Writing and Remembering

The Generation of Post Memory:
Writing and Visual Culture after the Holocaust

By Marianne Hirsch

New York: Columbia University Press, 2012, 305 pp., $27.50 hardcover

Epistolophilia: Writing the Life of Ona Šimaitė

By Julija Šukys

Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2012, 217 pp., $24.95, hardcover

Reviewed by Rochelle Ruthchild

Marianne Hirsch is the William Peterfield Trent Professor of English and Comparative Literature at Columbia University and professor in the Institute for Research on Women, Gender, and Sexuality. A distinguished and prolific scholar, a former editor of the journal of the Modern Language Association, and currently the association's president, she is the recipient of numerous awards and fellowships. To her writing, she brings her experience as the child of Holocaust survivors, whose early years were spent in Bucharest, Romania. Like the Lithuanian Ona Šimaitė, Hirsch and her parents lived in a European city with the changing boundaries, names, and languages of the edge of a crumbled multinational empire. In Hirsch's case, her parents strolled down their prewar main street Herrengasse in Czernowitz, which later became Iancu Flondor in Romanian Cernăuţi, and is today Kobylanska in Chernivtsi, Ukraine.

Hirsch's book is wide-ranging, including personal observations about her childhood in the capital of postwar Communist Romania, as well as trenchant analyses of a range of books, artwork, films, and other visual representations of the Holocaust. Two of the nine chapters are written with her husband, Leo Spitzer, with whom she is also collaborating on a book entitled *Ghosts of Home*. It is hard to do justice to the breadth of this book in a short review. Hirsch surveys key and relevant works by Art Spiegelman, W.G. Sebald, Susan Sontag, Toni Morrison, Nancy Spero, Muriel Hasbun, Tatana Kellner, Jeffrey Kellner, Ruth Klűger, David Leventhal, Anne Frank, Lorie Novak, Lucy Dawidowicz, Froma Zeitlin, Mitzi Goldman, Bracha Lichtenberg-Ettinger, and Susan Meiselas, among others.

Hirsch is to be commended for her ambition. Her feminist sensibilities appalled by the absence of female narrators in Claude Lanzmann's film *Shoah*, Hirsch seeks to reconceptualize the field of memory studies. She distinguishes between history and memory, arguing that

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

Addressing the issue of postmemory she writes, "The structure of postmemory clarifies how the multiple ruptures and radical breaks introduced by trauma and catastrophe inflect intra-, inter-, and transgenerational inheritance." Incorporating gender and queer consciousness into a male-dominated field, she is particularly strong in analyzing examples of mother/daughter transmission as reflected in photographic, artistic, and performance art. One striking example is that of Irma Morgensztern, a Warsaw ghetto escapee, her daughter, and Irma's mother, as portrayed in Jeffrey Wolin's 1997 exhibition and book, *Written in Memory: Portraits of the Holocaust*. Addressing the gender implications of a male artist making this history visible, Hirsch provides a positive interpretation: "[T]his particular image enables us to envision mother/daughter transmission not as an identity position, but as an affiliative space of remembrance, available to other subjects external to the immediate family."

Hirsch moves beyond the Holocaust to include and reflect upon other traumatic events and oppressions, such as slavery, the Vietnam War, and the Palestinian *Nakba* (cataclysm: 1948, when the state of Israel was established and the Palestinians fled or were driven out). In the latter case, she discusses Ghassan Kanafani's 1969 novella *Return to Haifa*. In Kanafani's work, a Palestinian couple go back to Haifa to revisit the house they were forced to leave in 1948, now occupied by Holocaust survivors. As the novella develops, the two traumatic experiences unfold into the next generation with devastating consequences.

Hirsch has little to say about memory and postmemory in much of the former Soviet Union, the site of at least one third of all Holocaust murders. She does discuss the work in Poland of Golda Tencer in collecting and exhibiting photos of Jews kept by Christian Poles and the ways in which Tencer is seeking to make visible the former Jewish presence to contemporary Poles. More discussion of the memories and postmemory of Holocaust survivors and their progeny who still live among the perpetrators and the European killing fields, transit points, and camps could provide a significant contrast with the experiences of those who emigrated to the West and to Israel.

