Rapid #: -21076415

CROSS REF ID: **1211030**

LENDER: **INTARCHIVE (Internet Archive) :: Main Library**

BORROWER: **ZCU (Columbia University) :: Butler**

TYPE:	Book Chapter
BOOK TITLE:	The Generation of postmemory : writing and visual culture after the Holocaust /
USER BOOK TITLE:	The Generation of postmemory : writing and visual culture after the Holocaust /
CHAPTER TITLE:	The Generation of Postmemory
BOOK AUTHOR:	Marianne Hirsch
EDITION:	
VOLUME:	
PUBLISHER:	Columbia University Press
YEAR:	2012
PAGES:	28-54
ISBN:	9780231156523
LCCN:	
OCLC #:	768335633

PATRON: **Hirsch, Marianne**

PATRON ID: mh2349@columbia.edu

Processed by RapidX: 8/7/2023 2:00:33 PM

Internet Archive Interlibrary Loan Fulfillment

Request on Monday, August 7th, 2023
The Generation of postmemory : writing and visual culture after the Holocaust
9780231156523
The Generation of Postmemory
Marianne Hirsch
pages 28-54

Response from Internet Archive from: https://archive.org/details/generationofpost0000hirs
We hope this is helpful.

"I'm tracking your interlibrary loans ... ooo,
the truck just hit a pothole in Poughkeepsie."

Did we make your day? Tweet us @internetarchive

Please explore the Internet Archive!

- Archive Scholar for fulltext search of over 25 million research articles
- https://archive.org/details/inlibrary and OpenLibrary.org for books to borrow
- Archive-it.org for library curated web collections
- Audio, software, TV News, and the Wayback Machine as well.

The Internet Archive is a non-profit library with a mission to provide Universal Access to All Knowledge.

info@archive.org

300 Funston Avenue - San Francisco - California - 94118 - www.archive.org

1.1 Art Spiegelman, from *The First Maus* (1972). First published in *Funny Aminals*. *Courtesy of Art Spiegelman*

1

THE GENERATION OF POSTMEMORY

When Art Spiegelman first began to draw his father's story of survival in Auschwitz, and his own childhood reception of that story, he relied on familiar visual archives and narrative traditions that he then transformed in radical and surprising ways. The three-page *First Maus*, published in 1972, begins as a bedtime story "about life in the old country during the war."[1] Visually, a small drawing of the house in Rego Park opens out to a larger frame of the child's bedroom, where the partially pulled shade, the toy figure holding up the lamp, the polka-dot pajamas, the checkered blanket, and the cozy hug create a seemingly safe scene in which the father can evoke for his son the most brutal stories of wartime violence and persecution, fear and terror.

The mice and cats in the flashback images have not yet achieved the visual economy they will eventually find in the subsequent *Maus* volumes, but the condensed account of the liquidation of the unnamed ghetto, the attempts at hiding, and the murders, betrayals, and deportation to Auschwitz already connect personal and public memory, present and past, in paradigmatic ways. The window shade is only partially pulled down, after all, and the postwar childhood is not protected from

the history it has inherited. Indeed, that history is absorbed in the most vulnerable moments of childhood: the intimate exchange of the bedtime story. As Spiegelman will say later, in the subtitle of *Maus I*, "My father bleeds history."[2]

And indeed, blood flows on this page, off the title letters spelling MAUS that bleed into the large, half-page title image that will remain foundational for Spiegelman, serving as the cover image of the second volume and appearing in a number of other frames. It is a drawing of a widely circulated 1945 photograph by Margaret Bourke-White of liberated male prisoners in Buchenwald, standing behind a barbed wire fence and all facing the photographer, huddled in blankets and torn uniforms, some holding on to the fence. Spiegelman's early drawn version of the photograph is distinct from its later incarnations not only in its drawing style, but also in the photo corners on the edges that show how this public image has been adopted into the private family album. Indeed, the arrow pointing to a mouse figure in the back row and identifying him as "Poppa" clarifies that the son can only imagine his father's experience in Auschwitz by way of a well-known image from the public archive. Even the most intimate familial transmission of the past is, it seems, mediated by public images and narratives.

But if the scene of narration in the first *Maus* takes place between father and son in the striking absence of the mother, it is the powerful image of her loss that will mediate the adult father/son relationship and the narrative of the second generation developed in the later volumes. Maternal abandonment and the fantasy of maternal recognition, announced by implication in the first *Maus*, are paradigmatic tropes for the psychology and aesthetic of the postgeneration, and for the workings of postmemory. "Mickey's" mother appears in the early drawings, led along by her husband from one hiding place to another. But it is the father who is the narrator of her story, as well as his own. When *Die Katzen* capture the couple and send them off to "Mauschwitz," the father hugs his wife, who covers her eyes with her hands. Like the silent women in *Shoah*, she has no voice, but she provides a mute emotional backdrop to the horrific tale in which she is inscribed. Her absence from the bedroom, her inability to modulate her child's reception of the father's history lesson, leave him exposed and undefended.

The aesthetic and representational choices characterizing Spiegelman's early *Maus* and the later volumes make it a generative text with which to begin to scrutinize the workings of the transgenerational structure of postmemory, and the conjunction of several of its prevalent elements that will become key terms in the chapters that follow—memory, family, and photography.

WHY MEMORY?

