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Home and Homesickness: Silvia Tennenbaum's Notes on Memory

*Lila Grey Miller*¹

"I am still trying to chart the passage, the long road through sunlit landscapes, the melodies of the languages that compete in my head, the passions unleashed by my exile, my escape into life."²

-Silvia Tennenbaum

Introduction to Silvia Tennenbaum

Silvia Tennenbaum was born in Frankfurt, Germany, in 1928 to Erich Pfeffer-Belli and Charlotte Stern, both from upper-middle-class circumstances. Her father was Protestant and her mother was Jewish. Tennenbaum's parents divorced during her early childhood, leaving her in the care of her mother and maternal family; her father became an absent figure. Her Jewish grandparents and their home thus became an important symbol of early selfhood and homeland. In 1936, the Nazi takeover drove her mother and stepfather, a conductor named William Steinberg, who was also Jewish, to the British Mandate of Palestine for a year and a half. Tennenbaum lived with her aunt in Switzerland for the duration. In 1938, the family emigrated to the United States, settling in New Rochelle, New York.³ This emigration or exile became a catalyst for Tennenbaum's memory later in her life, marking a before and after on Tennenbaum's timeline. The "before" made up of imagery and essences of home—*heimat* in Tennenbaum's notes and first language.⁴ The "after" she defined by her life in exile was constituted

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² Silvia Tennenbaum Papers, Box 9. Sophia Smith Special Collections. Smith College, Northampton, MA.

³ "Silvia Tennenbaum, Honored Novelist," *The East Hampton Star*, July 7, 2016.
<https://www.easthamptonstar.com/archive/silvia-tennenbaum-honored-novelist>.

⁴ Silvia evokes the German word *heimat*, which directly translates to 'home' or 'hometown' in English, when writing about her memories, both tangible and inaccessible, from Germany. She refers to there not being an adequate English equivalent to the word because it encapsulates more than home in the geographical sense but also the essence of what makes Germany the place where the act of being home can happen. *Heimat* also has ties to Nazism, having been co-opted by their fascist ideals of German nationalism as distinctly "Aryan." Because of Silvia's experience as someone navigating her connection to homeland and experience of exile, it feels very important to me to include this word.

in part by a longing for what could have been—homesickness or ‘*heimweh*.’⁵ Tennenbaum’s writing linguistically conveys her internal struggle to understand where her story falls: living as an immigrant and exiled, a survivor and witness, Jewish, German, and American.

Tennenbaum’s life in New Rochelle was enriched by her love of baseball, painting, and writing, and as she put in her notes, “inventing a world of my own.”⁶ Her love of art led her to Barnard College, where she majored in art history. In 1951, she married Lloyd Tennenbaum, a rabbi and Columbia student. The pair raised three children in Virginia, where Lloyd led a congregation. Tennenbaum began to write with dedication around this time, publishing a short story titled “The Sound of Crickets” in 1958.⁷ Later, the family moved to Long Island, where the pair were involved in community activism, particularly anti-Vietnam War demonstrations; they both spoke publicly in support of civil rights and integration. Her first novel, *Rachel, the Rabbi’s Wife*, was published in 1977 and gained largely positive recognition, landing on the *New York Times* Bestseller List. It was inspired by her own experience as a rabbi’s wife and was intended to critique suburbia.⁸ Shortly thereafter, the Tennenbaums separated and divorced officially in 1982. She continued to write prolifically both publicly and privately: short stories, letters to the editor, and journals. Her second novel, published in 1981 and entitled *Yesterday’s Streets*, though fiction, was heavily inspired by her family’s experiences in Germany.⁹ While the novel did not achieve the success of her first book in the US, the German translation of *Yesterday’s Streets* found many readers and was awarded the Goethe Medal in 2012. The award led Tennenbaum back to Frankfurt at age eighty-four, seventy-six years after her family’s exile. Saved in her papers is an advertising pamphlet for an event celebrating *Yesterday’s Streets*, including a short essay recalling the event, which she sent out to friends and family. She writes, “I just returned

⁵ Continuation of footnote 4. Similarly to *heimat*, Silvia uses the German word *heimweh*, directly translating to homesick in English, to embody her lifelong experience of exile.

⁶ Silvia Tennenbaum Papers, Box 9.

⁷ “Silvia Tennenbaum, Honored Novelist.”

⁸ According to a short article about Silvia and Lloyd in the *New York Times* from 1978, Silvia and Rachel, *The Rabbi’s Wife* received “vitriolic” accusatioThensreviews of antisemitism. One reviewer writes, “‘Rachel, the Rabbi’s Wife’ is an intolerably anti-Semitic book, and it will not have shelf space in any of my stores; Silvia Tennenbaum hates Jews and all things Jewish, especially the rabbinate.... It is an insult to American Jews. It will appeal to Nazis and to a handful of self-hating Jews and to anti-Semites everywhere who seek justification for their beliefs.” I am very curious regarding how Silvia received these accusations at the time, especially as someone who herself fled antisemitism and made the choice to marry a rabbi, despite coming from an assimilated family, out of a desire to be a more observant Jew. See: Robertson, Nan. “The Rabbi and His Wife.” *The New York Times*, January 11, 1978.

⁹ “Silvia Tennenbaum, Honored Novelist.”

after enjoying 2 weeks of this celebration, floating on air from its overwhelmingly positive vibes.”¹⁰ *Yesterday's Street's* reception in Germany was a meaningful achievement for Tennenbaum, especially its selection as the centerpiece of the literature festival, “*Frankfurt Leist ein Buch*” (Frankfurt Reads a Book), making it a text for the citizens of the city to read together.¹¹

Tennenbaum's exile and its impact surface throughout her published body of work, something that she openly admits in her notes. Later in her career, she embarked on a memoir project titled *The Woman by the Window*, named for Johannes Vermeer's paintings. The memoir was never published, but multiple versions, her notes, and brainstorming documents are intact in her archive. The manuscripts themselves are artful, linguistically and literally, as she conveys her extensive knowledge of art history through storytelling. Tennenbaum's papers contain as many detours as they do stories; however, this paper focuses on just some of the many folders of notes and drafts that document the search for her memories and the emotional turmoil that the finished product required. I seek to explore thoroughly how Tennenbaum's notes search for answers to subjunctive questions: “what could have been?” And “what would have been?” had her life not been upended by fascism, had she remained in Germany or *heimat*. This paper seeks to convey the potential of these documents as narrative sources for Shoah historiography.¹² The notes and brainstorming documents themselves unveil a liminal space for both Tennenbaum's own subjunctive considerations and outside interpretations. She dedicated herself to writing out her life story—“opening up memory and following its trail.”¹³ It is fairly clear from her pages of tormented brainstorming and journaling that she did not want to write this memoir. Tennenbaum, instead, felt the force of memory within her and went looking for it, finding themes of internal conflict and loss. The conditions of the materials, unpublished and imperfect, mimic the fragmented state of Tennenbaum's own memories. She chose to include the circumstances of her process in what she donated; therefore, this decision must be considered in evaluating Tennenbaum's work and its place within Holocaust historiography and memory studies.

