



PROPERTY MAP. courtesy of Nancy K. Miller.

## Immigrant Archives: The Afterlives of Objects

Nancy K. Miller | The Graduate Center, cuny

My paternal grandparents left the town of Kishinev (now Chisinau, the capital of Moldova) for New York in 1906. They belonged to the massive wave of emigration from Eastern Europe that brought two million Jews to America between the 1880s and 1924. Although I had known my grandmother, who died when I was almost thirteen, she rarely spoke; I do not even remember her voice. I saw her as a dark, distant figure, a lonely widow in a family dominated by my mother's boisterous relatives. Neither she nor my father ever shared any stories from their past, and I grew up in almost total ignorance of their history. But in the year 2000, through an unexpected phone call, I discovered that I had in my possession a cache of documents, objects and ephemera, that would allow me to penetrate the silence of these missing people—some of whom I could have known.

In the beginning, I was bewildered by the memorabilia of a lost family, mine and yet not mine, and uncertain where to begin. So I created a list, an inventory of the things that I had inherited—for the most part unidentified, undated, and unsorted. But my father had saved them, many of the items probably saved by his mother before him. Confronted by these acts of memory, I felt compelled to try and make a kind of sense of what I found, to see what the objects could tell me. For those of us belonging to the third generation of immigrants, we start

# EMISFÉRICA

---

here, with a list standing in for the plot of a satisfying narrative. The challenge becomes how to figure out what these mute things from the past might allow us to say, what they might come to mean in the present.

What follows is an arbitrary list of my immigrant legacy, the objects that I inherited, composed as they popped into my mind: some are literally found objects, scraps and traces of vanished worlds, preserved over decades in the drawers and closets of my parents' apartment, and that I discovered only after my father's death; some are documents I was able to obtain through various archives with the information I uncovered during my research.

01. Four pieces of monogrammed silverware belonging to my great-grandparents on my grandmother's side.

02. A set of honey-colored curls in a cardboard box whose label read "Savon Violette," a fancy French soap.



*When I first opened the box and saw the curls, my visceral reaction was: payess! (These are the sidelocks worn by Orthodox Jewish men.) A narrative immediately popped into my head: my grandfather, once religious, cut off his payess, this mark of his adherence to strict codes of observance. I liked the story of modernization and assimilation: leave the old country behind, become a changed man. He was cutting himself off from his past. But when I showed the locks of hair to experts in Jewish life, they were not persuaded. Too much hair, they said, for payess. These might instead be the long curls of a woman—my grandmother?—who had cut off her hair before getting married in Russia. But then saved the curls as traces of her once girlish self. Man or woman? Which story did I want to tell? In the absence of a DNA test, how could I decide? One day, I received an email from a man who had heard the story of my mystery hair. He remembered seeing locks of hair belonging to his mother when she was a little girl, curls she cut off when she went to elementary school. Suddenly, I remembered the snapshot of a little girl who might have been my grandmother's niece, a girl whose name I did not know but whose long curls almost touched the bottom of the snapshot. In the end, I realized, there would be no way to tell—no way to tell which story fit the hair, no way to tell the story as a reliable narrator. But the hair's resistance to a verifiable story turned out to be a kind of metaphor for my project: despite its material reality, I could make sense of its significance only through an act of*

# EMISFÉRICA

---

*interpretation.*



*Many Jewish immigrants divested themselves of the outward signs of their identity when they arrived in the U.S., sometimes throwing hats and tefillin overboard before they landed—maybe that was how I could place them in the larger story I was trying to unearth. Maybe the hair should be understood in that sense, as generic...a gendered trace of a group's history, even if the gender remained indeterminate. But what was gripping to me as the granddaughter of this generation, was the gesture of preservation: someone, an individual whom I might have known, wanted to save a piece of the past. And it was the act of saving within my family that became the thread I would follow. I've told the story in my book, but I've also, in turn, saved the hair. I don't have to know who saved. I know that it was someone from whom I am probably related. Does that make the hair mine?*

03. One photograph from Russia, taken in a studio in Kishinev, circa 1903.



*This is a photograph of my paternal grandparents, and their first son, Shulem (later Sam) my father's only sibling, his older brother, a man I never met.*

