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FAMILY HAIR LOOMS

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heirloom—2. something having special monetary or sentimental value or significance that is handed on either by or apart from formal inheritance from one generation to another.—Webster's Third International Dictionary

In the last years of his life, my father's rent-controlled apartment on the Upper West Side became the repository of what had been his lawyer's office in the glamorous Woolworth Building in Lower Manhattan. The office itself was small and chaotic, though my father claimed that he knew where everything was. My father's attachment to his office and the papers that filled it was intense, but at some point in the 1980s, the combination of his worsening Parkinson's disease and the economic demands of the law firm from whom he rented his space forced him to give up his name on the door. The Redwelds, the distinctive rust-colored containers of legal files, moved uptown.

When I inherited my father's possessions after his death, I found, tucked away in his dresser drawers and in the Redwelds that I thought contained the history of his legal career, the unsorted memorabilia of our family: random items from past and forgotten lives—cemetery receipts for the upkeep of graves, report cards, loose photographs of unidentified subjects, magazines, newspaper articles, telegrams, letters in Yiddish, and the mysterious locks of hair that I allude to in my title.

What was the point of my keeping what, on the face of it, was precious neither to me nor to anyone else—unless, through another kind of editorial decision, I could figure out whether there was something I could learn from what, as an academic, I called my archive, my material. Material for what? For a narrative I would some day construct about a family that had vanished without a trace. Or maybe just the opposite. This family, over generations, had left traces—in objects, in documents, and finally in me. What was missing was a story that would make sense of the silence that surrounded the scraps of information I had gathered, a

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story that would bear witness in the place of the absent voices.

If I haven't already done so in a gesture of efficiency, at my death someone will toss this entire legacy into a black trash bag and it will all vanish down the garbage chute of history, completing the disappearance already in progress. But perhaps if I convert these objects into words, I can counter the vanishing act. I can share my objects and reinsert them into the wider history to which they belong. This is because my story branches into a network of narratives both characterized by their incompleteness and their interrelatedness. The story I'm trying to tell is both individual and collective. For example, if you click onto the web site jewishgen.org you can see, through criss-crossing tracks of virtual connection, the attempts of many other third-generation descendants of an Eastern European world, shattered at the end of the nineteenth century into the shards and scraps of diaspora, to make sense of a fractured past. The objects—in particular, the locks of hair—photographs, and documents in my personal safekeeping for which I am seeking an interpretive framework take on meaning in relation to a world to which I have no direct access beyond their limited material dimensions. My objects bear witness, as it were, to the existence of a community to which I belong only remotely, but that I can invoke when I insert them into this historical context.

The hair was stored in a once-elegant cardboard box.



Fig. 1.: Locks of hair. Photograph by Lorie Novak.

I believe that after my grandmother's death in 1954, my father kept the locks previously saved by my grandmother, without necessarily knowing their origin. While I can safely guess that this hair belongs to my father's side of the family (on my mother's side everyone had bone-straight black hair), what does it mean to inherit something when you don't know for sure to whom it belonged? In this case, since the hair is unassigned—and, we might say, unlike a letter, unsigned—what is the status of possession of hair? Is this hair an heirloom? The box was not “handed on” to me, which is a condition for the category of heirloom. I took the hair into my possession after my father's death. But does uncertainty of origin and transmission disqualify an object from bearing witness to a meaningful prior existence? For me, the locks are family hair that looms, that beckons mysteriously from the borderlands of my quest. The hair is a link in a chain that ties me, binds me tightly, to the past, even if I can't fully decipher either hair or past. Still, in these circumstances, is it ethical for me to make up a story about the locks, to place them in a narrative I deliberately construct with the imagination, in part, of fiction? My answer is yes, provided that the story is plausible, given the history of these people, Eastern European immigrants who left Russia in 1906 for America.

Saving locks of hair was a commonplace practice during the Victorian period. Hair was often included in scrapbooks and memory albums, as a recent exhibition demonstrated: “Because it does not disintegrate over time if it is properly protected, hair has been a symbol both of abiding love and deeply felt loss for thousands of years. Mothers kept locks of their children's hair, women often gave their suitors locks of their hair as tokens of their affections, and locks of the sitter's hair were often added to miniature portraits” (Moonan 2007). This gesture, a way of bearing witness to love and loss, points almost by definition to the importance of gender in the act of memorialization: mothers save the hair of their children, women offer locks of hair to their suitors.¹ But what happens when we cross gender with ethnicity, in particular that of Eastern European Jews, in a slightly later period?²

When I first saw the box of curls in my father's dresser drawer after his death, I felt almost viscerally certain that I was looking at the sidelocks (*payess*) worn by ultra-Orthodox and Hassidic Jewish men, and I thought that the severed locks might have belonged to my grandfather. But when it came to writing about the locks that both fascinated and dis-

turbed me, I realized that I didn't know what I could legitimately say about what they might represent in a tradition from which I had taken my distance. I wrote to Susannah Heschel, a well-known scholar of Jewish studies, to ask her what she thought (on the basis of the photograph above) of the payess hypothesis. "To cut off payess," she responded, "is an old sign of rejection of Jewish law," although "hair," she continued, by custom usually would be "burned, not preserved." But then she went on to speculate about the affect behind the gesture. She wondered rhetorically "who saved the payess": "Presumably his wife, perhaps as a nostalgic remembrance of the old ways together, the commitment to Orthodoxy, perhaps the wedding of two young people from religious homes, now repudiated—though not without some sadness" (e-mail communication, October 22, 2006). This interpretation made sense to me, given what I knew about my family's origins.