These notes are an unpolished, complex source, covered with a layer of handwritten edits, that hold Tennenbaum's complicated self-perceptions related to a lifetime of reckoning with exile and the associated traumas. I argue that the notes themselves and what they represent of Tennenbaum's experience are a vital source for the representation of the Shoah and its effects. Tennenbaum's life

¹⁰ Silvia Tennenbaum Papers, Box 9.

¹¹ “Frankfurt Liest Ein Buch 16 – 29 April 2012,” *Frankfurt liest ein Buch*, April 2012.

¹² In line with Silvia Tennenbaum and as a personal preference, I choose to replace “Holocaust,” the word commonly used to describe the 1941-45 extermination of Jewish, Romani, Queer, disabled, and politically subversive peoples, a term originated from Greek to mean a completely burned sacrifice; instead, I choose to use “Shoah,” a term originated from Hebrew to mean calamity or catastrophe.

¹³ Silvia Tennenbaum Papers, Box 10.

trajectory is a familiar one within the umbrella of Jewish livelihood during and post World War II. I want to attempt an answer to the question of what makes Tennenbaum's story that of a Shoah survivor, if at all, and how these materials insist on the specificity of her emotional experience as well as her struggle to relay said experience. This exploration of Tennenbaum's self-perception seeks to place her in conversation with the historiography of women's circumstances in and after the Shoah, with arguments for memory as both help and hindrance to scholarship, and with public perceptions of Jewish experience in and beyond the Shoah. The wholeness of Tennenbaum is honored in her own act of self-memorialization, in her gaps in memory, and in her struggle to tell her story. Every part of Tennenbaum's life and existence was touched by Nazi devastation and the ripple effects of emigration and exile from her home country. Tennenbaum writes to engage a process of grief—for what happened and what *could* have happened—demonstrating the potential of first-person experience and perspective in understanding how the Shoah variously impacted Jewish people.

Women Survivors and the Gendered Approach

Gendered approaches across various fields of study have been consistently disregarded, in both spoken and unspoken ways. Specifically within Shoah historiography, questions and attempts to unveil women's unique experiences were neglected as the field developed in the 1970s. Within Shoah scholarship, there is a legacy of outward opposition and animosity towards a negatively connotated feminist agenda which would “distort the historical narrative...[and] that dealing with daily matters such as gender relationships would banalize and trivialize research on the Holocaust and the event itself.”¹⁴ A concern voiced was that with gendered victim distinction, Nazi policies themselves would be minimized. Hitler's regime targeted Jews with no differentiation of gender; instead, a systematic ‘Final Solution’, and fear for the “banalization and trivialization of the Holocaust” that could come with victim distinction, would potentially minimize Nazi policy as it threatened Jews without discernment.¹⁵ However, the impacts of the Shoah on its victims were differentiated by gender;

¹⁴ Dalia Ofer. “‘Will You Hear My Voice?’: Women in the Holocaust: Memory and Analysis,” In *If This Is a Woman: Studies on Women and Gender in the Holocaust*, ed. Denisa Neštáková, Katja Grosse-Sommer, Borbála Klacsmann, and Jakub Drábik, (Academic Studies Press, 2021), p. 4; Notably, Lawrence Langer, whose chapter “Gendered Suffering? Women in Holocaust Testimony” in *Women in the Holocaust* by Dalia Ofer and Lenore Weitzman argues that gender as an analysis category would result in a notion that women survived “better” than men. In Joan Ringelheim's chapter of the book she footnotes his critiques as an example of the limitations faced by the gendered approach to Holocaust scholarship.

¹⁵ Lenore J Weitzman and Dalia Ofer, “The Role of Gender in the Holocaust,” Introduction, in *Women in the Holocaust*, (Yale University Press, 1998), p. 1.

therefore, for women not to be excluded from the narrative, there had to be a concentrated, gendered study of the Shoah.

In the 1980s, scholars and researchers began to engage with gender as a lens through which to comb over Shoah materials to make evident the gendered nature of violence experienced by women. In 1983, Joan Ringelheim and Esther Katz organized a conference, “Women Surviving: The Holocaust,” which provided the first dedicated space for gender-based Shoah scholarship. Women scholars initiated this effort, some of them descendants of the Shoah’s victims and survivors. Many women survivors stated that they “never thought about what it meant to be a woman at that time,” and as scholarly space was designated for these women to consider gender, survivors were surprised by new insights and enhancements derived from prior information.¹⁶ This lack of gender-based reflection stems from what has been and continues to be asked of women: to withstand, compartmentalize, be grateful, and endure. The commonality of being a survivor was regarded as sufficient for scholarship, satisfied by coverage that could flatten Jewish experience as tragic, though digestible—a pattern that reemerges constantly as voices of hegemony seek to platform—and universalize—Jewish experience, consequently losing the variations brought about by intersections of subjugated identities.