While Hirsch seeks to capture major trends in postmemory, more elaboration of the criteria for inclusion and exclusion in her survey would have been helpful. Why, for example, in a book about visual culture, are so few films discussed? Why is the focus almost exclusively on the works of survivors and their children who live in the US, Israel and Australia?

If Hirsch develops a theoretical approach to memory or postmemory after the Holocaust, Julija Šukys thoroughly grounds herself in the physical evidence of the life of one woman, an unsung Holocaust heroine, seeking to make visible Ona Šimaitė (1894-1970): her writing, her brave deeds, her world. To Šukys, "Šimaitė is interesting both for how she is ordinary and atypical."

A little knowledge of Lithuanian history will help readers of this book. Lithuania has a glorious past; in the fourteenth century, it was the largest country in Europe, and included what are today Belarus, Ukraine, parts of Poland, and Russia. But by the time of Šimaitė's birth, a much shrunken Lithuania was a peripheral part of the Russian Empire, the largest of the multinational empires of the time. While the official state language was Russian, the languages of the people of the area included Lithuanian, one of the oldest Indo-European tongues, Polish, and Yiddish. Most of the present country of Lithuania was within the Pale of Settlement, the area in which most of Russia's Jews were confined. Jews were largely forbidden to engage in agriculture and thus heavily concentrated in towns and cities. Vilna was a major center of Jewish thought, the "Jerusalem of the North," and had a sizeable Jewish presence, about one third of the city's total population.

With the Russian Revolution of 1917 and the breakup of the tsarist empire, Lithuania proclaimed its independence on February 16, 1918, with Kaunas/Kovno as its capital. Vilna, its chief city, became part of the new state of Poland. In a prefatory note, Šukys points to the linguistic currents of the area: "Most cities and villages in Lithuania have at least two names: a Lithuanian one, a Yiddish one, and often a Russian or Polish one." Thus, the current Lithuanian capital is called Vilna by Jews, Vilnius by the Lithuanians, and Wilno by the Poles.

During World War II, Lithuania was occupied first by Soviet troops in 1940, then by the Nazis, and again by the victorious Soviets in 1944. During the Nazi occupation, 95 percent of Lithuania's Jewish population was massacred in various killing fields, the largest one Paneriai (Ponar in Yiddish), outside of Vilna, where about 100,000 people, mostly Jews but also some Polish intellectuals, were murdered by the Nazis and their Lithuanian collaborators. Lithuanians were noticeable among the ethnic groups who aided the Holocaust; in some places, they began killing Jews even before the Nazis arrived.

