

# Testimonial Objects: Memory, Gender, and Transmission

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**Abstract** Focusing on a book of recipes and a miniature artists' book from the Terezin and Vapniarka concentration camps, this essay argues that such material remnants can serve as testimonial objects that carry memory traces from the past and embody the process of its transmission. Inspired by Roland Barthes's notion of the *punctum*, we read such testimonial objects as points of memory—points of intersection between past and present, memory and postmemory, personal and cultural recollection. They call for an expanded approach to testimony, one in which a consideration of gender can play an important interpretive role. Testimonial objects enable us to consider crucial questions about the past, about how the past comes down to us in the present, and about how gender figures in acts of memory and transmission.

This essay emerges from the work we are doing on our coauthored book manuscript in progress, "Ghosts of Home: The Afterlife of a City in Jewish Memory and History." We are grateful to Geoffrey Hartman, Irene Kacandes, Nancy K. Miller, Ivy Schweitzer, Diana Taylor, and Susan Winnett for suggestions on earlier drafts of this argument and to Meir Sternberg for his excellent editorial suggestions. Many thanks to David Kessler for sharing his archive and knowledge of Vapniarka with us and to Mirta Kupferminc for making us a facsimile of the little book. Parts and earlier versions of this essay were presented at Yale University, Johns Hopkins University, the University of Michigan, the University of Calgary, Columbia University, Amsterdam University, and the Australian National University.

*Poetics Today* 27:2 (Summer 2006) DOI 10.1215/03335372-2005-008  
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### The First Book

Between 1942 and 1944, Mina Pächter and several of her women neighbors interned in the Terezín (Theresienstadt) camp undertook a remarkable project: together they reconstructed, from memory, and wrote down, in German, on small scraps of paper the meal recipes that they had routinely prepared in prewar times. Even while they themselves were barely surviving on potato peels, dry bread, and thin soup, they devoted their energy to recalling recipes for potato and meat dumplings, stuffed goose neck, and goulash with Nockerl; for candied fruits, fruit rice, baked matzos, plum strudel, and Dobosch torte. Many of them had inherited these recipes from their mothers, and in writing them down, they used them not only to remember happier times or to whet their mouths through recollection but—more importantly—as a bequest addressed to future generations of women. Before her death in Terezín in 1944, Mina Pächter entrusted the assembled recipes to a friend, Arthur Buxbaum, asking him to send them to her daughter in Palestine if he should somehow survive. Arthur Buxbaum did survive, but it took twenty-five years and several other intermediaries for the mother's package to reach her daughter, Anny Stern, who had since moved to the United States. Another twenty years later, in 1996, the recipes were published in the original German and in English translation, in a book edited by Cara De Silva and entitled *In Memory's Kitchen: A Legacy from the Women of Terezín*.

Nowadays, sixty years after the end of World War II, children of victims and survivors of the Holocaust, dispersed throughout the world, are still discovering such legacies as the recipe book from Terezín among their parents' possessions and are still trying to scrutinize the objects, images, and stories that have been bequeathed to them—directly or indirectly—for clues to an opaque and haunting past. In recent years, a powerful memorial aesthetic has developed around such material remnants from the European Holocaust. The writings and artistic productions of, for example, Art Spiegelman, Patrick Modiano, Anne Michaels, Carl Friedman, W. G. Sebald, Christian Boltanski, Annette Messager, Mikael Levin, Tatana Kellner, Shimon Attie, and Audrey Flack reflect this type of creative engagement. In the course of our own work on the history and memory of Czernowitz (Cernăuți), the central European city where Marianne's parents grew up and survived the war, we too have received memorabilia from prewar days and from the ghettos and camps associated with the Holocaust in Romania (figure 1), and we have wondered how we might best respond to their demands.

The study of such personal and familial material remnants calls for an



**Figure 1** “Entrance to Vapniarka.” Drawing by Leibel and Ilie. Courtesy Kessler family archive.

expanded understanding of testimony. Such remnants carry memory traces from the past, to be sure, but they also *embody* the very process of its transmission. Now, at a moment in Holocaust studies when, with the passing of the first generation, we increasingly have to rely on the testimonies and representations of members of the second and third generations, we need to scrutinize the “acts of transfer,” as Paul Connerton (1989: 39–40) has termed them, by which memory has been passed down over the years. In such “acts of transfer” Connerton would include narrative accounts, commemorative ceremonies, and bodily practices—but we would also add the bequest of personal possessions and the transmission and reception of their meanings to his categories of analysis. Indeed, for anyone willing to subject them to informed and probing readings, material remnants can serve as testimonial objects enabling us to focus crucial questions both about the past itself and about how the past comes down to us in the present.

*In Memory’s Kitchen*, for example, carries powerful personal, historical, cultural, and symbolic meanings that far exceed its deceptively ordinary contents, drawn from the domestic everyday world of its authors. We cannot cook from the recipes in this volume—most of them leave out ingredients or steps, or they reflect wartime rationing by calling for make-do substitutes (for butter or coffee, for example) or by making eggs optional. But we can

certainly use them to try to imagine a will to survive and the determined commitment to community and collaboration that produced this extraordinary book. For persons familiar with the history of the Terezín ghetto, moreover, the recipe collection becomes a testament to the power of memory and continuity in the face of brutality and dehumanization.<sup>1</sup> Evoking shared transcultural associations of food and cooking with home and domesticity, the recipe writers also, paradoxically, enable us to imagine hunger and food deprivation through the moving and extraordinarily detailed fantasies of cooking and eating that their fragmentary efforts reveal. The recipe collection testifies to the women's desire to preserve something of their past world, even as that world was being assaulted, and it attests to their own recognition of the value of what they had to offer as women—the knowledge of food preparation.