In her 1985 piece, “Women and the Holocaust: A Reconsideration of Research,” Ringelheim outlines framing questions that guided the gendered approach to Shoah scholarship. The beginnings of her research sought out new data with women’s experiences as the focal point, asking questions such as: if you were Jewish, in what ways did it matter whether you were a man or a woman? Did gender cause any difference in policies, actions, or reactions of either the Nazis or those opposed to them? In what ways did sexism function in the racist ideology against Jews and other so-called non-Aryans?¹⁷ Working with all of these and more in mind, Ringelheim’s research “suggested that traditional attitudes and responses toward women, as well as gender-defined conditions, made women especially vulnerable to abuse of their sexuality and of their maternal responsibility.”¹⁸ Women’s experiences were wholly impacted by sexism as well as by biological facts, such as wanted or unwanted pregnancy. Ringelheim goes on to outline her own work as problematic within the greater genre creation of women’s experiences in the Shoah. She levels critiques over cultural feminism’s role in her guiding questions, outlining its flaws as having “shifted the territory of liberation from an insistence on the need for changing material conditions to a belief in changing the inner life, consciousness, culture, and so on.”¹⁹ This, Ringelheim argues, shifts feminism’s aspiration for liberation from sexism in all its

¹⁶ Lenore J Weitzman and Dalia Ofer, “The Role of Gender in the Holocaust,” p. 13.

¹⁷ Joan Ringelheim, “Women and the Holocaust: A Reconsideration of Research,” *Signs*, 10: 4 (1985): p. 742.

¹⁸ Ringelheim, “Women and the Holocaust,” p. 743.

¹⁹ Ringelheim, “Women and the Holocaust,” p. 753.

manifestations away from targeting sources of power and instead becomes preoccupied with “changing hearts and minds.”²⁰ Cultural feminism bypasses revolutionary change within the state, institutions, religion, and other loci that enforce women’s roles under patriarchy. As relating to Ringelheim’s research of women in the Shoah, she writes, “To excavate women’s past, to begin to know and understand what has been ‘hidden from history,’ does not mean that we use that ‘herstory’ as a model for women’s liberation. Our task must be to contribute to a strategy for changing, not simply reinterpreting and obfuscating, women’s lives.”²¹ She argues that the gendered approach towards Shoah history must see individual women’s experiences of resilience during the Shoah as instances of immense loss, not gain.

Books such as *Different Voices: Women in the Holocaust* (1993) and *Women in the Holocaust* (1998) anthologized works by various scholars on gendered Shoah historiography who, in addition to applying feminist theory and contrasting it with existing scholarship, drew on testimonial perspectives from survivors. With feminist influence entering historical narratives of the Shoah, what constitutes historical source broadened and shifted to include subjectivity and individual testimony as legitimate frames of reference for understanding what it meant to survive the Shoah.²² The goal was not simply to discover the truth behind what happened, but to create dynamic historical accounts composed of first-hand experiences, with gendered analysis enriching the stories of all survivors. In Myrna Goldenberg’s chapter “Memoirs of Auschwitz Survivors: The Burden of Gender” in *Women in the Holocaust*, she uses multiple examples of women survivors’ memoirs of their time in concentration camps to contrast women’s experiences with each other and to point out their differences from those of men. In this binary read of narrative, women’s positionality illustrates how homemaking skills and inherent instincts to bond and protect each other aided in individual survival.²³ Models of family and kinship are frequently mentioned in these testimonies as being central to women’s experiences and survival in the camps, broadening standard patriarchal structures to provide each other with sympathy, love, and closeness—a pattern which is sparsely recognized as important in men’s testimonies.²⁴ The traditional family of this time, as mentioned, maintained a patriarchal structure relying on a male figurehead to validate the configuration, but in these testimonies, women’s experiences existed apart from simple adjacency to men’s.

²⁰ Ringelheim, “Women and the Holocaust,” p. 754

²¹ Ringelheim, “Women and the Holocaust,” p. 756.

²² Ofer, “Will You Hear My Voice?,” p. 4.

²³ Myrna Goldenberg, “Memoirs of Auschwitz Survivors: The Burden of Gender,” essay, in *Women in the Holocaust* (Yale University Press, 1998): p. 337.

²⁴ Goldenberg, “Memoirs of Auschwitz Survivors: The Burden of Gender,” p. 337.

In 1993, when the Holocaust Museum opened in Washington, DC, there was nothing devoted to women survivors. Feminist scholar Andrea Dworkin writes of her experience as a researcher in going to the museum only to find that “the story of women is missing.”²⁵ The reality of women’s experiences during the Shoah is gruesome. According to Dworkin, the museum “governed in its narrative choices by a courteous, inclusive politics of sensitivity to ethnic and political persecution, leaves out the story of the Nazis’ hatred of women.”²⁶ This sanitization, Dworkin argues, fundamentally erases the gendered circumstances of genocidal violence as a deliberately misogynist project that humiliated and violated women’s bodies. Were it not for photographic evidence, women would be almost entirely erased from the Museum in DC, and according to Dworkin, this reliance on imagery, coupled with a lack of articulated narrative experience, leads to a continuous subjugation of the Jewish women’s body. This extraction of the suffering inflicted upon women’s bodies from their narrative experiences permitted their subsequent insidious erasure from Shoah historiography and has been reflected in the lack of attention to gender in Shoah scholarship.

Joan Ringelheim joins Dworkin in critiquing the Holocaust Memorial Museum, writing about their Research Institute’s conference in December of 1993, a four-day event with eighteen panels and eighty participants, of whom sixteen were women.²⁷ Not a single panel focused on women’s experiences, and the institution dismissed these concerns, by claiming they had simply forgotten. Ringelheim says that the presence of women in the Museum’s permanent exhibition does not automatically make their gendered experience a focal point; the end—death does not make visible the processes of annihilation that were gender specific.²⁸ There must be a specific conceptual framework for women’s memories. In 2009, James Young engaged with the public’s gaze institutionally and within scholarship, specifically regarding women’s pain as both symbolic and as spectacle. The position of objects, material and human ones, in museums specifically “fix otherwise fluid and changing life into emblematic illustrations of their explanatory theses, ...these idealized icons of victimization, innocence, or even resistance are substituted for the stories women might be telling about themselves.”²⁹ The transformation of one’s story into a symbol through institutional presentation acts as a paradigm for how the memories of women survivors are relayed to the public. Suffering of women becomes viewed

²⁵ Andrea Dworkin, “The Unremembered: Searching for Women at the Holocaust Memorial Museum,” *Ms. Magazine*, November 1994.

²⁶ Dworkin, “The Unremembered: Searching for Women at the Holocaust Memorial Museum.”