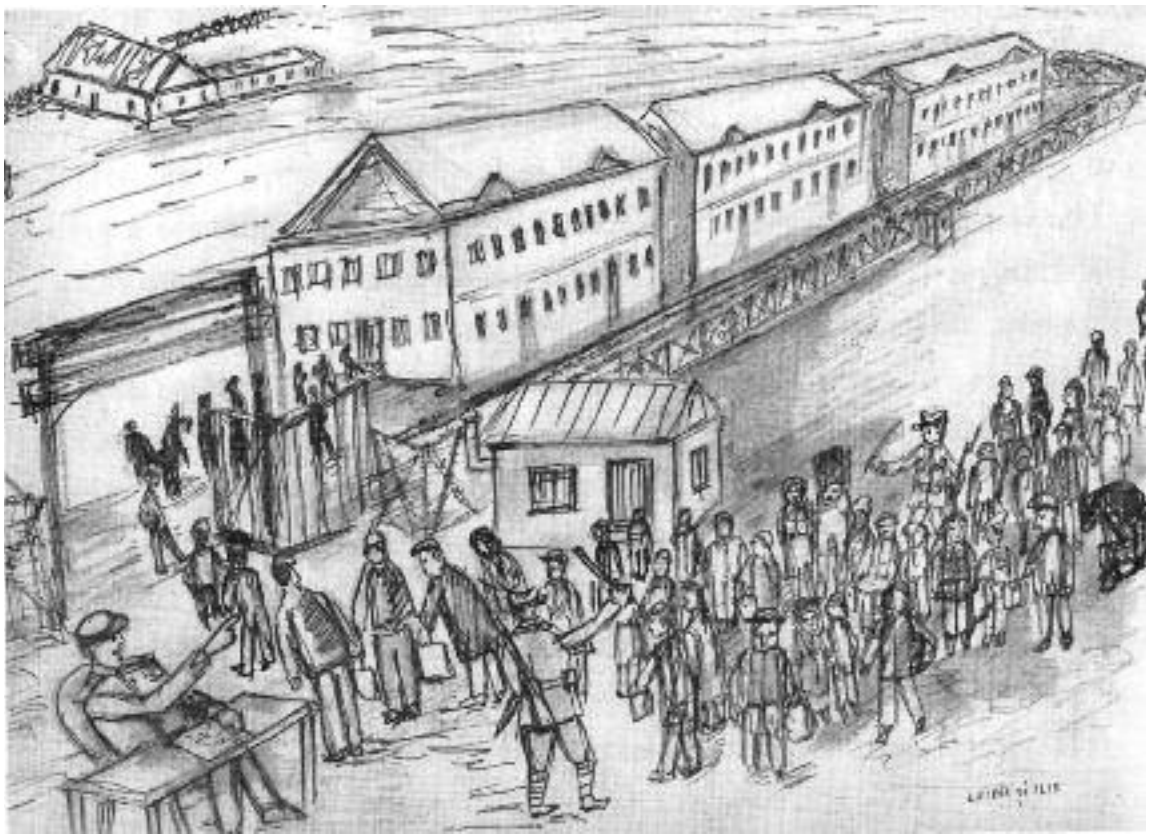
After the war, partially as punishment for their support of the Nazis, but also to combat any nationalist sentiments, the Communist government deported tens of thousands of Lithuanian peasants to various outposts of the gulag. In 1990, with the collapse of the Soviet Union, Lithuania was the first of the Soviet republics to declare its independence. Memories of World War II still hang heavily over the country, where a leading Nazi collaborator was reburied with honors, and where the National Genocide Museum focuses almost exclusively on the crimes of the Soviet regime, with little mention of the Holocaust.

It is the complex legacy of Lithuania and Vilna that Šukys seeks to address. She describes the milieu in which her subject was shaped: her close friends, her family, and the tragedy of a small state whose people were caught first in a hot war and then in a cold one. Ona Šimaitė never wrote her memoirs, but she was an inveterate letter writer—hence the title of the book. "Epistolophilia" is the love of letters and letterwriting. Her most detailed account of her many brave exploits during the war is in an 88-page, October 1945 typescript of a letter written in Russian to the left Socialist Revolutionary Isaac Nachman Steinberg. Šimaitė, then working at the Vilnius University Library, gained access to the ghetto on the pretext of retrieving overdue library books. She describes to Steinberg some of her exploits as a courier between the two main ghettoes in Kovno and Vilna, smuggling in medicine, food, clothing, counterfeit papers, and smuggling out letters, documents, and even sedated children from the Vilna ghetto.

Why did she write the document in Russian? Šukys refers to research arguing that writing in another language "may allow for a productive estrangement from past events, allowing one to say the unsayable and translate the untranslatable." But it may have been as simple as that this was the language most familiar to both Šimaitė and Steinberg. Šimaitė stopped writing in Russian in 1947. She does not explain the change, but her abandonment of Russian may be connected to the emergence of Stalin's overtly anti-Jewish policies in that period or to her final disillusionment about the possibility of any revolutionary dreams ever being realized in the Soviet Union. She was very aware of crackdowns in Lithuania and elsewhere against non-Communist partisans. Fears that her writing about her wartime exploits could aid the Bolsheviks in their repression would not have been unreasonable.

