut. It bears an inscription on the reverse side (Fig. 21). I can make out the Russian alluding to Leon's age being 2 years and 9 months, and the year 1939. There is another portion that is scribbled out. I puzzled over the splicing of the photo and the redacted text carefully blotted from legibility. I wondered if maybe my father's father Józef had sat for that photo prior to being deemed "Enemy of the State", arrested by the Narodny Komissariat Vnutrennikh Del (NKVD), the Soviet secret police, and sent to die in a Kamchatka gulag; if perhaps my grandmother looked to preserve the living for my father by removing evidence of the dead.



Fig. 22



Fig. 23

Another series of photos must have been kept by Joel Wolraich who had reconnected with my grandmother after the Shoah. I see my grandmother flanked by friends or relatives (Fig. 22). I wish I knew who they were. Somehow seeing my grandmother's broad smile tells me she did once experience a certain joy that I don't recall ever witnessing. And then there is this photo from a leisurely day of swimming where my grandparents are enjoying a day of recreation with a group of friends and/or family (Fig. 23). I presume this photo was taken in 1935 when Helen Wolraich (née Tolep) was visiting from the United States. I texted this group photo to Joel Wolraich's grandsons. After sharing their joy, one then asked: "who are the boys in front?" I didn't give it much thought and responded "perhaps some nephews..." and I also mentioned that I may have stumbled on some new information about my family... that my grandmother Itka, as they lovingly knew her, possibly had two young daughters.

I was determined to keep looking for traces of my grandparents' existence before and during the Holocaust, and so I returned to the USHMM database. I came upon a handwritten list of Łódź ghetto residents including a male named Pinkus Frenkel, born 1904, at the same address as Ita, Marja and Nina (Fig. 24).

*Blechno* str. Nr. 12

| Angem. d. Bemerkungen | Wohnung Nr. | Name      | Mädchenname oder Name des Mannes | Vorname        | Geschlecht | Geburtsdatum | Beruf      | Frühere Adresse | Karten Nr. | Ang. des Lageramtes | Angem. d. Bemerkungen |
|-----------------------|-------------|-----------|----------------------------------|----------------|------------|--------------|------------|-----------------|------------|---------------------|-----------------------|
|                       | 1           | Lacowski  | ✓ 2, K                           | elbowek Lajner | m          | 1900         | Lehrer     | Kamienka 10     | 130162     | ✓                   |                       |
|                       |             | Jacobs    | ✓ 2, K                           | Flurid         | m          | 6/6. 1910    | Handwerker | "               | 130163     | ✓                   |                       |
|                       | 2           | Sachs     | ✓ 2, K                           | elbowek        | m          | 28/6. 1895   | Handwerker | Sulzfelder 46/1 | 133813     | ✓                   |                       |
|                       |             | Rydz      | ✓ 2, K                           | Frejda         | m          | 27/6. 1897   | Kaufmann   | Sulzfelder 46/1 | 133814     | ✓                   |                       |
|                       |             | Rydz      | ✓ 2, K                           | Rydz           | m          | 6/5. 1900    | Handwerker | "               | 133815     | ✓                   |                       |
|                       |             | Basz      | ✓ 2, K                           | Wojna          | m          | 11/12. 1926  | "          | "               | 133817     | ✓                   |                       |
|                       | 4           | Kaylberg  | ✓ 2, K                           | Basz           | m          | 21/5. 1903   | Handwerker | Randg. 34/1     | 157680     | ✓                   |                       |
|                       |             | Frank     | ✓ 2, K                           | elbowek        | m          | 10/6. 1910   | Handwerker | "               | 157681     | ✓                   |                       |
|                       | 5           | Frankman  | ✓ 2, K                           | Basz           | m          | 17/6. 1894   | Kaufmann   | Kawowa 1/1      | 130173     | ✓                   |                       |
|                       |             | Frankman  | ✓ 2, K                           | Chana          | f          | 10/6. 1900   | Kaufmann   | "               | 130174     | ✓                   |                       |
|                       |             | Goldstein | ✓ 2, K                           | Basz           | m          | 17/6. 1919   | Handwerker | Berezinska 7    | 130181     | ✓                   |                       |
|                       |             | Goldstein | ✓ 2, K                           | Szula Basz     | f          | 17/6. 1919   | Kaufmann   | "               | 130182     | ✓                   |                       |
|                       | 8           | Frenkiel  | ✓ 2, K                           | Pinkus         | m          | 10/5. 1904   | Handwerker | Alp. 1/1        | 130183     | ✓                   |                       |
|                       |             | Frenkiel  | ✓ 2, K                           | Ita            | f          | 10/5. 1910   | Kaufmann   | "               | 130184     | ✓                   |                       |
|                       |             | Frenkiel  | ✓ 2, K                           | Marja          | f          | 9/5. 1919    | Handwerker | "               | 130185     | ✓                   |                       |
|                       |             | Frenkiel  | ✓ 2, K                           | Witka          | f          | 10/5. 1919   | Handwerker | "               | 130186     | ✓                   |                       |
|                       | 9           | Frenkiel  | ✓ 2, K                           | Witka          | f          | 10/5. 1919   | Handwerker | Alp. 1/1        | 130187     | ✓                   |                       |
|                       |             | Frenkiel  | ✓ 2, K                           | Witka          | f          | 10/5. 1919   | Handwerker | Alp. 1/1        | 130188     | ✓                   |                       |