²⁷ Joan Ringelheim, “The Split Between Gender and the Holocaust” in *Women in the Holocaust* (Yale University Press, 1998), p. 346.

²⁸ Joan Ringelheim, “The Split Between Gender and the Holocaust,” p. 350.

²⁹ James E. Young, “Regarding the Pain of Women: Questions of Gender and the Arts of Holocaust Memory,” *PMLA*, 124:5 (2009): p. 1778.

as iconic before painful. Young's concerns about memorializing women's Shoah experiences center on the reality that controlling how visitors interpret a story is impossible, especially due to the sensationalization and minimization of women's stories.

Shoah Historiography, Memorialization, and Tennenbaum

To accurately illustrate Tennenbaum's life and voice, it is important to place her within the context of her writing (largely the 1990s), a time when testimony was emerging as a legitimate historical guide, along with attention to gendered experiences of the Shoah. From Shoah literature and historiographic study emerges an unceasing list of questions for historians, for their subjects, and for the grey area in between, which at any given moment is inhabited by both. The enormity of the Shoah has been metabolized by political and social forces in the last eighty years, making it central to the identity of Jewish people, occupying a place on the historical timeline as a wholly altering trajectory for Jews and gentiles alike. However, this was not immediately true. Some scholars have discussed the postwar years (1944-1948) as deafened by silence on the part of both survivors and historians, though this has been refuted by others who claim that the immediate postwar period contained high volumes of survivor narratives and argue that, while scholarship may have been lethargic, survivor communities themselves were rife with storytelling.³⁰ Scholars such as Annette Wieviorka have said that Jewish people fulfilled "an urge to testify about their suffering during and after the Holocaust, yet it was several decades until the non-Jewish world was willing to listen and give survivors public attention."³¹ It was the survivors themselves who took the initiative to tell, rejecting public permission as the deciding factor in whether the time was right. The power of Jewish memory, collective and individual, held the agency in telling; however, the general public's refusal to listen caused repression amongst survivors.³²

Tennenbaum's agency resides in her hundreds of pages of notes and plans for her memoir and novels, as well as in her decision to archive them, demonstrating the urge to tell as coupled with a struggle to remember. Her musings and reflections are raw and heavy with longing to know and tell her story. She wants to decipher what happened and *what could have been* had the story of German Jews been wholly other, not subjected to systematic destruction. If her family had stayed in Germany, what would her life have been like? Tennenbaum writes to preserve the memory of German Jews, of a world left behind by force, her family's exile, and the destruction of war. She writes in a folder labeled in blue pen 'FRAGMENTS':

³⁰ Laura Jockush, "Introduction," in *Collect and Record: Jewish Holocaust Documentation in Early Postwar Europe*, (2012), p. 12.

³¹ Jockush, "Introduction," p. 14.

³² Additionally, Hans Keilson and David Boder are two important figures in early documentation of authentic Jewish experience during the Shoah.

The past always vanishes, of course, and becomes part of history, and historians can reconstruct it as such. It may live on—however romanticized—as part of a larger memory: a nation, a people, a family. But the history of the German Jews is threatened with total destruction—it constitutes a world erased from memory forever—no matter how many Museums are built, histories are written, or archives founded. Its end traumatized those of my mother's generation who lived in silence, those who died left not even scratches on a prison wall.³³

Tennenbaum sees memory as entangled with history, both that of the survivor or direct witness and that of the secondary witness. In referencing her mother's generation of survivors, Tennenbaum exemplifies the witness's impact of testimony on its production and reception. To witness testimony is to embrace the power of the individual and to respect the authority of the witness. Tennenbaum navigates the forgotten and the remembered in her memoir work, a historian in her own right. Her moment in time, her individual experience, lives inside a monstrous fabric of perspectives, complicated by tragedy, emotion, politics, and destruction. These complications, while overwhelming, provide historians with avenues to delve into material like Tennenbaum's and the intricacies of women's experiences during and after the Shoah. She and others force us to think: what has been lost? What is there to be found?

Before going any further with Tennenbaum's story, her identity in relation to the Shoah must be defined. It feels inaccurate to consider Tennenbaum not a survivor, and the declarative validation of this label holds a heavy weight. The purpose of this paper is not to earn Tennenbaum a seat at any table by offering enough proof of her suffering. To do that would be counterintuitive to my central argument: for the essentiality of Jewish individual perspective and circumstance, both relating to the Shoah and otherwise. Within Tennenbaum's archive is an attempt to convey what survival has meant to her, away from home and all that was lost. To deny her the title of survivor would be a denial of the horrendous extent of fascism's envelopment of Germany and fragmentation into Nazi rule. This directly relates to problems regarding contemporary understanding of the Shoah's impact; the destruction of Jewish life was not limited to the death camps, it began insidiously and did not stop. As laws changed and Jewish livelihood was increasingly threatened, Tennenbaum came into consciousness. These circumstances, where fear percolated amongst Jews, deeply impacted Tennenbaum and continued to throughout her life because she was *there* attempting a semblance of a normal childhood. From reading Tennenbaum's notes on her life, it is evident that while she and her family did escape death, there is so much else they could not escape. Tennenbaum is deeply aware of what she and her family narrowly avoided; how close they were to death. She writes:

³³ Silvia Tennenbaum Papers, Box 9.