Do children of survivors, like Artie in *Maus*, have "memories" of their parents' suffering? The bedtime scene of childhood transmission that Spiegelman draws suggests how the father's violent experiences can acquire the status of fairy tale, nightmare, and myth. It suggests some of the transactive, transferential processes—cognitive and affective—through which the past is internalized without fully being understood. These "acts of transfer," to use Paul Connerton's term, not only transform history into memory, but enable memories to be shared across individuals and generations.[3]

Certainly, we do not have literal "memories" of others' experiences, and certainly, one person's lived memories cannot be transformed into another's. Postmemory is not identical to memory: it is "post"; but, at the same time, I argue, it approximates memory in its affective force and its psychic effects. Eva Hoffman describes what was passed down to her as a fairy tale: "The memories—not memories but emanations—of wartime experiences kept erupting in flashes of imagery; in abrupt but broken refrains."[4] These "not memories," communicated in "flashes of imagery," and these "broken refrains," transmitted through "the language of the body," are precisely the stuff of the *postmemory* of trauma, and of its return.

Jan and Aleida Assmann's work on the transmission of memory clarifies precisely what Hoffman refers to as the "living connection"[5] between proximate generations and accounts for the complex lines of transmission encompassed in the inter- and transgenerational umbrella term "memory." The Assmanns have devoted themselves to elucidating, systematically, Maurice Halbwachs's enormously influential notion of

collective memory.[6] I turn to their work here to scrutinize the lines of transmission between individual and collective remembrance and to specify how the break in transmission resulting from traumatic historical events necessitates forms of remembrance that reconnect and re-embody an intergenerational memorial fabric that is severed by catastrophe.

In his book *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis*, Jan Assmann distinguishes between two kinds of collective remembrance, "communicative" memory and what he calls "cultural" memory.[7] Communicative memory is "biographical" and "factual," and is located within a generation of contemporaries who witness an event as adults and who can pass on their bodily and affective connection to that event to their descendants. In the normal succession of generations (and the family is a crucial unit of transmission for Jan Assmann), this embodied form of memory is transmitted across three to four generations—across 80 to 100 years. At the same time, as its direct bearers enter old age, they increasingly wish to institutionalize memory, whether in traditional archives or books, or through ritual, commemoration, or performance. Jan Assmann terms this institutionalized archival memory "kulturelles Gedächtnis."

In her elaboration of this typology, Aleida Assmann extends this bimodal distinction into four memory "formats": the first two, "individual" memory and "social" memory, correspond to Jan Assmann's "communicative" remembrance, while "political" memory and "cultural" memory form part of his "cultural" memory.[8] A fundamental assumption driving this schema is, indeed, that "memories are linked between individuals." "Once verbalized," Aleida Assmann insists, "the individual's memories are fused with the inter-subjective symbolic system of language and are, strictly speaking, no longer a purely exclusive and unalienable property. . . . they can be exchanged, shared, corroborated, confirmed, corrected, disputed—and, last not least, written down."[9] And even individual memory "include[s] much more than we, as individuals, have ourselves experienced."[10] Individuals are part of social groups with shared belief systems that frame memories and shape them into narratives and scenarios. For Aleida Assmann, the family is a privileged site of memorial transmission. The "social memory" in her schema is based on the familial transfer of embodied experience to the next generation:

it is intergenerational. "Political" and "cultural" memory, in contrast, is not inter- but transgenerational; it is no longer mediated through embodied practice but solely through symbolic systems.

Jan and Aleida Assmann's typological distinctions do not specifically account for the ruptures introduced by collective historical trauma, by war, Holocaust, exile, and refugeehood: these ruptures would certainly inflect these schemas of transmission. Both embodied communicative memory and institutionalized cultural memory would be severely impaired by traumatic experience. They would be compromised as well by the erasures of records, such as those perpetrated by totalitarian regimes. Under the Nazis, cultural archives were destroyed, records burned, possessions lost, histories suppressed and eradicated.

The structure of postmemory clarifies how the multiple ruptures and radical breaks introduced by trauma and catastrophe inflect intra-, inter-, and transgenerational inheritance. It breaks through and complicates the line the Assmanns draw connecting individual to family, to social group, to institutionalized historical archive. That archive, in the case of traumatic interruption, exile, and diaspora, has lost its direct link to the past, has forfeited the embodied connections that forge community and society. And yet the Assmanns' typology explains why and how the postgeneration could and does work to counteract or to repair this loss. Postmemorial work, I want to suggest—and this is the central point of my argument in this book—strives to *reactivate* and *re-embody* more distant political and cultural memorial structures by reinvesting them with resonant individual and familial forms of mediation and aesthetic expression. In these ways, less directly affected participants can become engaged in the generation of postmemory that can persist even after all participants and even their familial descendants are gone.

It is this presence of embodied and affective experience in the process of transmission that is best described by the notion of memory as opposed to history. Memory signals an affective link to the past—a sense, precisely, of a material "living connection"—and it is powerfully mediated by technologies like literature, photography, and testimony.

The growth of our memory culture may indeed be a symptom of a need for individual and group inclusion in a collective membrane forged by a shared inheritance of multiple traumatic histories and the individual

and social responsibility we feel toward a persistent and traumatic past. As Aleida Assmann writes, "the memory boom reflects a general desire to reclaim the past as an indispensible part of the present," and she suggests that the idea of "collective memory" has become an umbrella term that has replaced the notion of "ideology," prevalent in the discourses of the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s.[11]

WHY THE FAMILY?

Maus locates the scene of transmission in the bedtime connection between parent and child. The language of family, the language of the body: nonverbal and precognitive acts of transfer occur most clearly within a familial space, often taking the form of symptoms. It is perhaps the descriptions of this symptomatology that have made it appear as though the postgeneration wanted to assert its own victimhood, alongside that of the parents, and to exploit it.