My grandfather Rafael was born in Bratslav, Russia, a tiny town in what is now Ukraine, a town known in Jewish history for a famous Hasid and storyteller, Nachman of Bratslav, as he is called, who taught and wrote there in the early nineteenth century. Perhaps Rafael left home and rebelled against his father by cutting off the signs of his youthful religious observance. Since my grandfather, according to the photographs, first trimmed his beard and then shaved it, while his father, my great-grandfather (in photographs), maintained his long beard, full and untrimmed, this tale has a certain intergenerational logic. I like the idea of inheriting a rebellion against orthodoxy, but if I continue in the direction of the wedding ceremony and ritual in Orthodox families, another, equally suggestive scenario emerges—that of the bride.

The locks are a bride's hair, twirled into ringlets that were sacrificed before the girl put on a wig as a married woman. Maybe this is the story of a woman who wants to remember her past as a girl, once proud of her hair. This is the view of Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, who after looking at the actual hair object, forwarded the following account of a bridal hair cutting that she found on an Internet site:

The next morning after the *khupah* [ceremony], when the *sheitl* [wig] had already been sent to the bride at home, the regal *siddur* [prayer book] in the golden cloth with a lock, a *shkot* (a mirror in a [wooden] frame), etc, according to one's financial ability, the groom's mother, often with all of the relatives went to see the

nakhas [proud enjoyment], that is, if the *mitzvah* was done in the true Jewish way, and the bride was lifted from the bed. After undressing her, her hair was cut, during which the young, often 14 or 15 year old bride heartbreakingly would cry over her beautiful cut locks and braids. After the cutting, the bride would be veiled. (Lerer n.d.)

Kirshenblatt-Gimblet reflected on this possibility in an e-mail conversation (April 15, 2007), citing her own family as possible evidence: “Who knows? Longing for the shorn locks? Especially in later periods when girls may have not wanted to go along with this anyway (my father’s mother, for example).”

A third, alternative narrative suggested to me was that the locks of hair belonged to a son, whose hair, according to ultra-Orthodox Jewish tradition, would have been cut for the first time at age three in a formal ceremony. (This is a ceremony for boys only.) In this version, the act of saving might indicate a desire to recognize and memorialize the religious male development plot. On the other hand, since my grandmother may have lost children between the births of her two sons, the locks might simply be the hair of dead daughters. In either case, these curls would be an overabundance of hair for a three-year-old child (just as it would be for sidelocks).

Even DNA analysis, I have learned, cannot resolve the conundrum, since without a follicle, without a root, the gender of hair cannot be determined. At stake, however, is not necessarily a belief in the root—a verifiable truth of origin—but rather a narrative about uprooting, the departure that loomed large on the horizon of hundreds of thousands on the eve of the twentieth century. If this is a story not about a child, but rather of a man or a woman, the locks as preserved, whichever their gendered origin, seem to point to a break with tradition, a break probably consolidated, and perhaps inspired, by immigration. As such, my family hair would bear witness to a collective narrative, that of Eastern European Jews emigrating to the New World in the early years of the twentieth century, and shedding the marks of their foreignness.

But maybe not. Maybe in the absence of a specific story I am substituting a familiar, even overly familiar, narrative, by now a template about a certain aspiration to the modern and a compromise with Orthodoxy common to this generation of emigrants. What if my grandmother,

a woman fond of fashion, one day simply decided to abandon her golden locks, in favor of a new style? What if, when her husband suddenly died and she was newly widowed, my famously vain grandmother decided that the curls no longer suited her, mourned her loss through the cut, and saved the hair in remembrance of their bond?

Despite the proliferation of seductive narratives, my heirloom cannot stand alone in a meaningful way, except as a marker and bearer of memory itself: the locks of hair perform an act of remembrance. Someone, probably a woman, in view of the fancy French soap box, wanted to remember a boy or a man dear to her—or wanted to remember her own beautiful locks. Somebody else, probably my father, understood what was being remembered enough to preserve it (not that my father was capable of throwing anything away). A third person—a third-generation descendant—a daughter, saved the hair again to make a story in which her history might be continued. As an object, naturally, the hair cannot of itself testify to the experience it accompanied. But as the keeper of the locks, I can bring them into language, into the world of lost stories of which they so eloquently speak.

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NOTES

1. In *Forget Me Not*, his study of photography and acts of remembrance, Geoffrey Batchen notes the intimate association of women with the construction of mourning objects that add hair to jewelry: "By the mid-nineteenth century, American women especially were being charged with new social roles as keepers of memory, as mourners, and as home-based teachers of religious belief" (2004, 68).

2. On the importance of gender to interpreting objects like these, see Hirsch and Spitzer 2006.

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