*When I first looked at the portrait, soon after my father's death, and before embarking on the quest, I saw only foreignness in the faces of this mute trio. I could see that the writing was in the Cyrillic alphabet, but I was so mired in my ignorance and indifference that I replaced the*

# EMISFÉRICA

---

*photograph in the storage box of family artifacts I had inherited. It was only years after pursuing the research that I came to understand the image's importance: the photograph told me that my grandparents had indeed lived in Kishinev before emigrating (as noted on the ship's manifest), and that they therefore probably witnessed the famous pogrom that occurred in that city; that they had already begun to modernize from their parents' religious practices—my grandfather had trimmed his beard, posed hatless, and my grandmother was not wearing a wig; and that my unmet uncle was an immigrant. In other words, without knowing more, without wanting to know more just seeing this photograph taken in a studio in Kishinev was not meaningful in itself. The object that came from Russia, and was carried with them on their journey, did not mean anything, could not of itself produce a narrative without an act of interpretation, without creating the equivalent of a caption, without words.*

*What I subsequently learned about the meaning of that place, its history and character, changed my view both of what their story might have been, and ultimately helped me see my place in a historical chain. I too could locate myself on the map of the past. On the one hand, my grandparents had belonged to a generation of immigrants who left Eastern Europe because of pogroms—anti-Jewish violence across Russia—but they were also individuals tied to that place and time.*

04. Tombstones of my great-grandparents and grandparents, Montefiore, Mount Hebron. (Sarah's tombstone is half the size of Harry's, and almost hidden under a tree.)

05. My grandfather's cigarette case (monogrammed).

06. Family portrait, New York, circa 1906.

07. Ship's manifests: 1899, 1903, 1906.

08. My grandfather's Certificate of Naturalization, 1911.

09. My grandfather's Petition for Naturalization, 1906.

10. My grandfather's World War I draft Registration Card. September 12, 1918.

11. My great-uncle Isidor's World War I draft Registration Card. September 12, 1918.

12. Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Census of the United States, 1910, 1920, 1930.

13. My father's birth certificate, December 19, 1906.

14. Letter in Yiddish from Devorah Khaye Weisman in Argentina to Samele and Sade Kipnis, circa 1929.

# EMISFÉRICA

---



*For a long time I wondered about a letter in a pale blue envelope that had been sent from Argentina, handwritten in Yiddish. In part because I did not recognize the name of the sender, and in part because I didn't know of anyone who lived in Argentina, or who had a connection to that country, I put it away without pursuing its possible meaning. Still, as the custodian of these things that had been saved—letters in a language I could not read, photographs of people I did not recognize—I saved the letter. Once I began seriously trying to trace the history of this family, I decided to have the letter translated. It turned out that the sender of the letter was a sister of my grandmother, a sister I did not know existed. I knew my grandmother had a sister who emigrated to Canada, because my father had first cousins there. But I had no idea that Argentina was also, for my family, a location in the diaspora of this great wave of immigration. So here was another piece of the puzzle: a great-aunt I had never heard of writing to the uncle I had never met.*

*The letter is a four-page narrative describing a dramatic operation. My great-aunt Dvorah recounts in graphic detail the pain in her belly had caused her over the years, and the life-threatening proportions the illness had taken. The gravity of the situation led her to add the name “Khaye” to her given name, the word that in Hebrew means life, because she had come so close to death. It is not hard to imagine why my grandmother would have saved her sister's letter about survival—and suffering she compared to what they had endured in Russia. But for me the letter took on life not so much because of the vividly narrated physical ordeal, but because it fleshed out my grandmother's missing story (as well as my uncle's), and helped me see her as a person—not just my father's mother (and my mother's irritating mother-in-law). I began to see my grandmother as having been parted not only from her parents, but also from this sister, after immigration. At the same time, I was surprised to discover that my uncle, more than two decades after immigration, could still read Yiddish, and had had an affectionate relationship to this woman, his aunt, who called him “Samele,” in Russia. It was also another reminder of a fact I had trouble holding on to, that because my uncle was an immigrant, my father was their family's first American.*

*The letter was missing a stamp and date. But its value as a document far exceeded its status as evidence.*

15. Letters in Yiddish between Raphael Kipnis and D.R. Zawlawsky, January/March 1929.

16. Letter in English from Raphael Kipnis to Sam Beerman about the paper business, December 1929.

17. Photograph of Dvorah and family, Rosario, Argentina.

# EMISFÉRICA

---

18. One five rouble note, dated 1907.
19. Kipnis family tree, two versions.
20. Lower East Side addresses and occupations, from New York City directories
21. Death certificates, Raphael, Sadie, Harry, Sarah Kipnis.
22. Tefillin and prayer shawl in prayer bag.