But then I remember the queer kinship I always felt when I saw pictures of the deportees who—like Anne Frank—were sent to Auschwitz from Holland or other Western transit camps. At that moment I thought, “this could be me.” At that moment I understood how close I had come to sharing their fate. Once I understood this, I also came to see that my survival wasn’t assured just because we had been wealthy, assimilated German Jews. Luck and fate played their hand. (Understanding it doesn’t mean, however, that guilt has been erased from my conscience).³⁴

In writing of Frank’s death as a subjunctive condition of her own life, Tennenbaum aims to impart what it has meant to survive and bear witness as so many just like her died. With the dead went the *heimat* her family had known. It is for these reasons that I argue Tennenbaum was a survivor of the Shoah, because not only was she a German Jew who was not murdered, but she endured and persisted despite all, living with the reality of the subjunctive. Eva Fogelman, a psychologist, author, and filmmaker who focuses on the psychological effects of the Shoah on survivors, writes in “Who is Considered a Holocaust Survivor?” about her own parents, their differing survival stories as Polish Jews, and the lack of attention paid to “flight” and “indirect” survivors. Her mother fled Poland during the 1939 invasion but was captured and deported by Soviet authorities; her father fled weeks before the invasion and was never in a camp.³⁵ Fogelman describes how she experienced her parents telling their stories as she grew up, that they did not distinguish their experiences by the degree to which they suffered. She renounces the “hierarchy of suffering” as I also wish to do. Fogelman cites the definitions of Shoah survivor offered by Yad Vashem, Israel’s memorial to Shoah victims, and of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum to corroborate what she witnessed in her parents’ recollections. Both institutions define a survivor to be anyone, Jewish or not, who lived under Nazi domination and was persecuted, with Yad Vashem’s explicitly including “Jews who forcefully left Germany in the late 1930s.”³⁶ Notably, they add, “No historical definition can be completely satisfactory.”³⁷ While invoking institutional definitions, I am reminded of my argument for the individuality of narrative within Shoah historiography. Just because prominent institutions say one thing doesn’t mean it is universally applicable; Tennenbaum’s story is the crux of my argument.

During the late 1980s and 1990s, hence concurring with Tennenbaum’s notes and efforts to tell her own story in the first person, recording the Shoah within historiography had begun to be

³⁴ Silvia Tennenbaum Papers, Box 10.

³⁵ Eva Fogelman, “Who Is Considered a Holocaust Survivor?” Eva Fogelman, PhD, 2019, <https://evafogelman.com/blog/who-is-considered-a-holocaust-survivor/>.

³⁶ Fogelman, “Who Is Considered a Holocaust Survivor?”

³⁷ Fogelman, “Who Is Considered a Holocaust Survivor?”

“articulated as an issue of memory.”³⁸ At this time, when survivors began to pass away and “the possibility of transmitting what one might call ‘living memory’ [became] increasingly precarious and ultimately impossible,” testimony took on new urgency.³⁹ Living memory refers to the memories held by a witness, in this case, Shoah survivors. The inevitability of death is a threat to historical record, epitomizing remembering as a struggle against loss. The recording of survivor testimonies was an attempt to immortalize living memories and ensure their preservation. Alison Landsberg describes living memory and survivor testimony as heavily complicated by truth claims. Tennenbaum confronts this as she writes her memoir, searching at first for singularity, then coming to terms with the multitudinous nature of truth.

A singular interpretation of truth has impacted the preservation of memory and its use in Shoah historiography; the current foregrounding of the Shoah is limited by its supposed singularity in history, thereby subjecting it to judgements of truthfulness or falsity in survivor narratives. There is an implication that there is either a “wrong” or “right” way to witness the Shoah by its own survivors and by the Jewish and general public, maintaining the event as untouchable. In Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub’s book *Testimony: Crisis of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*, Laub writes of multiple levels of witnessing and of truth as something striving to be reached by both the owner of memory and the witness to it. Laub says that the Shoah created “a world in which one *could not bear witness to oneself*. The Nazi system turned out therefore to be fool-proof, not only in the sense that there were in theory no outside witnesses but also in the sense that it convinced its victims, the potential witnesses from the inside, that what was affirmed about their ‘otherness’ and their inhumanity was correct and that their experiences were no longer communicable even to themselves, and therefore perhaps never took place.”⁴⁰ There is a tension between this and Tennenbaum’s notes for her memoir. Her engagement with memory as an elusive entity demands the redemption of the complexity of witnessing from the survivor’s perspective. She writes for herself and for the legacy of her experiences, bearing witness to her struggle with fragmented memories. Her use of words, as described

³⁸ Alison Landsberg, “America, the Holocaust, and the Mass Culture of Memory: Toward a Radical Politics of Empathy,” *New German Critique*, no. 71 (1997), p. 64; Important to note is at this time the end of the Cold War, fall of the Berlin Wall, and collapse of the Soviet Union marked an emanation of public memory into Shoah scholarship. There were highly different memory politics between East and West Germany. After the wall came down, sites of study such as archives and concentration camps became available for scholarship.

³⁹ Landsberg, “America, the Holocaust, and the Mass Culture of Memory: Toward a Radical Politics of Empathy,” p. 64.

⁴⁰ Dori Laub, “An Event Without a Witness,” in *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*, (Rutledge, Chapman and Hallelusive Inc, 1992), p. 80.

by Charles Maier, “warded off an inner collapse.”⁴¹ She refuses to make them into anecdotes of singular truth for the purpose of endorsing any narrative besides her own. Tennenbaum writes as her own witness and to maintain the leverage that (living) memory holds over those willing to forget, to revise, and to move on.

Mainstream literature and attention have inadvertently created a ubiquitous idea of what Jews, both women and men, experienced during the Shoah. Tennenbaum points to the *Diary of Anne Frank*, first published in 1947, as a case study for this phenomenon of universality. She was familiar with Frank’s story not only because of her well-known victimhood but also because of a familial connection. Otto Frank, Anne’s father, was Tennenbaum’s mother Lotte’s cousin, making Anne and Tennenbaum second cousins. Tennenbaum mentions her mother’s distaste of Otto Frank’s decision to publish the diaries, “She was deeply reluctant to publicize the relationship, partly because she naturally recoiled from what she considered Otto Frank’s exploitation of his daughter’s youthful observations and confessions, and partly because she could not bear, I think, to contemplate Anne’s tragic death and what it meant,” stating her mother’s own consideration of the subjunctive, “This might have been our fate.”⁴² Tennenbaum considers the reception of Anne Frank’s story not only as she experiences it firsthand but also through an inheritance, one marked by secrecy and a lack of communication about what could have happened to her own family. Since Tennenbaum herself was young at the time of their escape from Germany, she relied to a degree on what she could collect from her mother while she was alive. Despite some recoil from Anne Frank’s testimony as it stands in popular culture, Tennenbaum can’t help but be reminded of how she could have easily ended up in Anne’s place. She recognizes herself in Frank, who, having been murdered in Auschwitz as a young woman and having her childhood musings published posthumously, represents the epitome of victimhood in public perception of the Shoah.

