

## History, identity and memory: Jewish tracing in Maria Stepanova's *In Memory of Memory*

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**Abstract.** Maria Stepanova, a Russian poet, essayist, and journalist of Jewish descent, published a polyphonic work titled *Memory of Memory* in 2017, which was translated into English in 2021. At the heart of this work lies a triad of memory — personal, familial, and collective — that intertwines and overlaps, addressing various themes, including the Jewish theme. The author embarks on a journey into her family's roots, gradually expanding the boundaries of *postmemory* to encompass more universal dimensions. Memory thus becomes a bridge, connecting the legacy of family history to collective memory, intertwining with 'grand history' and culminating in a discourse on Jewish identity and memory.

**Keywords:** history, memory, post memory, trauma, identity.

**Riassunto.** Maria Stepanova, poetessa, saggista e giornalista russa di origini ebraiche, ha pubblicato nel 2017 un'opera polifonica intitolata *Memoria della memoria*, tradotta in italiano nel 2020. Al cuore di questo lavoro risiede la triade della memoria — personale, familiare e collettiva — che si intrecciano e sovrappongono, affrontando temi diversi, tra cui quello ebraico. L'autrice intraprende un viaggio nelle radici della propria famiglia, per poi espandere i confini della *postmemoria* fino a raggiungere dimensioni più universali. La memoria diventa così un ponte che collega l'eredità della storia familiare alla memoria collettiva, intrecciandosi con la 'grande storia' e approdando al discorso sull'identità ebraica e sulla memoria ebraica.

**Parole chiave:** storia, memoria, post memoria, trauma, identità.

In the context of the extensive body of memory literature that has developed since the 1980s, a distinct strand has emerged, often referred to as the 'third generation' narratives. This category encompasses works in which the grandchildren, as members of the third generation, face the complex challenge of recalling and articulating historical events of the twentieth century with which their grandparents were directly or indirectly involved (Ribatti 2014). Such narratives have become particularly salient in response to the diminishing number of living eyewitnesses to these events, a phenomenon highlighted by Aleida Assmann (Assmann, 2015). The act of remembrance for these third-generation descendants is frequently mediated through family stories, silences, and fragmented narratives handed down through generations, a process that Marianne Hirsch has defined as *postmemory* (Hirsch 2012).

This is the aim of *In Memory of Memory* is to explore the intricate relationship between personal, familial, and collective memory. The book brought Maria Stepanova—poet, essayist, contributor to various periodicals and newspapers, and recipient of numerous national and international awards—wide recognition (Scandura 2018, 251). Born in Moscow on June 9, 1972, into a family of three-quarters Jewish descent, the author began exploring her family history at the age of ten, documenting the stories of her ancestors in a simple school notebook. This notebook, consisting of just eleven pages, became the starting point (Favilli 2023, 71) of her extensive research into the family memories

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passed down through the matrilineal line—from her great-grandmother Sarra Ginzburg, to her grandmother Olga Fridman, and her mother Natalia Gurevich, culminating in Stepanova herself (Favilli 2023, 100):

«It's the sense of our family as a matriarchy, a tribe of strong, individual women standing like milestones spanning the century. Their fates loomed large in my life, here they are in the front row – holding on to each other, merging into each other – of the many-headed family photograph. [...] the line of transmission [...] was a staircase leading steadily toward me, consisting entirely of women. Sarra begat Lyolya, Lyolya begat Natasha, and Natasha begat me. The matryoshka (nesting) doll insisted on the preeminence of single daughters, each emerging from the one before and inheriting, with everything else, the gift and opportunity to be the single teller of the tale» (Stepanova, 2021, p. 31-32)