Fig. 24

This finding shed some doubt on the likelihood that this particular Ita was in fact my grandmother. Pinkus is listed as a carpenter. Szmuel was a tailor who hailed from generations of tailors residing in Piotrkow Tribunalski and Rozprza. The absence of Szmuel's name was dissatisfying and so I then searched for traces of him in the Yad Vashem database of Victim's Names. There I found 24 variations on the name Szmuel Frenkiel from the Łodz region, all listed as murdered or presumably murdered. One of the entries does in fact reference a tailor named Szmuel who was married to Itka. The testimony was submitted in Israel by someone claiming to be a relative. The year of the submission is listed as 1952 (Figs 25 & 26).

[illegible]

Fig. 25

The Central Database of Shoah Victims' Names

SHMOUEL FRENKEL

Shmouel Frenkel was born in Lodz, Poland in 1911 to Leib and Khava. He was a soldier and married to Hava. Prior to WWII he lived in Lodz, Poland. During the war he was in Lodz, Poland.

Shmouel was murdered in the Shoah according to this account.

This information is based on a Page of Testimony (typed text) submitted by his relative, [Suzanne Frenkel](#).

What?

During the Shoah, Jews were murdered in a variety of ways, among them gassing, shooting, burning, drowning or burial alive, exhaustion through forced labor, starvation, epidemic disease, deprivation of medical care and minimal hygienic conditions, and more. Some Jews took their own lives in order to escape arrest and further persecution, or to end their hopeless, relentless suffering.

Automatic Addition of Correctness

|                              |                                                            |
|------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------|
| Last Name                    | Frenkel                                                    |
| First Name                   | Shmouel                                                    |
| First Name                   | Shmouel                                                    |
| Gender                       | Male                                                       |
| Date of Birth                | 1911                                                       |
| Place of Birth               | Lodz/Lodz,Poland                                           |
| Father's First Name          | Leib                                                       |
| Mother's First Name          | Khava                                                      |
| Marital Status               | Married                                                    |
| Spouse's First Name          | Hava                                                       |
| Residence Place of Residence | Lodz/Lodz,Poland                                           |
| Occupation                   | Soldier                                                    |
| Place during the War         | Lodz/Lodz,Poland                                           |
| Place of Death               | Auschwitz/Camp,Poland                                      |
| Date of Death                | 1942                                                       |
| Status according to Source   | Murdered                                                   |
| Submitter's Last Name        | Frenkel/Suzanne                                            |
| Submitter's First Name       | Suzanne                                                    |
| Relationship to Victim       | Relative                                                   |
| Source                       | Yad Vashem - Pages of Testimony Name & Memorial Collection |
| Type of Memorial             | Page of Testimony                                          |
| Item ID                      | 162776                                                     |

\* Automatic translation from Hebrew

Fig. 26

This page of testimony asserts that Szmuel died in Auschwitz in 1944. It also lists his parents' names, allowing me to learn the names of my paternal great grandparents: Leib Frenkiel and Khava Uszerowicz. I began sketching a family tree that extended beyond the names of my grandparents for the first time ever. When I searched for traces of Leib Frenkiel, I was confronted with the ambiguity surrounding his death: murdered in 1942. When no further details regarding one's death is provided via the Yad Vashem testimony paperwork, the accompanying text reads:

During the Shoah, Jews were murdered in a variety of ways, among them gassing, shooting, burning, drowning or burial alive, exhaustion through forced labor, starvation, epidemic disease, deprivation of medical care and minimal hygienic conditions, and more. Jews took their own lives in order to escape arrest and further persecution, or to end their hopeless, relentless suffering.