Tennenbaum writes of various post-Shoah media to place her firsthand experience within public memory, including the *Diary of Anne Frank*. Tennenbaum describes the book as divergent from other examples of Shoah literature due to its testimonial, non-fictional nature, its reception and her familial connection to Frank. Tennenbaum writes with an air of critique, saying that “it’s very ‘universality’ tends to deny the specifics of who she is. She’s become a symbol—to most people a symbol of hope,” voicing her impression that popular interpretation of Anne’s narrative regards it as “feel good,” maybe even revisionary.⁴³ As discussed extensively in *Anne Frank Unbound*, published in 2012, the same year Tennenbaum traveled through Germany with *Yesterday’s Streets*, the preservation

⁴¹ Maier, Charles S. “A Surfeit of Memory? Reflections on History, Melancholy and Denial.” *History and Memory*, 5:2 (1993): p. 144.

⁴² Silvia Tennenbaum Papers, Box 10.

⁴³ Silvia Tennenbaum Papers, Box 9.

of Anne Frank prioritizes her life and death unequally, something which seemingly troubles Tennenbaum.⁴⁴ The goal of first-hand testimonial accounts, such as Frank's and Tennenbaum's, fiction or nonfiction, is to detail the subjective experiences of the individual within the collective. While I argue that this supplementation enriches Shoah historiography, there is a risk in the public reception of subjective experience: it may be manipulated to serve as a representative of a false universal experience, overriding individual memory to support a dominant narrative.

Prominent "Shoah stories," such as *The Diary of Anne Frank*, are used in institutional-level memorialization projects. In 2019, Sarah Gensburger conducted a sociological study at a Shoah exhibition in Paris in which she investigated how the protocols of such exhibitions are adapted and executed.⁴⁵ She considers the visitor's gaze, the encounters between visitors and memory, arguing that, "...memory museums differ from the traditional historical ones in the fact that they are not expected to primarily transmit *knowledge and traditions* of the past, but rather *moral lessons*, thus participating in the prevention of violence and the construction of social harmony."⁴⁶ This intention, like attempts to preserve living memory, implicates the visitor and invites appropriation of the material. Those who visit these stories become witnesses to specific memories and to memory as a tool for engaging with the present moment—they leave with moral instruction.

Within Shoah historiography of the 1980s and 90s, fear of what forgetting could imply resounded throughout scholarship and amongst living Jews as well. The emergent utilization of memory and testimony in Shoah historiography constructed the memory culture of today, one that has centralized institutions and governments as tools of remembrance and memorialization. The opening of the Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, DC, in 1993 evidenced the use of memory as a tool in a social and political agenda, commencing the widespread emergence of Shoah museums and memorials through the following decades. As Tennenbaum points out, representations of Jewish Shoah experience in both institutional settings and literature or media still do not necessarily achieve truth, therefore troubling the goals of institutional and political remembrance. By placing a selection of narratives into a museum, the institution communicates to the visitor what is valuable and why, subsequent exclusions having major social ramifications as argued by Dworkin. The purpose of the

⁴⁴ Henry Lustiger Thaler and Wilfried Weidemann, "Hauntings of Anne Frank: Sitzings in Germany," in *Anne Frank Unbound: Media, Imagination, Memory*, (Indiana University Press, 2012), p. 137; *Anne Frank Unbound* is an anthology which engages with the phenomenology of Anne's story's reception in contemporary memory and subsequent engagements with her story, referred to by the authors as the "Anne Frank phenomenon."

⁴⁵ Sarah Gensburger, "Visiting History, Witnessing Memory: A Study of a Holocaust Exhibition in Paris in 2012," *Memory Studies*, 12:6, (2019), pp. 630-645.

⁴⁶ Gensburger, "Visiting History, Witnessing Memory," p. 1,.

Holocaust Memorial Museum in D.C., for example, is not just to remember the Shoah but also to teach a lesson to the public of why and how it happened. The call to action is to take what you learn and apply yourself towards disallowing history to repeat itself; the existence of the memorializing museum is in itself supposed to achieve this goal. This intention, however, does not garner automatic success—there must be conversations that hold external power, separate from museums and memorials. In 1993, the same year the D.C. Museum opened, Charles Maier wrote in “A Surfeit of Memory? Reflections on History, Melancholy and Denial,” calling the new emerging Holocaust museums part of a “memory industry” and that it is “the aftermath of memory and only secondarily the pursuit of history that motivates their construction.”⁴⁷ The priority of collective memory for palatability and clear messaging forgoes complexity. This reliance on personal change, not institutional, political change, invokes the same critique Ringelheim levels towards cultural feminism’s impact on her and others’ early scholarship of women’s experience in the Shoah. Individuals are forced to comply with a metanarrative rather than invited to transcend it.

Tennenbaum considers her place within Jewish literature and the Shoah survivor conversation. She asks herself: “Is my wish to be noted connected to Anne Frank?”⁴⁸ She expresses concerns over being swept up into the narrative, to have her complex individual testimony be overshadowed by presupposed ideas of what a Jewish woman or a survivor looks like and acts like. This being said, Tennenbaum’s many questions on the matter of narrative do not prevent her from sharing her own. If anything, her trepidations seem to stimulate her writing process and are used as tools to navigate her writer’s block and fragmented memories. Tennenbaum’s undertone of dissatisfaction with available survivor materials carves out space for her own memoir. Tennenbaum’s story, along with every survivor’s narrative, must be individualized within the collective in order to move away from “romanticizing” history and towards understanding what collective memory comprises—to reawaken the dead, the individuality of the survivor must transcend survival itself.

Exile and Memory: What Could Have Been

Sylvia Tennenbaum grapples with this subjunctive question throughout her memoir notes and drafts. As a child immigrant from Germany, as an assimilated Jewish woman, Tennenbaum writes her past as an attempt to recollect herself, to fill in the blanks, to consider what could have been. She writes her story claiming not to be interested in truth but rather with an eagerness for situating herself within the bigger picture, writing, “I’m constructing a narrative of my own life and however much I may believe I’m seeking the ‘truth’ I’ll never find it.”⁴⁹ In acknowledging the futility of truth, Tennenbaum

⁴⁷ Maier, “A Surfeit of Memory? Reflections on History, Melancholy and Denial,” p. 143.