As a book of recipes created and exchanged among women and bequeathed from mother to daughter, *In Memory's Kitchen* thus invites us to think about how acts of transfer may be gendered and how to engender feminist readings. The recipes embody and perpetuate women's cultural traditions and practices both in their content and in the commentary that accompanies some of them (one, for example, is called "Torte (sehr gut)" ["Torte (very good)"]). But in a book about food created in a concentration camp, considerations of gender also quickly disappear from view as we consider the Nazi will to exterminate *all* Jews and to destroy even the memory of their ever having existed. This text, therefore, also illustrates some of the well-known hesitations about using gender as an analytic category in relation to the Holocaust: the fear of thereby detracting attention from the racializing categorizations that marked entire groups for persecution and extermination. If those targeted for extermination were utterly dehumanized and stripped of subjectivity by their oppressors, were they not also degendered? Gender, in circumstances of such extreme persecution and trauma, may well be an immaterial, even offensive, category. As

1. Terezín (known as Theresienstadt in German) was built by the Hapsburg emperor Joseph II as a walled military garrison town and was named after his mother, the empress Maria Theresa. Connected to this fortified town was a smaller fortification that was used as a military and political prison. In 1940, after Czechoslovakia fell under Nazi control, this "small fort" became a Gestapo prison, and in 1941 the larger fortified town, called by the Nazis "Ghetto Theresienstadt," began to be used as a Jewish concentration and transit camp. Although tens of thousands of persons died there and multiple thousands more were deported to extermination camps in Poland until Terezín was liberated in 1945, Nazi propagandists presented the camp as a "model Jewish settlement." There they sanctioned—but, for the most part, compelled—artistic and cultural production by inmates for propaganda newsreels and staged social and cultural events to convince International Red Cross visitors in 1944 of the positive nature and high quality of their Jewish ghetto resettlement schemes. See Adler 1958; Schwertfeger 1989; Troller 1991; Chádková 1995.

Claire Kahane (2000: 162) has put it: “If hysteria put gender at the very center of subjectivity, trauma, in its attention to the assault on the ego and the disintegration of the subject, seems to cast gender aside as irrelevant.”<sup>2</sup> Hunger and thus food, after all, is an ever-present concern of every Holocaust victim. It is a persistent topic in every testimony and every memoir, regardless of the victim’s gender or other identity markers. This extends even to accounts of food preparation, which, perhaps in less sophisticated form, preoccupied male as well as female prisoners throughout Nazi ghettos and camps.<sup>3</sup>

Kahane (2000: 162) goes on to ask: “Does feminist theory of the past several decades make a difference in my reading of Holocaust narratives? . . . Could—and should—the Holocaust even be considered within the context of gender?” In response, the book of recipes from Terezín does raise significant historical questions about the role of gender *then*, in the ghettos and camps, and representational questions about its role *now*, in our readings of those experiences. Far from being irrelevant, we would say that a feminist reading and a reading of gender constitute, at the very least, compensatory, reparative acts. If the Nazis degendered their victims, must we not make a point of considering the effects of gender, even when these cannot always be kept clearly in view? In fact, we have been interested in looking at gender precisely when it recedes to the background, when it appears to be elusive or even irrelevant. Our broader aim in this essay is to suggest a reframing of the discussion of gender in Holocaust studies. On the one hand, we want to avoid what we see as an unfortunate and all too common polarity between erasing difference and exaggerating it to the point of celebrating the skills and qualities of women over those of men. On the other hand, we would like to get beyond “relevance” or “appropriateness” as categories.<sup>4</sup> As we will show in a detailed reading of another handmade book from a concentration camp—our own testimonial object from Vapniarka in Romania—gender is always relevant, if not always visible.

2. For an analysis of dehumanization as a form of degendering, see, for example, Spillers 1987; Hirsch and Spitzer 1993; Hartman 1997.

3. Israeli archives (Beit Theresienstadt at Givat Chaim-Ichud) even contain one recipe collection written by a man, Jaroslav Budlovsky, and there is also another recipe book written by male prisoners of war in the Philippines during World War II titled *Recipes Out of Bilibid* (De Silva 1996: xxx).

4. There is a substantial and contested literature on women’s experiences in the Holocaust that distinguishes it from the experiences of men. See, for example, Katz and Ringelheim 1983; Ringelheim 1984, 1990; Goldenberg 1990; Rittner and Roth 1993; Baumel 1998; Ofer and Weitzman 1998; Kramer 1999; Baer and Goldenberg 2003; Tec 2003. For feminist analyses of gender and the memory and memorialization of the Holocaust that foreground issues of representation, see Hirsch and Spitzer 1993; Hirsch and Smith 2002; Horowitz 2000, 2001; Kahane 2000; Eschebach et al. 2002; Hirsch 2002; Bos 2003.

### Points of Memory

What type of intervention can a feminist reading make when gender virtually disappears from view? We have found Roland Barthes's suggestive writings on photography and mourning helpful in this regard. We propose to use Barthes in the service of a feminist reading of testimonial objects, a reading that not only interrogates gender but is also more broadly inspired by feminist assumptions and commitments.<sup>5</sup>

Barthes's much discussed notion of the *punctum* has inspired us to look at images, objects, and memorabilia inherited from the past as "points of memory"—points of intersection between past and present, memory and postmemory, personal remembrance and cultural recall.<sup>6</sup> The term *point* is both spatial—such as a point on a map—and temporal—a moment in time; and it thus highlights the intersection of spatiality and temporality in the workings of personal and cultural memory. The sharpness of a point pierces or punctures: like Barthes's *punctum*, points of memory puncture through layers of oblivion, interpellating those who seek to know about the past. A point is also small, a detail, and thus it can convey the fragmentariness of the vestiges of the past that come down to us in the present—partial recipes on scraps of paper. In addition, such remnants are useful for *purposes of remembrance*—in order to help generate remembrance—another meaning of the term "point." And points of memory are also *arguments* about memory—objects or images that have remained from the past, containing "points" about the work of memory and transmission. Points of memory produce *piercing insights* that traverse temporal, spatial, and experiential divides. As points multiply, they can convey the overlay of different temporalities and interpretive frames, resisting straightforward readings or any lure of authenticity.

