

A Display Case for Our Loved Ones
Yom Kippur 5775 Justus Baird

In 1983, a book of photographs by Roman Vishniac was published. The book was called *A Vanished World*. The images were of prewar Eastern European Jewish life: two young boys in black hats in *cheder*, sitting side by side and studying a page of rabbinic commentary; a sad shopkeeper with nothing to sell; a grandmother and granddaughter, standing in a small room that functions as both a kitchen and bedroom, smiling slightly.

Roman Vishniac, who was born in Russia, captured those images in the Pale of Settlement between 1935 and 1938. His photographs came to evoke what many of us imagine as Jewish life in the *shtetl*. They were featured as illustrations for books by Isaac Bashevis Singer and Irving Howe; and they served as a guiding force for the cinematography of *Shindler's List*. He had become, in the words of one art critic, "the official mortuary photographer of Eastern European Jewry."¹

Years later, in 2000, a graduate student in art history and museum education at Harvard was assigned to research a book of photography. Her name was Maya Benton. She remembered a coffee table book of Vishniac's photographs from her grandmothers house and chose to study it. What Ms. Benton found as she dug into Vishniac's work was both fascinating and troubling. She discovered that Vishniac had actually take a much wider collection of photographs than the ones that he published – including many images that were of higher artistic quality, but that did not fit the narrative of impoverished Jewish life. She also found that Vishniac had a tendency to add captions to images that were imaginative or even fictional. For instance, one pair of photographs put together a middle age man and a young boy. The caption reads, "The father is hiding from members of the National Democratic Party. His son signals him that they are approaching. Warsaw, 1938." But the images were taken from different rolls of film, and probably even different cities.

As she continued her research, Ms. Benton found a note from the sales executive who worked on Vishniac's famous book, *A Vanished World*. The note described the publication as an "illustrated book of social history that would also appeal to a popular Jewish nostalgia market." She talked to the editor of the book, who said that at one point he realized that Vishniac "had become a mythmaker of his past — telling stories that were better than what really happened." Referring to Vishniac's creative captions, he said that he saw it as his job to keep some of the "baloney away from the pictures." Ms. Benton, the curator, put it this way: "It's as if we took pictures of homeless people in New York and then the city fell into the sea, and 50 years from now people looked at those photos and thought, That's what New York was."

¹ Alana Newhouse, [NYT](#). 2nd quote by Leon Wieseltier, quoted in same article.

Eventually Ms. Benton discovered that Vishniac's trip to the Pale of Settlement in the mid 1930's was actually a paid assignment from the Joint Distribution Committee. He had been commissioned to document the poor and the Orthodox among Europe's Jews so that the images could be used in fundraising work.

Vishniac's powerful and memorable photographs turned out to be perfect for that assignment. His daughter said that he "always spun tales." He was, indeed, a master storyteller – especially with his camera.

Vishniac was a master curator. He carefully selected only certain images and cropped each image in particular ways to tell the singular story of impoverished Jews.

But what happens when that story becomes the public narrative of our people for a certain place and time? What happens when one person's creative memory becomes mistaken for history?

* * *

I am a novice mourner. My father died a year and a half ago. I am still dealing with his estate. Many of his belongings remain in piles and boxes in my basement, waiting to be gone through.

Like many of you have done, I am going through the process of curating memories of him. I am asking questions like, Which parts of his life do I want to remember? Which parts do I want to forget? Which parts do I want to tell my kids about?

What guidance does our tradition offer us about curating these memories? As I remember my own father, should I aspire to be an historian, who pursues truth by representing the complexity of his life? Or should I aspire to be like photographer Vishniac, spinning a powerful story of his life, even at the cost of ignoring or misrepresenting other parts?

As I explored this question, I came across a book by my friend and teacher Dr. Yehuda Kurtzer, who is now president of the Shalom Hartman Institute of North America. His book, *Shuva*, is about the roles of history and memory in forming and sustaining the Jewish people.

Kurtzer discusses "memory season" on the Jewish calendar. Each spring, we experience a series of holidays related to history and memory. First comes two traditional holidays, Purim and Passover. And soon after, two modern holidays, Yom Hashoah and Yom HaZikaron.

Purim and Passover ritualize the past as acts of memory. Purim is the template for celebrating any moment when we emerge unscathed from a dangerous situation – like a communal benching of the *gomet* prayer. The tried to kill us, we survived, let's eat. And on Pesach, we "mostly tell stories about how people have told stories"² of what happened on Passover. On Pesach there are no harrowing testimonies of survivors. Instead, we get swept up in the "ongoing relevance of the message of liberation" that the holiday has come to represent. Purim and Pesach are exemplary holidays of Jewish *memory* in action.