To be sure, children of those directly affected by collective trauma inherit a horrific, unknown, and unknowable past that their parents were not meant to survive. Second-generation fiction, art, memoir, and testimony are shaped by the attempt to represent the long-term effects of living in close proximity to the pain, depression, and dissociation of persons who have witnessed and survived massive historical trauma. They are shaped by the child's confusion and responsibility, by a desire to repair, and by the consciousness that her own existence may well be a form of compensation for unspeakable loss. Loss of family, home, of a sense of belonging and safety in the world "bleed" from one generation to the next.

For those of us in the *literal* second generation, as Eva Hoffman writes, "our own internal imagery is powerful" and linked both to the particular experiences communicated by our parents, and to the way these experiences come down to us as "emanations" in a "chaos of emotions." Even so, other images and stories, especially those public images related to the concentration and extermination camps, also "become part of [our] inner storehouse."[12] I would argue that, as public and private images and stories blend, distinctions and specificities be-

tween them are more difficult to maintain, and the more difficult they are to maintain, the more some of us might wish to reassert them so as to insist on the distinctiveness of a specifically *familial* generational identity.[13]

The photo corners at the edges of Art Spiegelman's early drawing, and the arrow pointing at "Poppa," show how the *language* of family can literally reactivate and re-embody an archival image whose subjects are, to most viewers, anonymous. This "adoption" of public, anonymous images into the family photo album finds its counterpart in the pervasive use of private, familial images and objects in institutions of public display—museums and memorials like the Tower of Faces in the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum or certain exhibits in the Museum of Jewish Heritage in New York—which thus construct every visitor as a familial subject. This fluidity (some might call it obfuscation) is made possible by the power of the *idea* of family, by the pervasiveness of the familial gaze, and by the forms of mutual *recognition* that define family images and narratives.[14]

Throughout this book, however, I argue that postmemory is *not* an *identity* position but a *generational* structure of transmission embedded in multiple forms of mediation. Family life, even in its most intimate moments, is entrenched in a collective imaginary shaped by public, generational structures of fantasy and projection and by a shared archive of stories and images that inflect the broader transfer and availability of individual and familial remembrance. Geoffrey Hartman's notion of "witnesses by adoption" and Ross Chambers's term "foster writing" acknowledge breaks and fractures in biological transmission even as they preserve a familial frame.[15] If, however, we thus *adopt* the traumatic experiences of others as experiences we *might ourselves have lived through*, if we inscribe them into our own life story, can we do so without imitating or unduly appropriating them?[16]

This question applies equally to the process of identification, imagination, and projection of those who grew up in survivor families, and of those less proximate members of their generation or relational network who share a legacy of trauma and thus the curiosity, the urgency, the frustrated *need* to know about a traumatic past. Still, their relationship to the past is certainly not the same. Eva Hoffman draws a line,

however tenuous and permeable, between "the postgeneration as a whole and the *literal* second generation in particular."[17] To delineate the border between these respective structures of transmission—between what I would like to refer to as *familial* and "*affiliative*" postmemory—we would have to account for the difference between an intergenerational vertical identification of child and parent occurring within the family, and the intragenerational horizontal identification that makes that child's position more broadly available to other contemporaries.[18] But survivor families are often already fractured and disrupted: traumatized parents return from the camps to be taken care of, or to be rejected, by children who survived in hiding; families flee or emigrate to distant lands, and languages in host countries are more easily navigated by children than by parents. Affiliative postmemory is thus no more than an extension of the loosened familial structured occasioned by war and persecution. It is the result of contemporaneity and generational connection with the literal second generation, combined with a set of structures of mediation that would be broadly available, appropriable, and, indeed, compelling enough to encompass a larger collective in an organic web of transmission.

WHY PHOTOGRAPHS?

When Spiegelman adopts the Bourke-White image into his family album and points to an anonymous figure as "Poppa," he performs an affiliative postmemorial act. The key role that photographic images—and family photographs in particular—play as media of postmemory clarifies the connection between familial and affiliative postmemory, and the mechanisms by which public archives and institutions have been able both to re-embody and to re-individualize the more distant structures of cultural memory.

More than oral or written narratives, photographic images that survive massive devastation and outlive their subjects and owners function as ghostly revenants from an irretrievably lost past world. They enable us, in the present, not only to see and to touch that past, but also to try to reanimate it by undoing the finality of the photographic "take."[19]

The retrospective irony of every photograph consists precisely in the simultaneity of this effort and the consciousness of its impossibility. But is not all irony removed from such an act of viewing if violent death on a massive scale separates the two presents of the image?

Photographs, especially analog ones, of course, exist and survive, like memory, in "generations" of reproduction and reproducibility. As aura and authenticity fade in the processes of mechanical reproduction and now digitization, and as the relationship of the image to the original context of its production erodes, the changes images undergo mirror the movement from memory to postmemory.