Following Barthes, then, we might say that while some remnants merely give information about the past, like the *studium*, others prick and wound and grab and puncture, like the *punctum*—unsettling assumptions, exposing the unexpected, suggesting what Barthes calls "a subtle beyond" or the

5. For other feminist readings of *Camera Lucida*, or the use of Barthes in the service of feminist analysis, focusing on Barthes's discussion of the detail, see especially the brilliant discussion in Schor 1987; on the relationship of photography to death and to the mother, see especially Kritzman 1988; Jones 2002; Phelan 2002; Gallop 2003.

6. On postmemory, see Liss 1998; Hirsch 1997, 2001, 2002. We have developed the notion of "points of memory" in relation to Barthes and the *punctum* in several related essays: see especially Hirsch and Spitzer 2005. Barthes's compelling discussion of the relationship of photography to death has inspired much of the vast literature on visibility, photography, and the Holocaust and on the transmission of affect in the act of memory: see especially Hüppauf 1997; van Alphen 1997, 2005; Zelizer 1998, 2001; Baer 2000, 2002; Morris 2001; Eigler 2001; Harris 2001; Hornstein and Jacobowitz 2002; Yacobi 2002.

“blind field” outside the frame.<sup>7</sup> For Barthes, the punctum is first a detail: a pearl necklace, for example, or a pair of lace-up shoes in a family portrait taken by James van der Zee in 1926 (Barthes 1981: 44). It is a detail only he notices, often because of some personal connection he has with it: he is interested in the necklace because someone in his own family had worn a similar one. This acknowledged subjectivity and positionality, this vulnerability, and this focus on the detail and the ordinary and everyday—all these also belong to feminist reading practices.

And yet, even though it is largely subjective and individual, the memorial punctum is also mobilized by collective and cultural factors. The meanings of the coffee substitute in the Terezin recipe book, or of the pointed collar or the bad teeth in the images in Barthes’s *Camera Lucida*, are derived from a cultural/historical rather than a personal/familial repertoire. A point of memory emerges in an encounter between subjects—the mother who wanted her daughter to receive the recipes assembled in the camp, the daughter who receives those recipes from beyond the grave and who transmits them to others, along with her memory of her mother. As encounters between subjects, as acts of reading personal as well as cultural meanings, points of memory are contingent upon the social factors that shape those subjects and upon how those subjects experience them—factors such as class, age, race, religion, gender, and power and the intersections between them. But as acts of reading, they also expose historical and cultural codes, codes marked by gender and other factors. In both these ways, testimonial objects and images, bequeathed and inherited, can focus and keep visible the elusive question of gender in relation to cultural memory. For Barthes, the punctum is precisely about visibility and invisibility—once a particular detail, however off-center, interpellates him, it screens out other parts of the image, however central or primary these might initially have appeared (ibid.: 49–51). This sort of “insistent gaze,” as he terms it, this search for what might lie outside the frame, may well be what it takes to keep gender in focus when one is talking about the Holocaust.

In the second part of *Camera Lucida*, Barthes (ibid.: 96) elaborates his discussion of the punctum, stating: “I now know that there exists another punctum (another ‘stigmatum’) than the ‘detail.’ This new punctum, which is no longer of form but of intensity, is Time, the lacerating emphasis of the *noème* (‘that-has-been’), its pure representation.” The punctum of time is precisely that incongruity or incommensurability between the meaning of a given object *then* and the one it holds *now*. It is the knowledge of the

7. Among the numerous insightful discussions of Barthes’s notion of the punctum, see Rabaté 1997; Derrida 2001; Olin 2002; Fried 2005; Prosser 2005.

inevitability of loss, change, and death. And that inevitability constitutes the lens through which we, as humans, look at the past. The photograph, Barthes (*ibid.*) says (and, we might add, the testimonial object), “tells me death in the future.”

But looking beyond Barthes’s own frame, through a lens primarily focused on war and destruction, we might suggest that death does not preoccupy us all in the same ways. What if death is untimely, violent, or genocidal? Wouldn’t that make the temporal disjunction between then and now utterly unbearable? In ordinary circumstances, people who use or produce the objects that survive them, or who are depicted in photographic images, face indeterminate futures that are made poignant by the certainty we bring to them in retrospect. In the context of genocide, however, intended victims actually anticipate their own untimely deaths in a *near* future. In the images or objects that emerge from such traumatic circumstances, the act of hope and resistance against that knowledge may well be the punctum. Our work of reading entails juxtaposing two incommensurable temporalities and exposing the devastating disjunction between them. It is a question of scale—the smaller the hope, the greater the courage required to resist. This is precisely the paradox we find in the recipes from Terezín and also in the little book from Vapniarka to which we will now turn.

### The Second Book

This little book (figure 2) came to us through the family archive of a cousin, David Kessler, the son of Arthur Kessler, a medical doctor who, along with a group of others accused of communist or antigovernment activities during the early war years, had been deported in 1942 from the city of Czernowitz/Cernăuți to the Vapniarka concentration camp in what was then referred to as Transnistria (see figure 3).<sup>8</sup> When Arthur Kessler was diagnosed with Alzheimer’s disease in Tel Aviv in the early 1990s, his son David inherited a number of boxes containing documents and memorabilia from his father’s experiences in Vapniarka in 1942–43. In subsequent years, David Kessler, now an engineer in Rochester, New York, spent much of his free time sorting and cataloging the items that would teach him about events his father had mentioned only rarely and that father and son could no longer discuss during their regular visits over the last decade of Arthur Kessler’s life. Vapniarka was a camp run by the Romanians (allied with the Germans) for political prisoners, communists, and other dissidents, most of

8. On Transnistria and Vapniarka, see Fischer 1969; Ancel 1986; Benditer 1995; Carmelly 1997; Carp 1994; and Ioanid 2000. See also Hirsch and Spitzer forthcoming.



**Figure 2** The little book. Courtesy Kessler family archive.

them Jews, and it housed not only men, but also women and some children. This family archive has been invaluable to us in our research into the painful history of the virtually unknown and highly unusual Vapniarka camp and the deliberately induced *lathyrismus* disease that maimed or killed many of the inmates there.