Given the year and the region, he was most likely murdered at the Treblinka extermination camp. This testimony also named Leib's parents. While I hoped to eventually learn more about these ancestors by digging deeper into the archives, what continued to drive my search was the suspicion that Ita and Szmuel might have had other children prior to the Holocaust. The question about the boys in the group photo nagged at me. I noticed that both Szmuel's and Leib's testimonies were submitted by the same individual, Dov Plakchinski, and I wondered what else Dov might have testified about. I searched for files associated with the submitter's name and found 29 entries in the central database. My heart sunk for the grief Dov must have been carrying. Dov had filled out 29 individual testimonies for family and loved ones who were murdered. Three of them were listed under Frenkiel: Szmuel, Shlomo, and Khaim. It was unnerving to stare at these names on the screen and know that with one click I might unlock information that would alter the narrative about my family history.

Szmuel's and Shlomo's birth years, listed as 1900 and 1911, placed them in the same generation. Khaim Frenkel, however, was listed without a birthdate and so I clicked on Khaim's name first. What I learned was unexpected and also eerily anticipated. Dov Plakchinski, who knew my family and was somehow related, testified that Khaim was Szmuel and Itka's child (Figs 27 & 28).

I returned to the group photo and studied it anew (Fig. 23). Szmuel's hand is on the young boy's shoulder. Their features are strikingly resemblant. My grandmother Itka is radiant. They were a family.

Khaim Frenkel

Fig. 27

KHAIM FRENKEL

Kham Frenkel was born to Shmouel and Eka. He was a child. Prior to WWII he lived in Lodz, Poland. During the war he was in Lodz, Poland.

Kham was murdered in the Shoah (according to this source)

This information is based on a Page of Testimony (displayed here) submitted by, [Dov Plakhtinski](#)

Map

During the Shoah, Jews were murdered in a variety of ways, among them gassing, shooting, burning, drowning or burial alive, exhaustion through forced labor, starvation, epidemic diseases, deprivation of medical care and minimal hygienic conditions, and more. Some Jews took their own lives in order to escape arrest and further persecution, or to end their hopeless, relentless suffering.

Submit Additions/Corrections

|                              |                                                           |
|------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------|
| Last Name                    | Frenkel                                                   |
| First Name                   | Kham                                                      |
| Gender                       | Male                                                      |
| Father's First Name          | Shmouel                                                   |
| Father's First Name          | Shmuel                                                    |
| Mother's First Name          | Eka                                                       |
| Marital Status               | Child                                                     |
| Permanent Place of Residence | Lodz,Lodz,Lodz,Poland                                     |
| Place during the War         | Lodz,Lodz,Lodz,Poland                                     |
| Status according to Source   | murdered                                                  |
| Submitter's Last Name        | Plakhtinski                                               |
| Submitter's First Name       | Dov                                                       |
| Source                       | Yad Vashem - Pages of Testimony Names Memorial Collection |
| Type of material             | Page of Testimony                                         |
| Item ID                      | 8889846                                                   |

\* Automatic translation from Hebrew

Fig. 28

Postmemorial Irony

While in Israel in August 2022 for the World Congress on Jewish Studies, I spent a few days with my father’s half-sister Emma in Bat Yam. Knowing I was curious about our family’s past, Emma was eager to show me photos from her visit to Sarniy, where she grew up in the post-war period. While some of the photos were in an album, others were loosely kept in a large Ziploc bag. I worked to remain interested as we communicated in a mishmash of Russian and Hebrew about her visits to memorial sites and to the farmhouse the family lived in until returning to Poland in 1957. It wasn’t the language barrier or my lack of

curiosity that led my attention astray. When I'm completely honest about the encounter with her photos, I recognize an edge of scorn fueled by resentment. The photos Emma was showing me were signifiers for the photos that were missing, the photos of my paternal grandfather Józef and my uncle Arkady. On my stay in Israel in 1996, following the passing of my paternal grandmother Basia, I had inquired about any pre-war family photos. Emma confessed to me that when she first discovered that her mother had had a previous family, that her brother Leon (my father) had a different biological father in addition to an older brother, her shock, fueled by deception and jealousy, resulted in her destroying and disappearing any and all photos that lent credence to those claims.