In C. S. Peirce's tripartite definition of the sign, analog photographic images are more than purely indexical, or contiguous to the object in front of the lens: they are also iconic, exhibiting a mimetic similarity with that object.[20] Combining these two semiotic principles enables them also—quickly, and perhaps too easily—to assume symbolic status and thus, in spite of the vast archive of Holocaust images, the second generation seems to have inherited but a small number of specific images, or kinds of images, that have shaped our conception of the event and its transmission.[21] The power of the intercalated photos in the two *Maus* volumes can serve as illustration: the images of Anja and Richieu function as specters reanimating their dead subjects with indexical and iconic force. The photographs of Vladek in his concentration camp uniform, of Anja with her son, of Richieu as a young boy together reassemble a family destroyed by the Holocaust and consequently fractured in the artist's stylized drawings of mice and cats. They not only refer to their subjects and bring them back in their full appearance; they also symbolize the sense of family, safety, and continuity that has been hopelessly severed. Through the indexical link that joins the photograph to its subject—what Roland Barthes calls the "umbilical cord" made of light—photography, especially analog photography, can appear to solidify the tenuous bonds that are shaped by need, desire, and narrative projection.[22]

Whether they are family pictures of a destroyed world, or records of the process of its destruction, photographic images are fragmentary remnants that shape the cultural work of postmemory. The work that they have been mobilized to do for the postgeneration, in particular,

ranges from the indexical to the symbolic. In his controversial book *Images in Spite of All*, the French art historian Georges Didi-Huberman describes the double regime of the photographic image: in it, he argues, we simultaneously find truth and obscurity, exactitude and simulacrum. Historical photographs from a traumatic past authenticate the past's existence, what Roland Barthes calls its *ça a été* or "having-been-there," and, in their flat two-dimensionality, they also signal its insurmountable distance and "de-realization."[23] Unlike public images or images of atrocity, however, family photos, and the familial aspects of postmemory would tend to diminish distance, bridge separation, and facilitate identification and affiliation. When we look at photographic images from a lost past world, especially one that has been annihilated by force, we look not only for information or confirmation, but for an intimate material and affective connection that would transmit the affective quality of the events. We look to be shocked (Benjamin), touched, wounded, and pricked (Barthes's punctum), torn apart (Didi-Huberman). Photographs thus become screens—spaces of projection and approximation, and of protection.[24] Small, two-dimensional, delimited by their frame, photographs minimize the disaster they depict, and screen their viewers from it. But in seeming to open a window to the past, and materializing the viewer's relationship to it, they also give a glimpse of its enormity and its power. They can tell us as much about our own needs and desires (as readers and spectators) as they can about the past world they presumably depict. While authentication and projection can work against each other, the powerful tropes of familiality can also, and sometimes problematically, obscure their distinction. The fragmentariness and the two-dimensional flatness of the photographic image, moreover, make it especially open to narrative elaboration and embroidery, and to symbolization.[25]

What is more, in Paul Connerton's useful terms, photography is an "inscriptive" (archival) memorial practice that, one could argue, retains an "incorporative" (embodied) dimension; as archival documents that inscribe aspects of the past, photographs give rise to certain bodily acts of looking and certain conventions of seeing and understanding that we have come to take for granted but that shape, seemingly re-embody, and render material, the past we are seeking to understand and receive.[26]

Sight, Jill Bennett has argued, is deeply connected to "affective memory": "Images have the capacity to address the spectator's own bodily memory; to *touch* the viewer who *feels* rather than simply sees the event, drawn into the image through a process of affective contagion. . . . Bodily response thus precedes the inscription of narrative, or moral emotion of empathy."[27]

Familial structures of mediation and representation facilitate the *affiliative* acts of the postgeneration. The idiom of family can become an accessible lingua franca easing identification and projection, recognition and misrecognition, across distance and difference. This explains the pervasiveness of family pictures and family narratives as artistic media in the aftermath of trauma. Still, the very accessibility of familial idioms and images needs also to engender suspicion on our part: does not locating trauma in the space of family personalize and individualize it too much? Does it not risk occluding a public historical context and responsibility, blurring significant differences—national difference, for example, or differences between the descendants of victims, perpetrators, and bystanders? And does it not undergird a fundamentally oedipal and heteronormative, reproductive form of social organization? Constructing the processes of transmission, and the postgeneration itself, in familial terms is as engaging as it is troubling.

If particular tropes and particular images become pervasive, they can offer a lens into some of the workings of postmemory and the mediations on which it relies. Close scrutiny of such repeated images enables us to see how postmemory risks falling back on familiar and often unexamined cultural images that facilitate its generation by tapping into what Aby Warburg saw as a broad cultural storehouse of "pre-established expressive forms."[28] Taking shape in the "iconology of the interval," the "space between thought and the deepest emotional impulses,"[29] these forms transmit affect across subjects and generations. For the post-Holocaust generation, these "pre-established" forms often take the shape of photographs—images of murder and atrocity, images of bare survival, and also images of a "before" that signal the deep loss of safety in the world. As "pre-established" and well-rehearsed forms prevalent in postmemorial writing, art, and display, some of these photographic images illustrate particularly well how gender can become a

potent and troubling vehicle of remembrance for the postgeneration, and suggest one way in which we might theorize the relationship between memory and gender.

In order to make some of these points more immediately concrete, I want to turn to two images, drawn from Art Spiegelman's *Maus* and W. G. Sebald's *Austerlitz*. Illustrating the pervasive trope of maternal abandonment and the fantasy of maternal recognition, these pictures of lost mothers illuminate the performative regime of the photograph and the gazes of familial and affiliative postmemory that I develop further in the chapters that follow.[30]

WHY SEBALD?