Throughout David's childhood and youth, the camp's existence had been constituted for him through his father's fractured stories, through his encounters with other camp survivors, and through silences, whispers, and the power of his own fantasies and nightmares. He told us:

I knew about this mysterious place called Transnistria and that there is some place called Vapniarka there, that it was a camp. But nothing specific. You could not not hear about it. There was a string of people coming to our house on crutches. I knew the people, we were surrounded by them. They had special cars, built especially for them. My dad took care of them. It was all part of my surroundings. And my father would say in German, "There are some things children



**Figure 3** Map of Romania and Transnistria showing Vapniarka. From Ioanid 2000.

should be spared knowing. One day the story will be told.” . . . In my imagination it was someplace over there that doesn’t exist any more. It was always in black and white of course, very unreal, it belonged to the old old past, it had to do with old people. (Kessler 2000)

Now that his father could not transmit that story directly, David was left with the objects in the boxes labeled “Vapniarka”: a photograph of a model of the camp (figure 4), built by an inmate after the war and exhibited at the Kibbutz Lohamei Hagetaot Museum in Israel; a lengthy typed memoir in German that his father had written during the 1950s and 1960s but that David was unable to read because the language they shared in Israel was Hebrew; some published and unpublished accounts of the camp; a vast correspondence which included numerous requests for Dr. Kessler to certify to his patients’ camp-related ill-health before various reparations boards. The boxes also contained carefully filed copies of the medical articles Arthur Kessler had published about lathyrismus, the debilitating paralysis Vapniarka inmates contracted from the toxic *Lathyrus sativus* chickling peas that were the substance of their diet—from peas fed to them but not to the camp guards and officers.<sup>9</sup> In addition, David found a series of original wood-

9. At the end of December 1942, almost five months after Ukrainian prisoners in Pavilion III of the camp and some three and a half months after the others had been introduced to a chickling pea (*Lathyrus sativa*) soup diet, the first among them showed the symptoms of a strange illness: severe cramps, paralysis of the lower limbs, and loss of kidney function. Within a



**Figure 4** Model of the Vapniarka camp by A. Salomovici. Courtesy Kibbutz Lohamei Hagetaot Museum.

cuts by Moshe Leibl, a camp inmate, depicting scenes from the camp as well as a number of small, handmade, metal memorabilia: a key chain and a shoehorn marked with a capital *V*, a bracelet charm, a pin, a miniature crutch, and a medallion of a running male casting away his crutches. The most compelling of these is a tiny book, less than one inch long, about half an inch wide.

Vapniarka, like Terezín, was a camp where the prisoners occasionally had some amount of autonomy, and during these times, artists there were able to produce remarkable work. The little book, as well as the metalwork memorabilia in the Kessler family archive and the woodcuts and drawings by various artists, attest to the lively cultural and artistic life that was thriving in the camp even at its worst moments (see figure 5). In his Vapniarka memoir *Finsternis* (*Darkness*), Matei Gall (1999: 150) evokes the determination with which artists created their works in the camp:

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week, hundreds of others in the entire camp were also paralyzed. By late January 1943, some 1,000 in the Lager were suffering from this disease in its early and intermediate stages; 120 were totally paralyzed; a number had died. *Lathyrus sativa*, occasionally mixed lightly into animal fodder in times of food shortage or famine, was widely known to be toxic to humans by the local peasantry and presumably, since it was only fed to camp inmates, by Romanian authorities and officials as well. See Kessler 1947.



**Figure 5** Vapniarka barrack and inmates by Mărculescu. Courtesy Kessler family archive.

One day I saw a man who held a nail in his hand and tried to flatten it, to refigure it so as to create a kind of chisel; this seemed unusual if not somewhat suspicious. I continued to observe him. From somewhere—maybe from a fence, or from his bunk, I don't know—he got a piece of rotting wood; he looked at it, tried to make it smooth, found a place in the courtyard of the Lager and started working on that piece of wood, to chisel it. . . . A few days later, the men who unloaded coal at the railway station brought him something he mixed to create a kind of ink. Now he had color! With a brush made out of some remnants of rags he began to color his piece of wood, and he pressed the damp surface on to a sheet of paper. The carving became a work of art: In front of me I saw an engraving that represented our pavilion. It was only then that I learned that this carver was a well-known and talented artist, a master of woodcuts, engravings and lithography who had worked at a number of magazines. (Our translation.)

We know from the Vapniarka memoirs and testimonies that in 1943, toward the end of Arthur Kessler's internment in the camp, under a more lenient camp commander, inmates invented ways to pass a few of their evening hours through various entertainments and cultural activities. This was possible because of the unusual organization of the Vapniarka camp, the absence of Kapos, the prisoners' own initiative in running certain aspects of camp life, and the experience of a number of them in clandestine activity from their work in the communist underground.

The professional artists, musicians, theatrical persons, and scholars interned in the camp narrated stories, recited poetry, gave lectures on topics such as Marxism, fascism, the cause of the war, the history of Jewish resis-



**Figure 6** . . . in the palm of a hand. Photo by Leo Spitzer

tance against the Romans. They performed music, dance pieces, theatrical sketches. They composed and made up songs in German and Romanian, a number about the very place where they were imprisoned. Gall (*ibid.* 152) writes that in Vapniarka “I heard [Schiller’s “Ode to Joy”] for the first time, and I was deeply moved, even though it was sung without orchestral accompaniment.” And, perhaps most tangible and potentially accessible from the perspective of memory transfer across generations, they produced woodcuts and drawings, reflecting their physical surroundings and camp life—works of impressive quality and superb testimonial value.

Together with the drawings and woodcuts, the little Vapniarka book enables us to imagine the elaborate cultural activities in the concentration camp and their function as forms of spiritual resistance against both the dehumanization imposed by the jailors and the despair produced by the spread of an incurable disease.