I thought I had developed enough compassion for Emma to forgive her the act of depriving me the chance to see evidence of my paternal grandfather and my uncle Arkady, murdered at the age of 5 when the Nazis occupied Grandmother Basia's hometown of Dobrowicza. But in that instant at her kitchen table, as she beseeched me to accompany her in testimony, I was not able to be an empathic listener. And then, the unimaginable happened. As Emma flicked the individual photos from the Ziploc onto the table almost as if dealing cards, an unmistakable backdrop caught my eye. I don't recall what language I spoke, but Emma froze as I pointed emphatically and said "That's the other half!" She didn't know what I was referring to. "That must be Arkady!". Emma insisted it was a photo of her brother Franek, my father's youngest half-sibling. She was so sure of herself that she had very little interest in discussing the photo. I knew well enough not to argue with Emma, but tried to assure her that I had the other half of the photo in my possession back home in the U.S.; that it must be Arkady given that the child appeared older than my father at the time of the photo. As I studied the photograph in a state of shock, in awe of its existence, Emma looked to continue dealing from the batch of loose photos remaining in the Ziploc. Knowing that she was unlikely to give me the photo if I disagreed with her, and that the photograph's survival was attributed to a case of mistaken identity, I quickly snapped a picture with my phone. Before leaving for the conference in Jerusalem, I asked Emma's daughter to try and persuade her mother to let me have the photo even if

the child pictured was indeed her brother Franek. On my final night in Israel, back in Bat Yam after the conference, Emma's daughter handed me the treasured photo. I knew the very first thing I would do upon returning home (Fig. 29).



Fig. 29

Though my parents had very different childhood experiences during the Shoah, they both survived with their mothers. They both lost their fathers and the entirety of their extended families. Now, so many years later, I come to learn that my mother, like my father, had an older brother who was murdered. Though physically bereft of my direct ancestors and their family stories, learning their names and discovering artifacts that affirm their existence is a fulfilling act, an “acto de reivindicación”, aptly stated by Aida Ender. I ask myself whether it would have mattered to learn this information sooner. What would it have been like for my parents and my brother to also know about Khaim? Why am I only learning this now, when my mother's dementia is too advanced to absorb any of this information? She had always bemoaned being an only child. How would she have responded to knowing her mother raised her while grieving

the loss of her firstborn on top of everything else? Would having known potentially have aided her in resolving her own unanswered questions and suspicions?

This must be a sort of postmemorial irony. It abuts the “posthumous irony” Susan Sontag describes when considering the viewers’ gaze confronting the soon-to-vanish world of Eastern European Jewish life captured by Roman Vishniac.<sup>28</sup> The irony I describe is the convergence of present absence and absent presence of these traces to our family’s past. The albums were not hidden, yet they were not shown. My brother and I wanted to know, yet we didn’t search with enough intention. Our relationship with our family’s past was complicated due to the legacy of “frozen grief”, defined by Pauline Boss when discussing the intergenerational impact on offspring in the wake of ambiguous loss tied to migration and war.<sup>29</sup> Whereas we could interrogate subjects in our professional lives, my brother as a federal investigator and myself as an analyst of literature, we could not bring the same level of inquiry to ourselves and to our parents. The paper trail evidence of Khaim’s existence and his death was submitted in 1952, yet it took 70 years before I came across it. Were it not for the intersection of the Łódź ghetto with my research subjects, I may not have stumbled into this truth. It’s not that my brother and I had never searched. Our searches carried a certain futility without the anchoring provided by an evidentiary index such as a sheet of testimony, a document, or a photo.

## Conclusion

Upon considering the postmemorial arc elucidated in interviews with Gadi Siwek, Aida Ender, Diana Wang, and Mirta Kupferminc — my own family story notwithstanding — the psychic pain witnessed by 2G survivors tends toward an unconscious complicity in padding the silencing

28 Susan Sontag, *On Photography*, New York 1989.

29 Pauline Boss, *Ambiguous Loss: Learning to Live with Unresolved Grief*, Cambridge 1999.

of the past. Should a catalyst of some sort precipitate a shift in dynamics, a 2G survivor may repossess their family's story upon reclaiming their own position as witness. Dori Laub asserts that "repossessing one's life story through giving testimony is itself a form of action, of change, which one has to actually pass through in order to continue and complete the process of survival after liberation".<sup>30</sup> Such appears to be the case for the 2G survivors I had the fortune to interview and I am in awe of the fact that I myself could not traverse the psychic barriers keeping me from such precious family artifacts, such fragile knowledge, until having lost the very individuals I so dearly sought to protect. And in their pact with silence, they also sought to do the same for me.

30 Dori Laub, "Truth and Testimony" in Cathy Caruth (coord.), *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, Baltimore 1995, p. 70.