Those initial notes, which began as a simple desire to research and document her family history—exploring her lineage, roots, and the lives of her ancestors—eventually culminated in the publication of *Pamyati Pamyati* in 2017, which was subsequently translated into English as *In Memory of Memory* in 2021. The year 2017 holds particular significance, as it coincides with the centenary of two pivotal events: the October Revolution and the birth of Charlotte Salomon. Though these events differ in nature, they share a common symbolic theme of ‘birth’. The Russian Revolution of 1917 marked the collapse of the Empire and the emergence of Soviet Russia, ushering in an era filled with the optimism of revolutionary ideals alongside the consolidation of concepts like centralized authority, nationalism, and state control—a reflection of contemporary Russia (Sulpasso 2021, 476). In contrast, the birth of Charlotte Salomon in 1917, however an individual event, carries profound historical and artistic significance, especially in the context of the devastating political realities of the time. Though separated by geography and context, the Russian Revolution and Charlotte Salomon’s birth in Berlin are both overshadowed by the trauma that defined the 20th century, particularly the years leading up to and following the Second World War, when the trajectories of the two countries to converge. This trajectory becomes especially evident when we consider the year 1939, which shifted the concept of ‘birth’ into that of ‘death’. That year, the signing of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact marked a significant turning point in history, not only temporarily alleviating Soviet fears of a Nazi invasion but also ushering in a period marked by a morally complex and politically ambiguous landscape. Through this non-aggression agreement, the Soviet Union effectively muted its opposition to Nazi Germany’s increasingly brutal anti-Semitic policies, choosing to prioritize its own strategic interests over any moral considerations (Solzhenitsyn 2007, 15-19). While this pragmatic decision yielded short-term geopolitical advantages, it also entailed profound and far-reaching long-term consequence. Following the pact and particularly after Germany's invasion of the Soviet Union in 1941, marking the beginning of the Great Patriotic War—during which Leonid Gimmelfarb, affectionately called Lyodik (Stepanova, 2021, p. 254), served—Stepanova’s narrative underscores the catastrophic consequences of Soviet acquiescence to Nazi aggression. This complicity, marked by silence, left Soviet Jews largely unaware of the looming peril, exacerbating subsequent tragedies, such as those in Odessa (Schwarz. 1952, 123-125):

«[...] Both Lyodik’s grandfathers were in Odessa and both were Jews. Israel Gimmelfarb, Lyodik’s paternal grandfather, was shot in October 1941, immediately after Romanian forces occupied the town. The other grandfather, father of Betya and Verochka, was called Leonty, or Leib. [...] I have never found out anything about him – he vanished, quite as if he had never existed. [...] By the end of the war Odessa, with its Polish, Greek, Italian, and Jewish streets, had no more than six hundred Jewish residents, and none of my family were among them» (Stepanova, 2021, pp. 376-377).

The trauma of war and its far-reaching consequences prompted Stepanova to expand the concept of *postmemory* (Favilli 2023, 90) taking it beyond personal memories and Russia’s borders to reconstruct the past. The spatiotemporal coordinates of the postmodern *chronotope* broaden to encompass global memory places such as the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, the Joods Historisch Museum, the American Museum of Natural History, and the Jewish Museum in Berlin. While, the context is supplemented by the external voices of authors such as Marianne Hirsch, W. G.

Sebald, Helga Landauer and Rafael Goldchain, who describes the echoes of trauma as follows: “all of my extended family members who remained in Europe after the beginning of World War Two perished in the Shoah” (Stepanova 2021, p. 172), and others.

Charlotte Salomon, a German-Jewish painter and one of the countless victims of the Holocaust, is the central figure in the chapter titled *Charlotte, or Acts of Insubordination*, first published on Colta.ru (Stepanova, 2017) to mark the centenary of her birth. In 1938, while studying at the Berlin Academy of the Arts, Charlotte and her family, alarmed by the escalating political tensions and dangers in Nazi Germany—particularly after Kristallnacht (The Night of Broken Glass) and her father’s deportation to Sachsenhausen concentration camp—decided to flee the country. Charlotte initially sought temporary refuge with her maternal grandparents in France before moving to the La Belle Aurore pension in Saint-Jean-Cap-Ferrat, where she lived in isolation for two years while her parents were in the Netherlands. During this time, she immersed herself in her art, using it to process her emotions and confront past traumas. This intense period of creative focus culminated in *Life? or Theatre?*, a series of 769 sheets of paper that became not only her magnum opus but also a deeply personal expression of her experiences and reflections. As Stepanova notes: “Charlotte Salomon become the dining-table chronicle of this age of decline, bewilderment, and pitiful efforts to keep one’s dignity intact” (Stepanova 2021, 220-229) capturing both the personal and historical dimensions of the struggle for meaning and survival.