The little book fits easily into the palm of a hand (figure 6). Bound in leather and held together by a fancifully tied but simple rope, it immediately betrays its handmade origin. Elegant raised lettering graces the cover: “Causa . . . Vapniarka, 194 . . .”—the last number is missing, the writing or decorations at the top are impossible to make out, and the word “Causa” (spelled with an “s”) makes little sense in Romanian. The title page,

in purple lettering in Romanian, is less a title than a dedication: “To doctor Arthur Kessler, a sign of gratitude from his patients” (see figure 2). Its forty pages contain a series of scenes and anecdotes of camp life expressed, in graphic form, by seven different artists: each begins with a signature page followed by several pages of story-board drawings, a few with labels, one page of writing. We know that the majority of the seven artists are male, but some signed only a last name, and thus their gender is ambiguous. More than the question of the signature, however, the little book raises a more fundamental question about the readability of gender in this account of poison, disease, starvation, and resistance.

This little book has a great deal in common with the recipe collection from Terezín. Both books were hand sewn and made out of scarce scrap paper; both were collectively made in the camp in communal acts of defiance and resistance, constituting unconventional collective memoirs marked by the bodily imprints of their authors; both were assembled as gifts. Although, unlike Mina Pächter, Arthur Kessler survived and would have been able to tell his story to his son, the transmission of the full story of Vapniarka was also broken, delayed by half a century (the only three published Vapniarka memoirs appeared in the late 1980s and the 1990s). Both books, moreover, were structured in response to rigid formal limitations—the recipe format, the tiny rectangular page—and they thus conceal as much as they reveal, requiring us to read the spaces between the frames, to read for silence and absence as well as presence, employing Barthes’s “insistent gaze.” Both texts emerged out of moments of extremity and provoke us to think about how individuals live their historical moments, how the same moment can be lived differently by different people. In surviving the artists to be read by us now, the two texts also embody the temporal incongruity that Barthes identified in the punctum of time. They demand a form of reading capable of juxtaposing the meanings they may have held then with the ones they hold for us now. And like the book from Terezín, the little book from Vapniarka is intensely preoccupied with food—not as a source of fond memories of home but as the cause of a crippling and deadly disease.

Arthur Kessler’s memoir describes the moment when he received the little book and other gifts—just before the camp was dissolved toward the end of 1943, when the war on the eastern front had begun to turn against the Germans and their Romanian allies, and the prisoners were relocated to other camps and ghettos in Transnistria. Kessler left in the first group of one hundred inmates. “The patients feel that changes are under way; they are grateful to us as physicians and turn up later with expressions of

thanks and small handmade symbolic presents . . . testaments to their artistic talents.”<sup>10</sup>

For Dr. Kessler, the little book was no doubt a sign of gratitude, a form of recognition of his remarkable work as a physician who diagnosed the lathyrismus disease brought on by the inmates’ food and who spared no effort in trying to get the authorities to change the camp diet. The book was a gift that shows, as he writes, not just the patients’ talents for drawing but also their ingenuity in finding the materials, their skill in bookmaking, their resilience and collaboration. It is a testament to him as well as to his fellow inmates—to their relationships and sense of community—a message of good wishes for freedom, health, and a safe journey.

But the book was certainly also intended to be a souvenir containing scenes and anecdotes of camp life in graphic form: the barbed wire compound, the buildings, the bunks, mealtimes, men and women on crutches. Souvenirs authenticate the past; they trigger memories and connect them indexically (in C. S. Peirces’s sense of the term) to a particular place and time. They also help to recall shared experiences and fleeting friendships. Some of the pages in the little book are thus located and dated “Vapniarca, 1943”; and each series of drawings is also signed and personalized, as though to say: “Remember me?” “Remember what we lived through together?” And as a souvenir, the book is also a testament to a faith in the future—to a time yet to come when the camp experience will be recalled. It is thus an expression of reassurance—of a will to survive.

There is no doubt that Arthur Kessler and his fellow survivors would have found meanings in this little book that for us, looking at it in the present, remain obscure. There may be messages, references to specific incidents that we are unable to decode. For us, in the context of our second- and third-generation remembrance, the little book is less a souvenir or gift than an invaluable record—a testimonial object, a point of memory. Read in conjunction with other now-available sources for its visual account of small details of the camp itself and of camp experiences, it transmits much of what the Romanian authorities meant to commit to oblivion when they dissolved Vapniarka—all that today, in the now-Ukrainian town of Vapniarka and on the site of the camp itself, is largely erased and forgotten (Hirsch

10. All Arthur Kessler quotes in this essay are from his “Ein Arzt im Lager: Die Fahrt ins Ungewisse. Tagebuch u. Aufzeichnungen eines Verschickten” (“A Doctor in the Lager: The Journey in the Unknown; Diary and Notes of a Deportee”). This memoir, in typescript, is based on notes taken in the camp and was written not long after the war. An English translation by Margaret Robinson, Marianne Hirsch, and Leo Spitzer, edited and with an introduction and annotations by Leo Spitzer and Marianne Hirsch, is in preparation.

and Spitzer forthcoming). Concerning gender relations and differences, for example, it illustrates that in this camp, unlike other better-known camps, not only were there men, women, and children among the internees, but they shared some of the same spaces. It confirms that the prisoners clearly came to understand the connection between food and disease: that both women and men suffered from the paralysis.<sup>11</sup> It displays the inmates' primary preoccupations with food, water, the crippling malady—as well as with freedom and its attainment.

The book, of course, also testifies to Arthur Kessler's important role in the camp, depicting him in a number of the drawings as a competent and respected doctor. But it also reveals contemporary prejudices and highlights details largely omitted from subsequent memoirs. In one of the sequences, for instance, we see a woman working along with Dr. Kessler, either as a fellow doctor or as a nurse. We know from Arthur Kessler's memoir and other sources that there were over twenty doctors in the camp and that one, Dora Bercovici, was a woman who headed the nursing staff that the prisoners had organized. Written accounts of Vapniarka, including Kessler's very detailed narrative, mention Bercovici in passing but give her little of the recognition for battling the lathyrismus epidemic which, in the opinion of Polya Dubs (2000), a woman survivor who had worked with her, she rightfully deserves. However slightly, a feminist reading of the little book and other sources does help us to redress this inequity.