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, Art Spiegelman's *Maus* played an important role in enabling the work of postmemory of an entire generation. That role fell to W. G. Sebald and particularly his 2001 novel *Austerlitz* in the first decade of the new millennium. Both works have spawned a veritable industry of critical and theoretical work on memory, photography, and transmission, and thus the differences between *Maus* and *Austerlitz* are a measure of the evolving conversations of and about the postgeneration. My comparative discussion here aims to bring out some of the elements implicit in these conversations—the continuing power that the familial and the indexical hold for Spiegelman and the less literal, much more fluid, conception of both that characterizes the turn-of-the-century remembrance illustrated by Sebald. In this sense, these two works form bookends to the period covered by the works discussed in the rest of this book.

Maus and *Austerlitz* share a great deal: a self-conscious, innovative, and critical aesthetic that palpably conveys absence and loss; the determination to know about the past and the acknowledgment of its elusiveness; the testimonial structure of listener and witness separated by relative proximity and distance to the events of the war (two men in both works); the reliance on looking and reading, on visual media in addition to verbal ones; and the consciousness that the memory of the past is an act firmly located in the present. Still, the two authors could not be

more different: one the son of two Auschwitz survivors, a cartoonist who grew up in the United States; the other a son of Germans, a literary scholar and novelist writing in England.

The narrators of *Maus* are father and son, first and second generation, and their conversations illustrate how familial postmemory works through the transformations and mediations from the father's memory to the son's postmemory. The generational structure of *Austerlitz* and its particular kind of postme'mory is more complicated: Sebald himself, born in 1944, belongs to the second generation, but through his character Austerlitz, born in 1934 and a member of the "1.5 generation," he blurs generational boundaries and highlights the current preoccupation with the persona of the child survivor. Austerlitz himself has no memory of his childhood in Prague, which was erased and superseded by the new identity he was given when he arrived in Wales and was raised by Welsh adoptive parents. The conversations in the novel are intragenerational conversations between the narrator and the protagonist who (we assume) were both young children during the war, one a non-Jewish German living in England, the other a Czech Jew. For them, the past is located in objects, images, and documents, in fragments and traces barely noticeable in the layered train stations, streets, and official and private buildings of the European cities in which they meet and talk. Standing outside the family, the narrator receives the story from Austerlitz and *affiliates* with it, thus illustrating the relationship between familial and affiliative postmemory. And, as a German, he also shows how the lines of affiliation can cross the divide between victim and perpetrator memory and postmemory.

Maus, while trenchantly critical of representational regimes and eager to foreground their artifice, remains, at the same time, anxious about the truth and accuracy of the son's graphic account of the father's prewar and wartime experiences in Poland. Indeed, in spite of its myriad distancing devices, the work achieves what Andreas Huyssen has called a "powerful effect of authentication."[31] That authentication, and even any concern about it, has disappeared in *Austerlitz*. The confusion experienced by Sebald's character, the profound losses he has suffered, his helpless meanderings and pointless searches, and the beautiful prose that conveys absence and an objectless and thus endless melancholia,

all this combined with blurry, hard-to-make-out photographic images, speak somehow to a generation marked by a history to which they have lost even the distant and now barely "living connection" to which *Maus* uncompromisingly clings.

While *Maus* begins as a familial story, *Austerlitz* becomes so only halfway through: familiality, and thus also gender, anchor, individualize, and re-embody the free-floating, disconnected and disorganized feelings of loss and nostalgia that come to attach themselves to more concrete and seemingly authentic images and objects. Still, the world around Sebald's character does not actually become more readable, nor does his connection to the past become more firm, when he finds his way back to a personal and familial history, to Prague, where he was born and where he spent a very few years before being sent to England on the Kindertransport, and to the nurse who raised him and knew his parents.

The images Austerlitz finds, I want to argue, are what Warburg calls "pre-established expressive forms," that amount to no more than impersonal building blocks of affiliative postmemory. "Our concern with history" Austerlitz says, quoting his boarding school history master André Hilary, "is a concern with preformed images already imprinted on our brains, images at which we keep staring while the truth lies elsewhere, away from it all, somewhere as yet undiscovered."[32] This passage perfectly encapsulates the perils of postmemory. The images already imprinted on our brains, the tropes and structures we bring from the present to the past, hoping to find them there and to have our questions answered, may be screen memories—screens on which we project present, or timeless, needs and desires and which thus mask other images and other, as yet unthought or unthinkable concerns. The familial aspects of postmemory that make it so powerful and problematically open to affiliation contain many of these preformed screen images. What image is more potent than the image of the lost mother, and the fantasy of her recovery?

In *Maus*, the photograph of mother and son, a postwar image embedded in the inserted "Prisoner on the Hell Planet: A Case History," anchors and authenticates the work (figure 1.2). As the only photograph