⁴⁸ Sylvia Tennenbaum Papers, Box 9.

⁴⁹ Sylvia Tennenbaum Papers, Box 10.

unsettles the notion of the singular or typical experience of a survivor or witness. There is melancholy that runs through her realization that the truth she seeks and that which she finds are incongruent: one can never know what really happened. Considering her lack of early memories from Frankfurt, not being able to discover the truth would understandably be more discouraging than Tennenbaum lets on. Within the overarching narratives of collective memory and institutional memorialization of the Shoah, she reaches into the core of what exile from Germany meant for her and her family. Again and again, she returns to the concepts of home and homesickness in relation to her life before and after her family left Germany. In her notes, she searches for memories that she knows are there but cannot be found for various reasons, either from pre-emigration childhood or convoluted by time and life. Tennenbaum writes, “‘*Kummer*’ (sorrow) goes straight to the heart. It is, above all, what my parents and grandparents’ generation experienced. Sorrow above everything else. There was anger too, later, and rage, tailing the grief, the sense of loss, the disorientation of exile in a foreign land.”⁵⁰ In addition to seeking memory, what powers her to write the story of her life is the search for a space to process the emotions and feelings buried within her and her family’s exile.

In Tennenbaum’s notes about childhood in Germany and early times in the US, some of the only memories she clearly remembers are from time spent with her grandparents and mother at her grandparents’ villa. Within those memories, in addition to an abundance of German cakes, she remembers her grandmother silencing conversations that were not for her ears, “saying (in English)... ‘not before the children,’ or ‘*pas devant les enfants*,’ when English became our second language.”⁵¹ This set a precedent of secrecy between young Tennenbaum and the adults in her life who sought to protect her but inadvertently robbed her of a sense of consciousness over the complex situations her family navigated, leading her to lack the language required to fully access her experiences. Tennenbaum’s deep interest in visual art and fiction, both forms that provided escape from truth, can perhaps be understood as an outcome of this. Art acted as a means of understanding what felt out of grasp to her personhood and to her relationship with memory. As Tennenbaum writes, concerns emerge over what memories are accessible or inaccessible to her, preoccupying her greatly. Her conversation of memory elucidates the impacts of not being privy to details regarding major life events and positions her firmly in a place of consistent self-doubt.

In February of 1999, Tennenbaum wrote an entry in her notes:

Ruth wanted to know last night whether I remembered far back into my childhood, and I told her that I didn’t. Then how can you write about it? She asked me. I can’t, I said. I have to make it up or to comment on it. That was one of those realizations that comes only when you need to verbalize it. It means I can’t do the LIFESTORY (stop

⁵⁰ Silvia Tennenbaum Papers, Box 9.

⁵¹ Silvia Tennenbaum Papers, Box 9.

calling it a memoir) chronologically..... It must be like looking at a photo album and spinning a tale from that. Or finding letters, returning 'home' to walk yesterday's streets.⁵²

This is the moment where Tennenbaum realizes her relationship to memory as being largely obscured. She faces the reality out loud, years after these notes begin. Dominick LaCapra wrote in *History and Memory after Auschwitz*, published in 1993, about the recent turn to memory as one interested in “memory sites” and “trauma sites,” writing “a memory site is generally also a site of trauma, and the extent to which it remains invested with trauma marks the extent to which memory has not been effective in coming to terms with it, notable through modes of mourning.”⁵³ Tennenbaum’s lack of memory is not differentiated as either being due to time or due to trauma, but the realization brings her clarity: preoccupation with accessing memory begins and ends with longing. This recognition provides a breath for mourning, but Tennenbaum writes on. The struggle to tell her story, exemplified in Tennenbaum’s archive, I argue, is vital to Shoah historiography because it refutes an idealized and sanitized notion of memorialization, placing the complex, sometimes traumatized, subjective experience as central to historical recollection.

Tennenbaum considers exile fervently as she writes, bringing it up at least every few pages of her notes. Tennenbaum’s discussion of exile focuses on her life in the US as being constantly in conversation with what her life could have looked like had her circumstances differed and her family remained in Germany. For Tennenbaum, exile is continuous, and she therefore almost never uses the word immigration. Departure from the known, from *heimat*, began before Tennenbaum’s family was forced to leave, when the Nazis rose to power during her infancy, when “the streets of Frankfurt fluttered with Nazi banners...smeared on the walls of Jewish buildings and cemeteries, [they] trailed paint and blood behind them.”⁵⁴ So much of the horror of this time only reaches Tennenbaum after the fact, as she reflects more than sixty years later. Partially because she was so young and because early places she regarded as home in Germany, specifically her grandparents’ house, were completely destroyed during the war. What Tennenbaum continued to search for, *heimat*, could not be found where it was first lost, she writes of the lifelong impact of exile, “You lose your home and then you keep looking for it, over and over again, you try to recreate it, to make it the same comforting, enclosing, filled with a sense of safety place—but yet you must finally discard it because it becomes a prison too.”⁵⁵ Here, Tennenbaum draws a line of connection from her exile from Germany to her marriage

⁵² Silvia Tennenbaum Papers, Box 10.

⁵³ Dominick LaCapra, “History and Memory: In the Shadow of the Holocaust,” essay, in *History and Memory After Auschwitz* (Cornell University Press, 1998), p. 14.

⁵⁴ Silvia Tennenbaum Papers, Box 10.

⁵⁵ Silvia Tennenbaum Papers, Box 9.

and subsequent divorce. The dynamic of her marriage became a prison, and she does not shy away from placing blame upon it for derailing her life goals. Perhaps her blame is loaded with the pain of exile as well. The attempt to recreate home as she knew it before exile does not fulfill that underlying sense of loss and grief. She continued to long for a place, whether physical or otherwise, where her memories could rest—eventually choosing to archive her work in the Smith College Special Collections.

