Memory in an Amnesic World: Holocaust, Exile and the Return of the Suppressed.

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"Memories," says Benjamin Kunkel (2002:42), "stand in relationship to forgetting as photographs to unrecorded time and holocaust survivors to the 6 million dead; they are a small, exceptional minority."

Stephen Spielberg's Shoah Foundation has completed 50,000 interviews with Holocaust survivors. The Holocaust Museum is conducting interviews before the remaining survivors are gone. Defining a more limited scope, Laqueur's book Generation Exodus deals with Jews born in Germany and Austria between 1914 and 1926, and who emigrated before the major killing started. This is a cohort to which I belong.

With the help of the tape recorder, and of Studs Terkel, this is the age of oral history--for more than 20 years high school and college students have been encouraged to interview and record their elders. The Library of Congress seeks volunteers to interview 19 million surviving WWII veterans.
In recent years, the Holocaust has expanded to include not only those who were killed but also those who survived deportation, camps or hiding, as well as those who escaped early, and in addition to Jews also Gypsies and homosexuals, Communists and other resisters and other "inferiors." I recall meeting a francophone African physician in the 1940s. Living in France, he had been arrest and sent to a German camp as an Untermensch, a "sub-human."

For a long time these categories have been discussed separately. Now the US Memorial Holocaust Museum defines a survivor in the broadest terms. Yet for me, one of those who got out before the killing started, to be considered and to consider myself a "survivor" seems nothing short of indecent.

It should be noted that we are speaking and writing as Americans, in an American context-- Scholarly or otherwise--whether as survivors, however defined, or children of survivors or indeed children of those who did not survive. And this identity in this context is quite different than that of survivors or their children living in Israel, in Europe or elsewhere. In Israel it has taken 40 yrs to be able to talk about it. And the reasons for the silence have been different ones than here. What is constant is the need to deal with the experience, however differently that has been done.

Having left Vienna in the summer of 1938, I returned only in 1992--after 54 years. Later, I wrote about that experience. It took several more years before I worked on a memoir by one of my aunts, who also managed to escape Austria, recording her and her husband's life as servants in Scotland. The book, edited by my colleague Barbara Rigney and myself, was published as EXILE: A Memoir of 1939. The necessary contextualization: historical, familial, cultural, led to some questions and also to personal
discoveries. I needed to learn more about the history of Jews in Vienna and, more widely, in the Austro-Hungarian empire. I also needed to limit my discussion so as not to overwhelm my aunt's text, to restrict myself to essentials. Here is a story that might have been included:

The writer and central character of the memoir is my aunt Bronka, my father's sister. She, like my father and her two other sisters, was born in Cracow. The family moved to Vienna in about 1912. Her husband, Joseph, was born in Bojan, Bukovina, then part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, later part of Romania, now part of Ukraine. One day in New York he told my mother the following: Once when a mule train to Russia stopped in Bojan on its yearly run, a young man in its crew had fallen ill. Joseph's family agreed to keep him until the mule train's return. The family had a young daughter and she and the young man fell in love and wanted to get married. When the mule train returned, the driver explained that the young man though raised by him was not his son but of unknown origin. At the time he was a small child there had been an epidemic in the region and the rabbis decided that God's wrath could be met only by a sacrifice (korban). The first-born boy children were to be exposed. In practice this meant that they were taken to market places in neighboring towns, and adopted by Jewish families there. The young man, Eliezer, was Joseph's grandfather.

The story fascinated me. It meant that only a hundred years before the time I heard it, some Jews lived in worlds so culturally remote, that only on a cosmic level could they cope with a health crisis while at the same time other Jews nearby, such as the urbanites of Czernowitz, were part of the modern world of the 19th century. I also learned that there were Jewish mule trains.