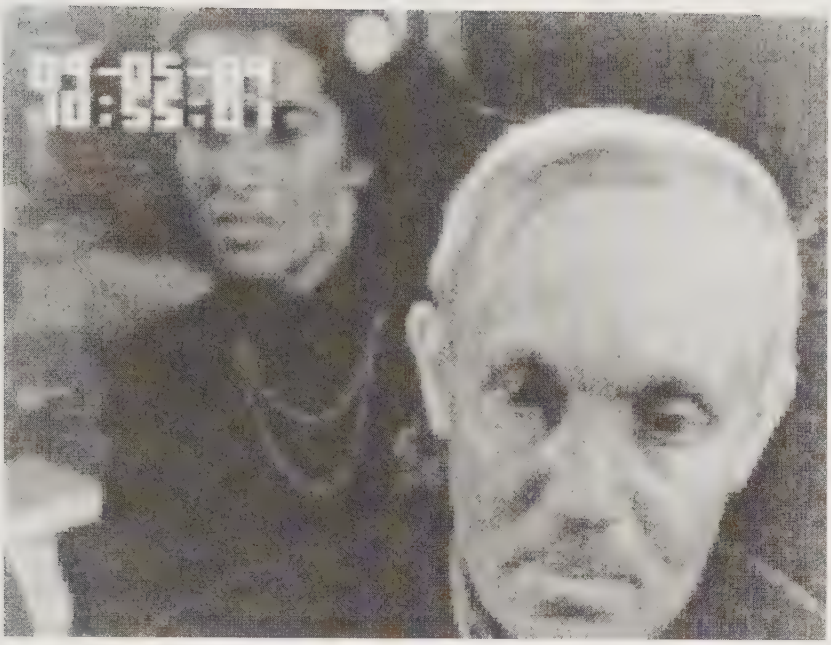
1.2 Art Spiegelman, *Trojan Lake, N.Y., 1968. From* Maus I: A Survivor's Tale/My Father Bleeds History, *by Art Spiegelman, copyright 1986 by Art Spiegelman. Used by permission of Pantheon Books, a division of Random House, Inc.*

in the first volume, it solidifies the mother's material presence even as it records her loss and suicide. Maternal recognition and the maternal look are anything but reassuring: in fact, when the artist draws himself wearing a concentration camp uniform, he signals his complete transposition into his parents' history and his own incorporation of their trauma in Auschwitz activated by the trauma of his mother's suicide.[33] Still,

there is no doubt in the work that this photo is a photo of Anja and Art Spiegelman. Taken in 1958, it shows not the war but its aftermath. Through the angle at which it is drawn, it breaks out of the page, acting as a link between the comics medium and the viewer, drawing the viewer into the page and counterbalancing its many distancing devices (the multiple hands holding the page and the photograph, the expressionist drawing style that yanks the reader out of the comics style of the rest of the book, and the human forms that challenge the animal fable to which we have become habituated in our reading, to name but a few). The maternal image and the "Prisoner" insert solidify the familiality of *Maus*'s postmemorial transmission and individualize the story. At the same time, Anja's suicide in the late 1960s can also be seen as a product of a broader post-Holocaust historical moment—a moment at which other Holocaust survivors like Paul Celan and, a few years later, Jean Améry, also committed suicide.

The two "maternal" images in *Austerlitz* function quite differently: rather than authenticating, they blur and relativize truth and reference. After following his mother's deportation to Terezín, Austerlitz is desperate to find more concrete traces of her presence there. He visits the town, walks its streets, searches the museum for traces, and finally settles on the Nazi propaganda film *The Führer Gives a City to the Jews* as the last possible source in which he might find a visual image of his mother. His fantasies revolve around the extraordinary events of the Red Cross inspection of Terezín, in which inmates were forced to participate in performances of normalcy and well-being that were then filmed for propaganda purposes: "I imagined seeing her walking down the street in a summer dress and lightweight gabardine coat, said Austerlitz: among a group of ghetto residents out for a stroll, she alone seemed to make straight for me, coming closer with every step, until at last I thought I could sense her stepping out of the frame and passing over into me."[34] The fantasy is so strong that, against all odds, Austerlitz does succeed in finding in the film an image of a woman who, he believes (or hopes), might be his mother.

The film to which he finds access in a Berlin archive is only a 14-minute version of the Nazi documentary, and after watching it repeatedly, he concludes that his mother does not appear in it. But he does not give up:



1.3 Film still from *The Führer Gives a City to the Jews*, a Nazi propaganda film. *Reprinted in W. G. Sebald,* Austerlitz, *translated by Anthea Bell (New York: Modern Library, 2001)*

he has a slow-motion, hour-long copy made of the excerpt and he watches it over and over, discovering new things in it, but marveling also at the distortions of sound and image that now mark it. In the very background of one of the sequences contained in these distorted slow-motion fragments of a propaganda film of fake performances of normalcy, Austerlitz does eventually glimpse a woman who reminds him of his image of his mother (figure 1.3). In the audience at a concert

> set a little way back and close to the upper edge of the frame, the face of a young woman appears, barely emerging from the back shadows around it. . . . She looks, so I tell myself as I watch, just as I imagined the singer Agáta from my faint memories and the few other clues to her appearance that I now have, and I gaze and gaze again at that face which seems to me both strange and familiar, said Austerlitz.[35]

Far from the fantasy of recognition and embrace Austerlitz spun out for the novel's narrator—"she alone seemed to make straight for me, coming closer with every step, until at last I could sense her stepping out of the frame"[36]—the woman's face is partially covered by the time indicator showing the 4/100 of a second during which it appears on the screen. In the foreground of the image, the face of a gray-haired man takes up most of the space, blocking the backgrounded woman from view.

In the novel, this picture can at best become a measure of the character's *desire* for his mother's face. It tells us as little about her and how she might have looked, what she lived through, as the photo of an anonymous actress Austerlitz finds in the theater archives in Prague. His impression that this found image also looks like Agáta is corroborated by Vera, who nods, but the link to truth or authentication remains equally tenuous. Austerlitz hands both images over to the narrator along with his story, as though for protection and dissemination, at once.