Tennenbaum reveals the exhaustion that underlies her lifetime of dealing with the emotional repercussions of a traumatic early childhood. Grief is palpable as she continuously reflects on how her life and exile are intertwined. Exile is so prominent that she considers including it in the title of her memoir, “Exiled Forever (too heart-rending) Forever in Exile - The Pathos of Exile - Exile is Forever - Once an Exile, Always an Exile - Forever Exiled - Perennial Exile - Exile Never Stops - To Be In Exile Always - Exile is a Rending of the Heart - I Never Knew I was Homeless. (Most are too heart-rending).”⁵⁶ In the end, Tennenbaum chose not to include any mention of exile in the title, instead calling it *The Woman by the Window* in reference to several Vermeer paintings. It is relevant to the fragmented status of her memories that Tennenbaum’s memoir is titled after something removed from her actual experiences, but instead a piece of art that she felt moved by. While her life story and memory are marked by “trauma sites,” Tennenbaum does not wish to foreground her experiences as such. The paintings she frequently references seem to act as mechanisms to make distant, blurry images and memories from her life become enlivened, as is the goal of her memoir project. As Tennenbaum puts it, “there is often a mystery and you must uncover it.”⁵⁷

Despite Tennenbaum’s family’s luck and relative privilege to flee, she held the mental and physical consequences of survival. LaCapra argues that trauma “brings about a lapse or rupture in memory that breaks continuity with the past, thereby placing identity in question to the point of shattering it,” complicating the survivor’s accessible and inaccessible memory as separate from what was experienced on a timeline.⁵⁸ He goes on to explain that trauma “may raise problems of identity for others insofar as it unsettles narcissistic investments and desired self-images...”⁵⁹ Tennenbaum’s writing draws a parallel to LaCapra’s point as she says, “...the world is mine—all mine! It is no longer only the weight of received and reconstructed history; it is something, at least partially, that could be affected by me.”⁶⁰ Tennenbaum aims to transcend a life-defining trauma of exile and lack of agency. At the moment of writing, she is in Germany, giving additional power to this moment, making it one of actual existence within the subjunctive. Writing in her later years, she sees her part as a Shoah survivor

⁵⁶ Silvia Tennenbaum Papers, Box 9.

⁵⁷ Silvia Tennenbaum Papers, Box 9.

⁵⁸ LaCapra, “History and Memory,” p. 9.

⁵⁹ LaCapra, “History and Memory,” p. 9.

⁶⁰ Silvia Tennenbaum Papers, Box 9.

as important not only because of what has been done to her but also because she is an actor within history and within the moment she writes from. In her notes, Tennenbaum clarifies how forced migration impacted her selfhood. Her writing is a reclamation of the conditions put upon her by exile as she brings images to life and considers herself beyond remembrance.

The fragmented status of Tennenbaum's memories and notes is what renders them a relevant historical source in considering memory's role in Shoah historiography. Tennenbaum's dynamic struggle to tell her story complicates memory's role in historiography as a fixed entity. LaCapra argues that the historiographic positioning of memory is an issue of addiction, relating his thesis to Charles Maier's discussion of institutional preoccupation with memorialization over historical accuracy. What LaCapra focuses on in conjunction with Maier is the type of memory where the focal point is a victimization that the witness attempts to access. LaCapra writes, "Thus construed, memory involves fixation on the past that inhibits action in the present oriented to a more desirable future."⁶¹ In terms of Tennenbaum, the process of continuously looking for home is itself an imprisonment within memory, a compulsion. What she desires is inherently always linked to the past and to memories which she can't access, yet knows are there. In her notes, Tennenbaum is moving forward while simultaneously looking for something behind her, unable to shake the feeling of forgetting.⁶² Just as the threat of forgetting has and continues to haunt Shoah historians, it also weighs on Tennenbaum. Tennenbaum writes, "They all lost something, of course, and most of that 'something' was a memory they could pass on to their children. They lost it out of grief and out of shame and out of rage. But also because the Jewish world they entered was one that denigrated their experience, that saw the face of the enemy in their (our) faces."⁶³ She carries on the grief that first belonged to her Jewish family members in the generations before her, as well as others who share in her experiences.

On Concluding, Or a Lack Thereof

Considering subjectivity is a powerful method of transcending universality and is enriched further by examining the dynamic role of memory at both the individual and collective scale. What I seek to convey through this paper is that to engage with memory as a historical source within Shoah historiography gives voice to individual narratives. To be preoccupied with satisfying a dominant narrative itself is to prioritize a sanitized version of suffering. Situated against a backdrop of gendered Shoah scholarship, this paper argues for further incorporation of first-person narrative in Shoah historiography in order to recognize not only the story itself but the struggle to tell it as holding imperative value. The archival materials used for this paper, Tennenbaum's memoir notes and

⁶¹ LaCapra, "History and Memory," p. 14.

⁶² Silvia Tennenbaum Papers, Box 10.

⁶³ Silvia Tennenbaum Papers, Box 10.

manuscripts, having remained unpublished, serve as a memorial to memory's complex fragmentation. Tennenbaum's work powerfully exemplifies how first-person narratives of Jewish survivors of Nazism complicate Shoah historiography and its impact on the Jewish Diaspora. Her consideration of the subjunctive allows for both the pain and power of memory to be incorporated into the historiographic body.

Tennenbaum writes, reminding herself in an almost mantralike way, that she must tell her story from a perspective of continuity between the past and the present. This was her duty to herself, to the legacy of her family, and to all others who suffered what she did, surviving a life in exile. To resurrect Tennenbaum's fragmented memories as a historical source requires the same ethical responsibility. There will always be relevance for the past within the present, not only because of the cyclicity of history but because to be human means to look to those who came before you and follow the strings they left behind. Tennenbaum wrote and wrote and could not stop because to stop meant to be finished. It meant to exit the liminal space of possibility and of what *could have* been; to leave behind *heimat*, the home she longed for, simply to exist inside of that longing. In Tennenbaum's words, "...it keeps me from finishing [writing], thinking that as long as I put that off, I'll keep on living. If I put it off forever..."⁶⁴ In many ways, I am indebted to Silvia Tennenbaum, whose decision to donate her papers to the Smith College Special Collections gave me the space to grapple with the Shoah, its legacy, and historiography. I am grateful to have struggled alongside Tennenbaum, to be privileged with a look inside her mind. The fragmentary nature of her memories is reflected by the status of this paper as but one finished segment of a process never to be rendered complete.

⁶⁴ Silvia Tennenbaum Papers, Box 9.