The plot of *Life? or Theatre?* unfolds as both a family saga and a poignant love story, yet it is more than just an act of artistic expression—it also functions as a deeply personal form of therapy for Charlotte Salomon. In her quest for healing, the young artist felt compelled to embody every person she had ever known, giving voice to both the living and the dead. This act of ‘inhabiting’ the experiences of those around her allowed her to confront her past, transforming her grief into a creative force (Moiseeva 2022, 25). Her work was published posthumously by her father and his wife after Charlotte’s tragic death in 1943. At the age of 26, a pregnant Jewish woman, she was deported to Auschwitz, where, most likely, she was sent directly to the gas chambers upon arrival. Her life was cut short before she could realize the future she so desperately desired. Today, most of Salomon’s works are part of the collection at the Joods Historisch in Amsterdam, which has made the entire work available on its website (Leben? Oder Theater? s.d.).

The ‘penetrating nature of the work’ encapsulates the central themes of Charlotte Salomon’s artistic vision. *Life? or Theater?*, a groundbreaking fusion of painting, text, and music, goes beyond the traditional confines of autobiography (Moiseeva 2022, 25). The work functions as a Freudian family ‘romance,’ delving into the complexities of generational relationships and unconscious desires. Simultaneously, it offers a sentimental reflection on the past—a theme that Stepanova adopts as a subtitle (M. Stepanova 2017, 228-229).

The author’s connection with Charlotte Salomon is evident from the very first lines, a bond that transcends their shared Jewish heritage. While the chapters dedicated to other artists and writers often adopt a more uniform tone—perhaps to impose a sense of coherence on an otherwise diverse narrative—this chapter stands out for its engaging and multifaceted style. At this point in the book, the narrative takes on a new vitality, underscoring how Charlotte emerges as one of Stepanova’s deepest sources of inspiration (Favilli 2023, 88), embodying both her concept of ‘inhabiting’ the living and the dead, and serving as a three-dimensional model. In *In Memory of Memory*, this model takes shape through the integration of three distinct yet complementary dimensions: the visual dimension, conveyed through *ekphrasis*; the textual dimension, developed through narrative writing; and the musical dimension, expressed through the poetic elements that permeate the entire structure of the book. The result of this fusion is a complex structure, akin to a museum display case, filled with fragments, photographs, postcards, letters, and documents from a family archive (Ercolani 2020). These display cabinets, thus conceived, function as *semiophores* (Krzysztof 1990) —objects and images that embody a new dimension of meaning. The polyphonic narrative unfolds fluidly and lyrically, allowing the reader to meander freely between chapters, much like exploring the rooms of a museum without a fixed path (Ercolani 2020). Each room of the narrative serves as an *epitaph* for past generations, commemorating not only those who lived but also the very essence of memory itself.

This concept is encapsulated in the title *In Memory of Memory*, which emphasizes the act of remembering as a living, evolving tribute to the past.

Within this rich, museum-like structure, an important challenge emerges, centered on the reconstruction of the author's family history, a Jewish microcosm, with the sole Russian branch—her paternal grandfather, Nikolai Stepanov—intertwined in these historical and identity narratives. The main difficulty lies in the gaps within the family archive, which prevent the formation of cohesive chapters and hinder the creation of a complete picture (Grimova 2020, 145). Furthermore, the archive remains decontextualized, a condition that persists even when visiting significant and symbolic places such as Paris, Saratov, Kherson, and Odessa. However, partial contextualization is achieved through an external constellation of texts and authors such as Jacques Rancière, Georges du Maurier, Andrey Sergeev, Osip Mandelstam, Anna Akhmatova, Marina Tsvetaeva, Lidiya Ginzburg, and others. These figures serve as both guides and witnesses, providing context and perspectives that help fill in the historical voids and broaden the exploration of memory. Nevertheless, the underlying structural gaps hinder the construction of a linear narrative, free of discontinuities. Consequently, the text emerges as a fragmented tapestry, mirroring the incomplete nature of both history and memory (Grimova 2020, 145). This fragmentation is further intensified by the absence of a rich family context, shifting the narrative away from the traditional family saga towards an 'ordinariness' (Moiseeva 2022, 20):

«I felt bound to notice that my ancestors had hardly made any attempt to make our family history interesting. [...] As a child I was always very disappointed by the professions and activities of my family. Engineers and librarians, doctors and accountants, my relatives represented the full range of the ordinary and humdrum; nothing special or exciting, nothing adventurous» (Stepanova 2021, p. 22 and p. 377).