Dubs's testimony and some of the camp drawings that have survived underscore traditional gender differences that were operative in Vapniarka: women did not work outside the camp but tended to stay in the one camp building that was assigned to them and their children; they worked as nurses and cleaning staff, and they prepared food.

In looking for confirmation and elaboration of some of these differences in the little book, a detailed look at the way human figures are actually represented by its artists can prove instructive. Is gender clearly recognizable in these figures, and if so, are there instances when they are particularized and explicitly gendered and others when gender and other forms of particularity disappear from view? Are any patterns detectable? Such a close reading does immediately reveal that the little book offers us more than the historical information it contains or the scenes it narrates—scenes that all seem to tell the same story, through the same bare-bones, minimalist plot, repeated seven times, with slight variations. What is most strikingly

11. Both Arthur Kessler's and Nathan Simon's (1994) accounts of the spread of the disease agree that, proportionately, women contracted lathyrismus at a lower rate and suffered fewer fatalities from it than did men. Their explanation is that women consumed smaller portions of the toxic pea soup.



**Figure 7** Romașcanu's illustrations.

apparent is not uniformity at all but minute and larger-scale differentiation—the stamp of individuality, of voice, tone, and modulation that each of the miniature graphic accounts is able to convey.

The first artist, Romașcanu, for example, uses purple ink and closely drawn grids to frame his pictures tightly (figure 7).<sup>12</sup> Through the grids, as

12. The spelling of this artist's name, transcribed from the signature on the art, is uncertain.



**Figure 8** Ghiță Wolff's illustrations.

through windows, we can make out images of daily life that seem to provide regularity, perhaps even comfort: several scenes of nursing, close human contact, cooking and food. Still, these scenes are mediated, almost inaccessible. The viewer has to peer around the backs of the figures that obstruct access to the interior spaces, allowing only partial views. The train in the last frame of this sequence, marked "Spré Libertate" ("toward freedom"), may be traversing a railroad crossing, but it is still encased by the claustrophobic grid. Freedom may be hoped for. But it has certainly not been reached.

Preceding the departure, there is a scene of farewell between a male doctor and a woman standing below him, with her back to the viewer. She is looking right, toward the train. His look is kind, paternal; hers, however, is in no way submissive, despite her smaller stature and the lower positioning of her figure. But with her back to us, she seems bodily to enact the inaccessibility of these images and the privacy they seem to wish to preserve. Questions emerge: Were these first drawings in the little book done by a female artist (the artist's signature contains no first name)? Or did a male artist draw them, sketching a woman to figure mystery and opacity? These questions stimulate us to think about gender as not only a factor in everyday life or a historical category but also as a vehicle of representation.

When we view the images of the second artist, Ghiță Wolff (figure 8), all the framing inhibiting our vision is gone. These drawings appear joy-



**Figure 9** Avadani's illustrations.

ful, childlike, revealing a seemingly unbounded (or indomitable) life within. Here the same everyday scenes of outdoor camp existence take place under a smiling sun, and they seem to reflect a brighter, perhaps more optimistic, consciousness. Gender is clearly marked in some of them: the first includes men, women, and children; the next two, only men. Yet in the ensuing sketches gender is illegible. The figures, whether lying in their bunks or in the infirmary, are of indeterminate sex. Indeed, in the last image of Wolff's sequence—a drawing which appears to dissolve even the boundaries set by the book page—a small stick figure walks out through the camp gate toward us, raising her (or his) arms on the road to freedom. The individual is “liber,” free. But in this fantasy of liberty from ruthless confinement, gender appears irrelevant.

All allusion to liberty disappears in the next three segments. The third artist, Avadani (figure 9), is the most cryptic.<sup>13</sup> The stick figures here are initially simpler and more basic than Wolff's, but they evolve, becoming more complex, less skeletal, as the illness seems to advance. Even here, however, gender is not clearly marked until the fourth panel of the illustration. In this one, a more substantial figure (a doctor perhaps? Dr. Kessler?) stands before a pot of food, possibly coming to the conclusion that we now know was made: that the toxic contents of the inmates' diet induced their increasingly debilitating, frequently fatal, paralysis. Or is the figure, here and in the final sequence, not meant to be an inmate at all, but a camp guard, more “fleshed

13. The spelling of this author's name, transcribed from the signature on the art, is uncertain.



**Figure 10** The proverb.

out,” perhaps, because he enjoys a nontoxic, chicken-in-the-pot meal? Certainly, a context is missing in these sketches: their figures, almost entirely unmoored, are not identifiable or located in a specific moment or place.

And yet the panel in the little book that follows Avadani’s enigmatic contribution—the only page of writing within it besides the cover page—contains a powerful allusion to place in the form of a proverb: “Omul sfinteste locul; Locul sfinteste omul—Wapniarca” (“Man sanctifies the place; the place sanctifies man—Wapniarca”) (figure 10). Read as a proverb, applied to a concentration camp in which inmates were being slowly poisoned by the officials imprisoning them, its words are ironic if not sarcastic, to say the least. But as an insertion within an artists’ book praising the efforts and accomplishments of Dr. Kessler, it must certainly also be read more straightforwardly—as a tribute to the honor he bestowed on the place (and on his fellow inmates) with his presence. Like so much else transmitted in such testimonial objects, the page’s meanings are layered and not at all mutually exclusive. The generic universal “omul” (man), moreover, like the incongruous genre of the proverb, is related to some of the universalizing gestures we find in the drawings—if indeed it makes sense to say that the artists are universalizing the figures when they make gender invisible. Or are they perhaps just erasing particularity in the way that a proverb comes to stand for a wealth of experience and reduce it to a formula which, no matter how apropos, is always inadequate?

Jeşive’s watercolors (figure 11), which come after the proverb, stand out among all the drawings for their visual complexity. They require that we turn the pages sideways at times, since some are horizontal and others vertical. Although all depict exterior scenes, they offer no allusion to freedom. These stark scenes of disease and forced labor—performed both by clearly male and also by ambiguously unmarked figures—stand in sharp contrast to the beauty of their pastel depiction, as they most poignantly illustrate the stubborn persistence of the imagination amid pain and persecution. Jeşive’s colors perform an escape into beauty, even as they refuse to represent the



**Figure 11** Jeșive's illustrations.

dream of escape that is present in the form of trains or open gates in virtually all the other drawings.