What, with this precious image, is the narrator actually receiving? Even for the familial second (or 1.5) generation, pictures are no more than spaces of projection, approximation, and affiliation; they have retained no more than an *aura* of indexicality. For more distant affiliative descendants, their referential link to a sought-after past is ever more questionable. The images Austerlitz finds, moreover, are in themselves products of performances—his mother was an actress before the war, and, what is more, in the propaganda film in Terezín, all inmates were violently forced to play a part that would further the workings of the Nazi death machine. Unlike the picture of mother and son in *Maus*, which was probably taken by the father, the presumed image of Agáta in the film inscribes the gaze of the perpetrator and thus also the genocidal intentions of the Nazi death machine and the lies on which it was based.[37] The numbers in the corner, of course, recall the Auschwitz numbers and thus anticipate the fate of the Terezín prisoners. They overpower the figures who shrink beneath the fate that awaits them. But who are these figures? Has Austerlitz, has the narrator, found what they were seeking?

Austerlitz's description of the film still throws ever more doubt on the act of postmemorial looking. Austerlitz focuses on one telling detail: "Around her neck, said Austerlitz, she is wearing a three-stringed

and delicately draped necklace which scarcely stands out from her dark, high necked dress, and there is, I think, a white flower in her hair."[38] The necklace, I believe, connects this image—whether deliberately or not—to another important maternal photograph, that of Roland Barthes's mother in *Camera Lucida*, perhaps *the* image exemplifying the trope of maternal loss and longing and the son's affiliative look that attempt to suture an unbridgeable distance.

The necklace appears in Barthes's discussion of a picture by James van der Zee not so much as a prime example of Barthes's notion of the punctum as detail, and of the affective link between the viewer and the image, but of how the punctum can travel and be displaced from image to image. Barthes first finds the picture's punctum in the strapped pumps worn by one of the women; a few pages later, when the photograph is no longer in front of him, or of us, he realizes that "the real punctum was the necklace she was wearing; for (no doubt) it was this same necklace (a slender ribbon of braided gold) which I had seen worn by someone in my own family."[39] In a brilliant reading of Barthes's notion of the punctum, Margaret Olin takes us back to the initial image to expose Barthes's glaring mistake: the women in van der Zee's image wear strings of pearls and not "slender ribbons of braided gold."[40] The slender ribbon of braided gold, she argues, was transposed from one of his own family pictures that Barthes had reproduced in his *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes* and entitled "the two grandmothers."[41]

Olin uses this example to call into question the very existence of the famous winter garden photo of Barthes's mother in *Camera Lucida*, showing how some of the details in his description might have been drawn from another text, Walter Benjamin's description of a photograph of the six-year-old Kafka in a "winter garden landscape."[42] The mother's picture may instead be one that is indeed reproduced in *Camera Lucida*, titled *La Souche* (*The Stock*).[43] These displacements and intertextualities, which Olin delineates in fascinating detail, lead her usefully and yet dangerously to redefine the photograph's indexicality: "The fact that something was in front of the camera matters; what that something was does not. . . . What matters is displaced," she provocatively states.[44] In her conclusion she proposes that the relationship between the photograph and its beholder be described as a "performative index" or an

"index of identification," shaped by the reality of the *viewer's needs and desires* rather than by the subject's actual "having-been-there."[45]

I believe that the maternal image in *Austerlitz* can be inserted into the inter-textual chain Olin identifies, especially since, amazingly, Austerlitz also makes a mistake about the necklace, which, in the photo, only has two strings and not three, as he claims. To call reference into question in the context not just of death, as with Barthes's mother, but of extermination, as with *Austerlitz*, may be more provocative still, but this is indeed how photographs function in this novel. As *Austerlitz* shows, the index of postmemory (as opposed to memory) is the performative index, shaped more and more by affect, need, and desire as time and distance attenuate the links to authenticity and "truth." Familial and, indeed, feminine tropes rebuild and re-embody a connection that is disappearing, and thus gender becomes a powerful idiom of remembrance in the face of detachment and forgetting.

The generation of affiliative postmemory needs precisely such familiar and familial tropes to rely on. For feminist critics, however, it is particularly important to perceive and expose the functions of gender as a "preformed image" in the act of transmission. The photograph of the mother's face is a "preformed image" at which we stare while, as Austerlitz says, "the truth lies elsewhere, somewhere as yet undiscovered."[46] At our generational remove, that elsewhere may never be discovered. Thus the maternal image in *Austerlitz* provokes us to scrutinize the unraveling link between present and past that defines indexicality as no more than performative. The gendered familial figures we retrieve from our storehouses of expressive forms can be as elusive, and as in need of authentication, as memory itself.

And yet, for better or worse, one could say that for the postgeneration the screens of gender and of familiality, and the images that mediate them, function analogously to the protective shield of trauma itself: they function as screens that absorb the shock, filter and diffuse the impact of trauma, diminish harm. In forging a protective shield particular to the postgeneration, one could say that, paradoxically, they actually reinforce the *living* connection between past and present, between the generation of witnesses and survivors and the generation after.

FAMILY ROMANCES

In *Austerlitz*, the performative index structures every one of the photographs included, and even the very identity of the protagonist. Named after its main character, the novel's cover displays a photograph that is later revealed to be of that character as a child (figure 1.4). As we read, we have to ask ourselves, who *is* the curly-haired blond boy on the cover

1.4 *The Queen's Page. From W. G. Sebald,* Austerlitz, *translated by Anthea Bell (New York: Modern Library, 2001)*

of the book? If, as Barthes says, the photograph is evidence for someone's presence in front of the lens, who *was* in front of the lens and what is his relationship to the fictional Austerlitz? This photo is only one in several fictional devices to throw doubt on every element of the plot and to leave readers disoriented. Jacques Austerlitz, after all, is named after a train station that figures in the text, and that station refers to the site of a famous Napoleonic battle. And, of course, "Austerlitz" also recalls the name of the most famous Nazi death camp, Auschwitz. Placing us in the midst of a play of signifiers, the novel nevertheless uses photographs to gesture toward historical authenticity.