However, in a historical context, particularly one marked by constant upheaval, the concept of 'ordinariness'—devoid of extraordinary talents or great successes—takes on a deeper meaning, symbolizing resilience and survival. It functions almost as an 'invisibility cloak,' protecting individuals from the severe realities of their time and enabling them to withstand the enduring hardships (Moiseeva 2022, 20). Within this framework, the 'ordinary' character—whether consciously or unwittingly—becomes the measure of history (Moiseeva 2022, 22). This shift in focus towards the individual can be seen as a response to the scepticism surrounding grand historical narratives, which often present the past as a linear sequence of victories, conquests, and heroic deeds (Favilli 2023):

«The state concept of Russian history views the past centuries as a grand, decorated staircase, with Russia ascending triumphantly from one victory to the next. In this narrative, all conquests, cultural achievements, and successes are highlighted and celebrated, while the contradictions, tragedies, and darker moments are either overlooked or dismissed as isolated incident» (Sulpasso 2021, 476).

From the 'invisibility' of these individuals emerges a transformative perspective that reveals the darkest and most erased aspects of history, often overshadowed by dominant narratives (Moiseeva 2022, 22). Sarra Ginzburg, Stepanova's great-grandmother and custodian of family memory, exemplifies this dynamic, offering a view into 20th-century Russia. The author recounts Sarra's participation in the 1905 demonstration in Nizhny Novgorod, first referenced in the ballad *Sarra na barrikadakh* (Sarra on the Barricades, 2005). This episode transcends individual memory to symbolize a collective struggle for change during a period of profound social upheaval. In that moment, men and women, driven by shared aspirations, marched side by side, embodying the hope for a 'better world, built on the stable foundations of reason and justice' (M. Stepanova 2021, 137). The photograph capturing these events, now preserved in the Nizhny Novgorod Museum, has become a part of public memory, affectionately known in family folklore as 'Babushka on the Barricades':

«Great-Grandmother Sarra, first on the left, looks older than her seventeen years. Her hat, the sort that's fastened with pins, has slipped to the back of her head, a strand of hair has escaped and her round-cheeked face is red raw, you can see how cold she is. One of her hands is tucked into her coat's cuffs, another is balled

into a fist. Her right eye, injured on the barricades, is covered with a black bandage [...]. This was in Nizhny Novgorod, the barricades were built during the uprising that began on December 12, 1905, and was put down by artillery after three days of street fighting» (Stepanova, 2021, pp. 44-45).

Nevertheless, just two years later, Sarra was arrested for distributing clandestine literature and subsequently imprisoned in the Peter and Paul Fortress in St. Petersburg. After her release in 1908, she chose to leave Russia, opting not to join the Communist Party, and began a new life in France, where she enrolled at the Sorbonne to study medicine. The onset of World War I, however, brought new challenges. Sarra embarked on a perilous journey back to Russia, navigating the hazards and uncertainties of wartime (M. Stepanova 2021, 133-155). In 1916, she gave birth to her daughter, Lyolya, and successfully passed the state examinations required to practice medicine in Saratov, validating her 'milk-white' foreign certificate. The year before, she had married Mikhael Fridman (M. Stepanova 2021, 341; 329) and received from him a small brooch inscribed with the words: 'you can't escape your fate'. This gift symbolized the beginning of a new chapter in her life, marking the closure of her revolutionary past and bourgeois origin. As Stepanova writes: "she might have gone back to her old ways, her revolutionary activity; she might have had her name in school history books or, just as likely, in the lists of the executed. But she remained well beyond the reach of the textbooks and their footnotes [...]" (M. Stepanova 2021, 21-22).