² Kurtzer p5

But Yom HaShoah and Yom HaZikaron do not look anything like the templates of Purim and Pesach, which strive to be Jewish *history*. “On Passover,” Kurtzer writes, “we insert ourselves into a narrative, we become the oppressed and the liberated; [whereas] on Yom HaShoah...we become passive listeners to a survivor or eyewitness.” Yom HaShoah tends to privilege historical accuracy over collective memory and meaning making. The point here is not to criticize Yom HaShoah. The point is to distinguish between holidays that have evolved over generations by focusing on memory and meaning, and contemporary holidays that have taken a historical approach.

The radically different approaches of these Jewish holidays – the way they embody the difference between memory and history – can teach us how to remember our loved ones who have died:

Jewish memory is not a photographic, comprehensive catalog. Jewish memory challenges us to create narratives of past events that lead to meaning, commitment and obligations. (x2)

Let me try to make this more concrete, using the metaphor of an exhibition case, or a display case. When we try to preserve the totality of history – like preserving a whole library – without ever curating an exhibition case, we fail to transmit meaning.

An unused library may be more historically accurate, but it also gets very dusty. The Jewish way to remember is to curate an exhibition case with a handful of precious items and then tell stories about them, even if that means that the meaning of those memories evolves over time.

Neuroscientists have already taught us the biological basis of how our memories evolve. They have discovered that memories are reinforced only when they are accessed, and that each time we access them, we change the memory in some slight way. Memories that are not accessed on occasion are eventually lost. Our memories are constantly evolving as we reference them and share them.

* * *

My father suffered from an un-named condition that causes hoarding. He was, in a phrase, a pack rat. Throughout his life, he was surrounded by tall piles of stuff: in every room of every house he lived in, in every car he owned, in every bag he carried, there was lots and lots and lots of stuff. He was psychologically incapable of throwing things away.

In the backbreaking work of sorting through and getting rid of all that stuff after he died, I learned a simple truth: when you try to keep everything, you keep nothing. Only when you take the time and energy to **curate** something have you created value and meaning.

Only when you can tell a simple story – only when you have abandoned completeness and accuracy in the pursuit of meaning – can you hold on to something for a long time.

This is the irony of Jewish memory: curating a few precious memories is the ultimate act of preservation. Placing a few memories, imbued with meaning, in a display case gives our loved ones a chance at being remembered.

So what would I put in the display case of my father's life? In my father's display case, I will start with three things:

First, I will put one of his landscape photographs. It is one of thousands that he took in his life. It will remind me of how much he loved to be behind the viewfinder, how much he longed to be outdoors, and how much wonder he brought to the natural world.

Second, I will place in the display case of copy of my parents' divorce court proceedings. I was 6 years old when they divorced, and I discovered these proceedings as a teenager. The moment I read through them, I took a step toward young adulthood. The divorce proceedings remind me of the pain of infidelity, the infinite complexity of parenting, and the hard work that any marriage requires.

Third: a piece of scrap paper with notes Dad jotted down during a phone call with me when I was 20 years old and living abroad in Jerusalem. I discovered the note in one of the hundreds of tall piles of his stuff. That note reminds me that he cared about what I was doing. And it reminds me that he really did keep everything.

Our relationships with our loved ones are often complex. The memories we choose to display can be positive or negative. Romanticizing the past may not help. We make meaning from painful memories just as easily as we do from joyful memories – certainly we have learned that lesson from the Jews who came before us.

The display cases of memory that we construct may not be historically accurate, in that they will inevitably leave out many things, but they will contain important truths. Yehuda Kurtzer writes “we should not mistake accuracy for truth.” In other words, approaching the past like a historian does not necessarily lead us to truth. We should have a historical consciousness, he argues, but not at the expense of creating “sacred myth” and meaning.

This is the genius behind the work of photographer Roman Vishniac. Did he realize that only by carefully selecting a few photos, and crafting a narrative around them, he would preserve the memory of Jewish life in the Pale of Settlement for many generations to come?

No matter how many museums or centers for Jewish history we build, the future of the Jewish people cannot be built with archives. The only way to ensure the future of our people is to find the humanity in the stories of our loved ones and our communities – stories that echo in our souls.³

³ Paraphrased from Kurtzer, 142.

The job of the living is to curate the memories of our deceased loved ones. We who are living have the responsibility to choose what we carry forward, to put those precious items into a display case, and to tell those stories to everyone who walks by.

Yizkor is our ritual for remembering. For a few precious moments, in community, we work on the display cases of the lives of those who made us who we are. Rediscover a memory. Add a memory. Maybe even exchange a memory. Yizkor is our designated time to build and refresh the display cases of memory of those we have loved and lost.

That is how our loved ones, and our people, will live into the future, safeguarded against being forgotten.