Austerlitz receives the photograph of himself from his nurse, Vera, who says to him "this is you, Jacquot, in 1939, about six months before you left Prague."[47] The precise date, 1939, underscored by the precise connection to his departure from Prague, and also the fact that the date is 1939, the year of the start of the war, all serve as forms of authentication. But when he gets the image, Austerlitz does not recognize himself. What makes the scene in the photograph come back to him is not the visual image but the *words* Vera says his grandfather said to him in Czech, *paže růžové královny*. But when that scene comes back to him, he does not find himself but loses himself altogether: "Once again I saw the live tableau with the Rose Queen and the little boy carrying her train at her side. Yet hard as I tried . . . I could not recollect myself in that part. I have studied the photograph many times since . . . I examined every detail under a magnifying glass without once finding the slightest clue."[48] Austerlitz goes to the picture for information about the past, but all he finds is the affects and emotions associated with it. He reports being "speechless," "uncomprehending," filled with "blind panic." The emotions are so strong that they leave him incapable of imagining "who or what I was," but they do enable him to fantasize in great detail his parents' return to the apartment, still alive.[49] The photograph confirms his feeling that "time does not exist at all, only various spaces . . . between which the living and the dead can move back and forth as they like."[50] As Barthes suggests, the photographic referent is the revenant, the ghost that returns to haunt those who look at the image, but Sebald goes further than Barthes in making the viewer himself or herself the ghost who haunts the photograph.

The picture of the little pageboy on the book's cover and inside it itself materializes like a revenant from the dead. Vera finds this image and another one of the two parents on stage acting in "*Wilhelm Tell*, or *La Somnambula*, or Ibsen's last play" by chance.[51] Tellingly, she finds it in a copy of *Le Colonel Chabert*, Balzac's novel about the survival and haunting return of a colonel in the Napoleonic wars who had been left for dead, but who climbs over the other corpses on the battlefield around him and returns home, only to have his identity contested by his wife and other heirs and to end up alone, destitute, and embittered. The photographs of Jacquot and his parents also function as revenants, and their identity is no less contested or ambiguous than the colonel's.

Unlike the photographs of Vladek and Anja in *Maus*, the parents in *Austerlitz* are minuscule figures on an enormous stage, actors in an undetermined play. Their costumes and size in the image make them unrecognizable. And Jacquot is not the little boy who was sent off to England and who returns as an adult to find himself, but the Rose Queen's page, dressed up in a costume in an empty field, in a scene he can neither remember nor locate.

These acts of myth making, these elaborate costumes and elegant stage sets, are the scenarios of a Freudian family romance and its ambitions. Freud writes that "the child's imagination becomes engaged in the task of getting free from the parents of whom he now has a low opinion and of replacing them by others who, as a rule, are of higher social standing" or, as he writes later, of "better birth."[52] The child becomes the Rose Queen's page or her son. But, in the aftermath of Terezín and Auschwitz, another family romance may be at work altogether, reconnecting a ruptured family rather than enacting the break. This is certainly the case for the three photographs in *Maus*. Could it be that these "family pictures," however staged, merely stand in for other photos from the time, historical photos that might be too difficult to look at? Perhaps the family pictures themselves are mere screen memories recalling a pre-historic time and masking an unbearable visual landscape, a shadow archive, with "preformed" figures of destruction.

This, in fact, might be the post-Holocaust family romance and survivor fantasy: that before the destruction, there was another world, a happier one, one uncontaminated by the violence that followed.[53] When

he looks at the photo of himself, Austerlitz says, he feels "the piercing inquiring gaze of the page boy who had come to demand his dues, who was waiting in the gray light of dawn on the empty field for me to accept the challenge and avert the misfortune lying ahead of him."[54] Establishing the existence of such a safe prewar world might enable the fantasy of averting the disaster that was to come.

This need for a "before" is not a matter of reality or indexicality, but of fantasy and affect. As Austerlitz shows, photographs can provide the stage for just such an affective encounter that can bring back the most primal childhood fears and desires for care and recognition. When Austerlitz and Vera look at the two photos she found in the Balzac volume, she begins to speak of the mysterious quality of such photographs when they surface from oblivion: "One has the impression, she said, of something stirring in them, as if one caught small sighs of despair, *gémissements de désespoir* was her expression, said Austerlitz, as if the pictures had a memory of their own and remembered us, remembered the roles that we, the survivors, and those no longer among us had played in our former lives."[55]

It seems to me that this may be the clearest articulation of what we fantasize and expect of surviving images from the past: that they have a memory of their own that they bring to us from the past; that that memory tells us something about ourselves, about what/how we and those who preceded us once were; that they carry not only information about the past but enable us to reach its emotional register. That they require a particular kind of visual literacy, one that can decode the foreign language that they speak, for in Sebald's formulations, they don't just utter "small sighs of despair," but they do so in French, "*gémissements de désespoir*." The work of postmemory would thus consist of "learning French" (as it were) to be able to translate the "*gémissements*" from the past into the present and the future, where they will be heard by generations not yet born.

2.1 Carl and Lotte Hirsch, Strada Iancu Flondor, Cernăuți, 1942. *Courtesy of the Hirsch family archive*