Great-grandmother Sarra survived two revolutions, the First World War, and the tumultuous year of 1937—another reflection of contemporary Russia, frequently evoked by Stepanova (Bucko 2021). This year marks a pivotal moment in Soviet history: the Great Purge (1936-1938), which commenced following the assassination of Sergei Kirov and targeted those deemed enemies of the state. The victims of this political terror were individuals from diverse origins, including many of Jewish descent, nobles, party leaders, former members of the imperial army, and officials linked to Leon Trotsky (Calimani 2006). The victims of this political terror were individuals from diverse origins, including many of Jewish descent, nobles, party leaders, former members of the imperial army, and officials linked to Leon Trotsky (Deutscher 2011). Among those targeted was Isaac Deutscher, who was ultimately expelled from the Communist Party for allegedly exaggerating the threat of Nazism, with accusations of 'spreading panic among the Communist ranks'. His outspoken views were further condemned for employing rhetoric typically reserved for 'enemies of the working class', particularly when he highlighted the atrocities committed by the Stalinist regime. In addition to his criticisms of Soviet policy, Deutscher also addressed the Jewish question, treating it as a distinct issue from the broader challenges facing the Communist movement. Initially, he had supported the establishment of a Jewish Republic in Birobidzhan, seeing it as a potential haven for the Jewish people (Meghnagi 2010, 90-93). However, over time, the settlement devolved into an open-air prison, ultimately transforming into a new form of the Pale of Settlement (Pipes 1975, 16), marked by deportation and murder for countless individuals. This tragic development, marked by immense suffering, became a harrowing chapter that Deutscher would remember with profound regret (Meghnagi 2010, 97):

«In 1938, in what was later known as the Great Terror, the country's punitive capacity was strained to the utmost: the Gulag could no longer cope with the quantity of prisoners. Production, so to speak, *ground to a halt*. Annihilation was the solution and army officers found themselves at the front of this grim line: hundreds and thousands of foreign spies were suddenly found among their ranks» (Stepanova, 2021, p. 401).

When German troops invaded the unprepared Soviet Union on June 22, 1941, chaos ensued, plunging the entire population, including Jews, into a state of uncertainty and fear. As Stepanova observes, 'the city was in a state of frenzy for several months. People fled precipitously as you might dive through a hole cut in the ice' (Stepanova, 2021, p. 347). The Soviet government, fully aware of its complicity through silence and the catastrophic consequences that followed, could neither admit responsibility nor openly prioritize Jews in evacuation efforts. Consequently, the evacuation orders issued after the invasion, though insufficient to safeguard everyone, avoided any mention of the Jewish population (Solzhenitsyn 2007, 16-19). Sarra Ginzburg's family was evacuated to Yalutorovsk, a city in western Siberia, where they remained for three years. It was there, just days

after their arrival on 12 September 1941, that her daughter, Olga Gurevich, gave birth to Natasha, who later became the mother of Maria Stepanova (Stepanova, 2021)

The end of World War II and the victory that followed, as Stepanova notes, marked a turning point in Russian history, reshaping both its political landscape and national identity, where the complexities of the past were erased, stripped of tragedy, conflict, or struggle. History became curated like a museum exhibit, showing only uninterrupted triumphs and successes (Sulpasso 2021, 476). This duality became evident with the formation of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee in 1942 and, later, with the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948. These milestones reignited Soviet leader Joseph Stalin's deep-rooted mistrust towards the Jewish community, whom he viewed as inherently 'mystical, intangible, and cosmopolitan' (Calimani 2006, 169). This pervasive suspicion eventually evolved into a broader campaign against 'cosmopolitans', a *euphemism* that masked the surge of antisemitism that spread throughout Soviet society from 1948 to 1953 (Nadzhafov 2005). In this context, the years that Stepanova's great-grandmother, Sarra, spent in Paris—where she built a career and adopted a cosmopolitan European identity—became another marker of her perceived otherness, exposing her to the same forces of danger that had once targeted her Jewish origins. This situation culminated in the announcement by *Pravda* of the arrest of a 'group of medical saboteurs' accused of murdering Andrei Zhdanov and conspiring to assassinate Joseph Stalin (Calimani 2006, 175-185). The so-called Doctors' Plot unleashed a wave of arrests, executions, and widespread job losses, affecting Sarra and her daughter Olga, both Jewish doctors. Their lives, once defined by an unwavering dedication to their profession, were abruptly overshadowed by suspicion, danger, and fear (M. Stepanova 2021, 325):

«I don't know what would have been more dangerous for Doctor Sarra Abramovna Ginzburg: her native Jewishness or her assumed Europeaness. I wonder, did she ever discuss what was going on with her close family, was she scared that it would also affect those around her, her very successful son-in-law, daughter, and grandchild? Her stroke, and the resulting 'senility' – that long-awaited inability to be responsible, make decisions, take steps – removed her from the group at risk, and placed her in a cool, safe place [...]» (Stepanova, 2021, p. 348).