Šimaitė also recounted her experiences in Vilna in a long letter to Hirsz Abramowicz, the father of Dina Abramowicz, later the much beloved librarian at the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research in New York City. Abramowicz *père* had traveled to New York in June 1939 for an international conference and was stranded there when the war broke out. Dina, then 31, met Šimaitė in 1940 at Vilna's Jewish Children's Library. Dina and Ona, both librarians, connected immediately. Later, when Dina and her mother Anna were living cramped together with seven other people in the Vilna ghetto, Šimaitė helped sustain them with food, letters, and documents, until Anna was sent to Treblinka and the ghetto was liquidated. Miraculously, Dina was able to escape to the partisans.

In April 28, 1944, Gestapo agents arrested Šimaitė, ransacked her apartment, and held her for twelve days. During interrogation they hung her upside down, beat her, burned the soles of her feet with hot irons, and condemned her to death—but the Vilnius University rector raised enough money to ransom her. Instead of being hanged, she was sent to Dachau, and then to a series of labor camps until the end of the war.



Entrance to Vapniaka concentration camp, drawn by an inmate of the camp

Why did Šimaitė risk her life to save Jews? To postwar charges that she did it for money, she angrily retorted in a letter to Steinberg that her accusers "can't conceive of what it meant to feel humanity and comradery." Her commitment to democratic socialism, to the principles of internationalism and revolution acquired in her youth, motivated her opposition to both Nazi and later Communist tyranny, and her identification with the oppressed and marginalized throughout her adult life.

After the war years, Šimaitė maintained ties with those she had helped in the ghetto, most notably Sala Waksman (later Tanya Shterntal), whom she had carried out of the Vilna ghetto in a sack. Shterntal relocated to an Israeli kibbutz after the war. Šimaitė unofficially adopted her, visited her in Israel, and tried unsuccessfully to determine the fate of Tanya's biological mother.

Šukys is tenacious in following every lead to clues about Šimaitė's life, from her childhood in a traditional peasant family to her postwar migrations. Šimaitė's troubled family relations included estrangement from her devoutly Catholic mother and a fraught relationship with her niece, diagnosed under the Soviet regime with schizophrenia and ultimately a suicide. Perhaps her deepest connection was to the Lithuanian poet Kazys Jakubėnas. She carried on an intense correspondence with him during the war. With the Communists in control, Jakubėnas met the fate of many independent Lithuanian intellectuals. Arrested by the Soviets, he was sent to a labor camp in Kazakhstan. Through the efforts of his brother, he was freed and returned to Vilnius, but soon after he was killed by the secret police on January 7, 1950.

Šukys is very much present throughout this work, which becomes a family affair as the author travels with her husband and infant son Sebastian to all the places associated with Šimaitė. Sebastian accompanies his mother when they visit Šimaitė's last residence, a Russian émigré nursing home in a Paris suburb. Although Šimaitė died in 1970, she lives on for mother and son in Montreal. In the last chapter of her book, Šukys glimpses her subject as she walks through the autumnal city: "She is here, her presence unmistakable."

I highly recommend both of these books as significant contributions to Holocaust literature, women's and gender history, and memory studies. Hirsch wades into the ideological, literary, and semiotic battles about preserving and defining the memory of a traumatic event such as the Holocaust, once those with real-time remembrances have died. She is particularly strong in her analysis of the gendered components of Holocaust representations and the importance of making them visible in the shaping of postmemory. Šukys, in a true labor of love, rescues a remarkably brave woman from history's dustbin, and in the process complicates the narrative about Lithuania during the Holocaust and the postwar period.

Rochelle Goldberg Ruthchild cherishes her memories of her great-aunt Anna, survivor of five concentration camps, who hailed from prewar Vilna and participated in its vibrant cultural life. Ruthchild is a research associate at Harvard's Davis Center for Russian and Eurasian Studies, an editor of ***Aspasia: The International Yearbook of Central, Eastern, and Southeastern European Women's and Gender History***, the author of ***Equality and Revolution: Women's Rights in the Russian Empire, 1905-1917*** (2010), and a producer of the forthcoming documentary film ***Left on Pearl: Women Take Over 888 Memorial Drive, Cambridge***. She is most grateful for the hospitality of Evgenii, Vera, Raya, and Misha, and the bounty of their organic garden during her trips to Lithuania.