(I threw away all but the little boxes inside the tefillin which contained the ritual prayers. That gesture might be a metaphor for this project. I can save only the reminders—the act of strapping on tefillin is meant to remind men of their obligations. I don't need or wish for those reminders, reminders not meant for me.)

23. Receipts for cemetery plots and their upkeep: Harry Kipnis, Sadie Kipnis.
24. Directions to Montefiore cemetery, Harry Kipnis (Take the Elevated train to the last stop—Terminal Building, Jamaica, then...)
25. Property map, documents of land purchase, cancelled checks.



*When a real estate agent in Los Angeles, who worked with a colleague in Israel identifying properties belonging to absentee owners, told me in the summer of 2000 that I had inherited a parcel of land in Israel, I was highly skeptical. Nothing in what I had gleaned of my family's history suggested Zionist convictions, and nothing suggested anything but the financially constrained life of first-generation immigrants. But I remembered having seen a folder among my father's papers containing a variety of documents about this property. The folder included a brief correspondence from 1949 between my father and a friend who had visited Israel and looked into the possibility of selling the property. The exchange suggested that nothing had come of the inquiry. I decided to proceed with the realtor since he wasn't asking for money in advance (just a rather large commission for his efforts). What did I have to lose? I already had gained a story, and hadn't I always wanted a story about my father's family? The inheritance*

# EMISFÉRICA

---

*required that we find my first cousin, a man I had never met, since he too would be an heir. This was the beginning of my quest, and the first stop took me to Memphis, Tennessee. My cousin's daughter had already begun researching the family history and had found a website with our family name—Kipnis—where the ship's manifests of all the immigrants with that name had been posted. I was astounded by this glimpse into the past, which propelled me into my incarnation as the detective on the paper trail of my lost family.*

*Like many third-generation descendants of immigrants to America around the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, I was almost entirely ignorant of the geography and history of my ancestors. I knew that my grandparents had come from Russia—but where in the vast Russian empire seemed impossible to know. With the information on the manifest, I was able to begin looking for their place on the map. Under the category "last permanent place of residence" was written: Kishinev.*

26. Condolence letter on the occasion of my grandfather's death from Talmud Torah Darchei Noam, March 1934

27. Summer courtship correspondence between Louis Kipnis and Mollie Miller, 1934. Photographs in Canada, 1934.

28. Letters from cousins in Canada, 1984, 1991.

29. Ration card, Sadie Kipnis, May 4, 1942, 2100 Davidson Ave, Bronx, NY.

Five stamps remaining (22, 20, 19, 16, 15). At 67, she was five-feet tall and weighed 138 pounds. (At times, close to her age, I've gotten perilously close to her weight—no wonder she looked like a fireplug in most of her pictures—even though I'm taller than she was. Growing up, I thought I was "tall" at five-feet four, because I was taller than my mother and my sister.)

30. Family portraits and snapshots unidentified by name or date.

A man on a horse. Who, in our entire family, could have sat astride a horse? Maybe it was my great aunt's husband who lived in Argentina.

31. Reel of 16-millimeter film of my parents' honeymoon to Canada, August 1936 in a silver metal case. The film, which has curled, smells like vinegar.

---

**Nancy K. Miller** is Distinguished Professor of English and Comparative Literature, The Graduate Center, CUNY. Her recent books are *Rites of Return: Diaspora Poetics and the Politics of Memory*, co-edited with Marianne Hirsch; *Picturing Atrocity: Photography in Crisis*, co-edited with Geoffrey Batchen, Mick Gidley, and Jay Prosser; and a family memoir, *What They Saved: Pieces of a Jewish Past*, in which the afterlife of these objects is

# EMISFÉRICA

---

fully explored.