In Aurel Mărculescu's images (figure 12), which then follow and which project a very different view of exteriority, the shaded ink drawings seem dark and sinister in comparison to Jeșive's pastels. In them, each figure is situated in front of a barbed wire fence or a massive building or both. Here the only escape is through the imagination: the first panel shows a man—perhaps the artist himself—drawing, and the last shows isolated figures in their bunks (or ill, in the infirmary), alone with their thoughts and their dreams. The first three panels depict men, but the last two, representing extreme imprisonment and extreme privacy and interiority, are more ambiguous, echoing a pattern we've perceived before.

The last two sequences in the little book are briefer, as though the artists were running out of space (figure 13). DB's dynamic stick figures—all male, it would seem—give, in four panels, a foreshortened, minimal history of the Vapniarka inmate experience. A figure, using a walking stick and carrying a bundle on his back, energetically strides through the open gateway of the camp. This is the moment of arrival. But the disease cripples him, and we later see him standing on crutches in front of a barbed wire fence. He is not alone: the next panel depicts three figures, their arms interlocked, standing

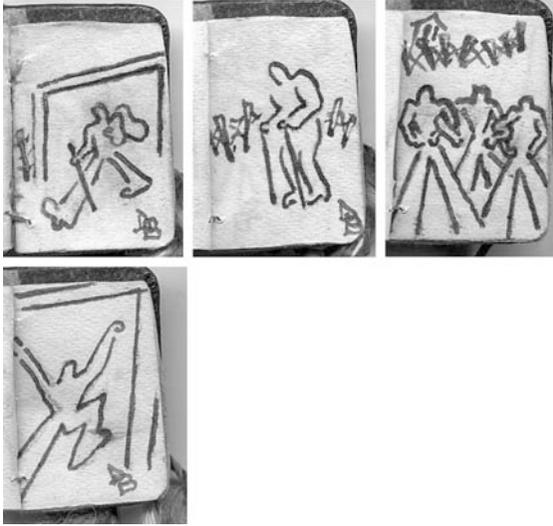


**Figure 12** Mărculescu's illustrations.

in front of the same fence in a gesture of defiant resistance. And, in the last panel by DB, the now seemingly empowered figure runs out through the same camp gateway, his arms raised high in triumph.

The book ends with a sequence of drawings by Gavriel Cohen, one of the talented artists who also left behind a number of additional pencil and pen-and-ink sketches of life in the Vapniarka camp (figure 14). Here he sketches, in accurate perspective, a double-page scene of what must have been the interior of the infirmary. A doctor or nurse is tending to a patient reclining on a bunk. Another patient lies on another bunk, a crutch laying at his bedside, in a position suggesting resignation if not despair. Gender is blurred in these sketches, secondary to the disease and affliction that is foregrounded. It recedes into the background, suggesting more questions than answers. In this light, the final panel of the series, and of the book itself—a moving train with a giant question mark above it—takes on a layered meaning. Certainly, it too echoes the yearnings for departure and freedom expressed by previous artists. But the unknown destination implied by the mark can also be read as a final entreaty to the departing Dr. Kessler. When he leaves, what will happen to the patients left behind?

Although they tell nearly identical plots, all of the drawings in the little book have vastly divergent emotional colorings. Like the recipes from Terezín and like witnesses in oral testimony, they expose more than they say, and they do so through mode, shading, and tone. In proportion to the book's small size, each of these differentiations, including gender, becomes hugely meaningful. As Barthes suggests in his reading of photographs in *Camera Lucida*, in each of the artistic representations in the little book, one aspect



**Figure 13** Illustrations from the DB sequence.

of an image, one detail, can make everything else recede from view, assuming the role of a punctum. And yet, as we have also seen, the testimonial impact of the little book—for Arthur Kessler at the time when he received it and for us now—greatly exceeds the sum of its parts and, of course, its miniature form.

How can we understand the book's miniaturization, its most distinctive feature? Certainly the materials—leather, paper, string, pens, and watercolors—must have been difficult to come by, and the miniature form, in all likelihood, attests to their scarcity. It would also have been easier for Arthur Kessler to hide such a minute object when he left the camp for unknown further destinations in Transnistria. Gaston Bachelard, who has written eloquently about the miniature, provides us with an insightful observation that is applicable to this little book. He recounts a passage by Hermann Hesse, originally published in *Fontaine*, a French literary journal that appeared in Algiers during World War II, that describes a prisoner who paints a landscape on the wall of his cell showing a miniature train entering a tunnel. When his jailors come for him, the prisoner in Hesse's story writes: "I made myself very tiny, entered into my picture and climbed into the little train, which started moving, then disappeared into the darkness of the tunnel. For a few seconds longer a bit of smoke could be seen coming out of the round hole. Then this smoke blew away, and with it the picture, and with the picture my person" (Bachelard 1964: 150). This passage vividly highlights the deep connection between miniaturization, confinement, and power. The



**Figure 14** Illustrations from the Gavriel Cohen segment.

miniature offers the powerless the fantasy of hiding, of escape, and of a victory over the powerful jailors. The escape is possible only through wit, imagination, and fantasy, as legendary small figures like Tom Thumb have demonstrated again and again. One could argue that, as a fantasy of the disempowered, the miniature is marked by gender. Feminized and infantilized by their jailors, male prisoners engage in fantasies of escape, expressed within and through the miniature, instead of armed combat, a traditionally more masculine response.

Susan Stewart (1993: xii) writes that the miniature is a “metaphor for the interior space and time of the bourgeois subject,” while the gigantic is a metaphor for “the abstract authority of the state and the collective, public, life.” Although it was collectively made, we can see the little Vapniarka book as an expression of the subjective interiority that is most assaulted and threatened by confinement in a concentration camp. But it is also a remnant—and reminder—of persistence against all odds. Each miniature drawing in stick figure form represents individualized experiences of unprecedented suffering and survival, even as it underscores the inadequacy of this or any other idiom for its expression. Whatever the practical reasons for the book’s miniature status, they need to be supplemented with an understanding that by giving Arthur Kessler this tiny object, the patients were giving him the most precious gift they could bestow—the small bit of privacy and interiority, of depth and subjectivity, they had been able to

preserve. Handmade, jointly conceived and constructed, yet individually imagined, the miniature object they are endowing to him—and through him and his son, to us as well—contains not only their signatures, but also their bodily markings. Through this multiple “act of transfer,” the miniature appears as the small core of privacy—a shared privacy in this case—that defies smothering by the deadly authority of the state.

Along with other surviving Vapniarka drawings and woodcuts, the little book enables us to imagine the elaborate cultural activities of the Vapniarka camp and their function as forms of spiritual resistance against the dehumanization imposed by the jailors and the despair produced by the spread of an incurable disease. In this way, again, the little book is related to the recipe book from Terezín. In Terezín, where art was sanctioned and even coerced for use in Nazi propaganda efforts, the recipe book, generated by the women as a clandestine project, reflected a refusal and a resistant challenge to the purposes of the Nazi authority.

Additionally, the Vapniarka book’s tiny size specifically relates to, and provides a graphic analogue for, another incident of miniaturization discussed in several of the Vapniarka memoirs: the elaborate communal letters the inmates composed and smuggled to the outside world. Here is Gall’s (1999: 151) account:

What are our letters like? An ordinary sheet of paper was folded so as to produce 24 squares of one centimeter each. Every square was numbered front and back, each one of us received a code number that corresponded both to the number on one of the squares and to the number of our respective family. I for example had the correspondence Number 14. Once the carrier arrived safely with the folded and well-hidden sheet of paper, the letter was cut into the respective squares and everyone received the correct message.

Arthur Kessler, upon receiving the little book as a gift, would no doubt have recalled the miniaturized form of letter writing in which he also participated. For us, as well, its reduced dimension enables us better to visualize those collective letters and the calculated process of producing them. This ability to make us imagine the camp’s lively cultural activity or the practice of smuggling letters makes the little book and its drawings into points of memory that pierce through the temporal and experiential layers separating us from the past.

But as we have already seen, more is at stake in the miniature form. The little book’s size reflects the minimalism of the master plot that we find in the seven narratives. Perhaps, paradoxically, it is only through minimalism and miniaturization that the prisoners could express the enormity of their experience. As with the recipes from Terezín, it is literally only by going off

the scale in the other direction that we can begin to imagine the numbers, the totality of devastation, the shattering of individuality and collectivity that was the Holocaust. As we look at the recipes and the drawings in the little book, we can imagine how Anny Stern might have read the book her mother transmitted to her, how she might have tried to find hidden messages, accounts and explanations, meanings that exceed the recipe form. We can try to imagine receiving a one-centimeter letter from a relative in Vapniarka, as Judith Kessler, Arthur's wife, did: how minimal the messages must have been and how rich and multivalent they must have become in the act of her probing readings. The recipes from Terezín and the little book from Vapniarka elicit similarly meticulous and multiple readings from us. There is so little space that every line, every word counts as a possible clue. In such a context, minute marks and variations, virtually invisible, become hypervisible, disproportionately enormous.

A similar oscillation between invisibility and hypervisibility marks the question of gender in relation to the Holocaust: its seeming irrelevance makes it all the more relevant and significant. Like a figure/ground pattern, or like the oscillation between stick figures and fleshed out drawings, it emerges as significant, tangible, only to recede again, making space for other concerns. The recipes from Terezín and the drawings from Vapniarka thus become more than microcosms and emblems of the camps in which they were produced—they are emblems for the very process of reading gender within the context of the Holocaust. As points of memory, they have indeed provoked a piercing insight that traverses time and space—the incongruity of gender and the Holocaust, its oscillation between foreground and background, its legibility and illegibility.

The miniature, Stewart (1993: 54) writes further, contains the daydream that “the world of things can open itself to reveal a secret life . . . a life within life.” But this tiny memory book, a remnant that has now survived the deaths of those who could have told us more about it, does not reveal its secrets easily. It took bright lights, magnifying glasses, and a great deal of persistence for us to decode even its cover—and yes, once we succeeded, it revealed a secret life. It turns out that the word “Causa,” which is part of the book's title, was not meant to be Romanian at all, for it became apparent to us that, before some of the letters had faded, that the cover title actually read “Dr. Honoris Causa, Vapniarca, 1943” (see figure 15).

Once the cover became legible, it became hypervisible, exposing the depths of irony and incongruity structuring this gift. Indeed, the irony revealed is particularly evident to us who dwell in academia. With this gift, patients were bestowing on Arthur Kessler an *honorary doctorate from their concentration camp!* Once we decode the cover, the book's intent as gift and sou-



**Figure 15** “Dr. Honoris Causa, Vapniarca, 1943.”

venir is thus superseded by its function as an award of honor—as a kind of ironic certificate of merit embellished by a loopy ribbon made of ordinary string. But that honor does not contain any grand official diploma. It contains, instead, in graphic form, small individual accounts of the patients’ encounters with Dr. Kessler. The miniature form, juxtaposed with the grand title, underscores the incongruity of producing art in a concentration camp, of finding kindness, goodness, and friendship in the midst of deprivation and suffering. That juxtaposition, once we are able to make it visible, is indeed poignant. The punctum here is not in the details but precisely in this incongruity that echoes others—the incongruity of asserting humanity

in the face of starvation and dehumanization, of figuring hunger through dreams of food, of reading gender in the context of the Holocaust.

But in holding the little book from Vapniarka in the palm of a hand, and by reading its images with an insistent gaze, we can do even more. We can remember those who created and crafted its contents, and we can highlight and try to further transmit their courage, their resilience, and their collaborative determination. And yet, only if we acknowledge the distance that separates us from them, the layers of meaning and the multiple frames of interpretation that the intervening years have introduced and that have influenced our reading, can we hope to receive from them the testimonies and the testaments they may have wished to transmit.

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