The situation ended in 1953 with Stalin's death, but it still cost Olga Fridman her job, bringing her life, like that of her great-grandmother Sarra in 1905, momentarily back into the spotlight of history (Favilli 2023, 98). However, thanks to an acquaintance of Sarra, who offered her a job opportunity at an epidemiological centre—an exceptional act of courage and altruism in an era marked by great danger and risk—Olga, a Jewish woman with a medical background, accepted the position and remained there for the rest of her life (M. Stepanova 2021, 368).

As the story reveals, the Jewish question is, first and foremost, a family question, initially brought to light in *Spolia* (2015) and later expanded in the novel *In Memory of Memory*. The phrase '*we are Jews*' (M. Stepanova 2021, 345) is passed down through generations as a memory, from Ginzburg, Fridman, and Gurevich to Stepanova. The use of italics for the phrase '*we are Jews*' carries profound symbolism. Italics, commonly used to indicate quotations or non-a-chapter, suggest that these words do not originate from the author but reflect an external perspective or label imposed on her or her family. In this context of labelling, one of the most important goals becomes pursuing an education, studying, and entering a profession. The same spirit that drives great-grandmother Sarah to travel to Paris to study medicine (Vasil'eva 2018, 47-48), even though there is no mention in her correspondence of Yiddish language, religious practices, or culture in general:

«Apart from the main topics of conversation and the very few details in passing, one thing struck me: in all this correspondence there was not one reference to Jewishness, however superficial. And beyond this absence (of festivals, rituals, anything connected with the observance of tradition), lay another: Yiddish, the language of exile and humiliation, was never spoken. There were flashes of Latin, the professional language of diagnosis and assessment, and tiny scattering of French and German. But words from the language of home, words of that could have served as little shared call signs or beacons of understanding, seemed to have been excluded from daily use, forbidden for conversation» (Stepanova, 2021, pp. 133-134).

Only once in the correspondence, when the discussion focused on family matters and summer exams, the future great-grandfather used a phrase in Yiddish, written in brackets and quotation marks: (*‘עס רעדזיך אזוי’*), translating to (*‘es redt zich azoi’*). This brief inclusion in Russian serves to circumscribe and delineate the boundaries of non-inclusion in Jewishness, signalling the family’s distancing from Jewish identity (Stepanova, 2021, p. 134). The estrangement is evident not only in the selective use of language, such as the occasional Yiddish phrase, but also in how the family navigates their social and professional lives, often downplaying or even erasing their Jewish heritage in favour of assimilation:

«For these people, changing names was as common a matter as moving from one town to another. My other great-grandfather, the handsome Vladimir Gurevich [...] unexpectedly turns out to be Moisey Vulf, according to his papers. How did he pull off the old skin, and how did he choose the new one? Mikhel becomes Misha almost effortlessly, Vulf becomes a Vladimir; as if he had always been a Vladimir. Sarra’s brother, the wonderful Isif [...] was transformed into Volodya» (Stepanova, 2021, p. 307).

The same dynamics of assimilation are evident on a larger scale, as seen in the case of the poet Osip Mandelstam, who, in the eyes of many, remained a *Zhyd* (Jew) (Vasil’eva 2018, 48): ‘[...] it is Jewish identity (not poverty, nor a comic combination of insistence and uncertainty, and hardly even his poetry) that defines how Mandelstam is seen from the very outset in the literary circles of the early twentieth century. His identity was considered exotic then, to such an extent that it overshadowed everything else’ (M. Stepanova 2021, 135). His fate in this regard is not unique; Stepanova, in the chapter *The Jew boy Hides from View*—a title that speaks for itself—describes it as follows: ‘in order to get noticed, the ‘jewboy’, whoever he was, had to hide himself away: purge and recast himself, improve himself and destroy all traces of family, race, or tribe, or adherence to place [...] It was understood that belonging wholeheartedly to the world of culture meant rejecting your Jewishness’ (M. Stepanova 2021, 136). Stepanova’s words reveal a painful and widespread reality: to be accepted into Russian cultural and intellectual circles, one had to annul their Jewish identity. This process of self-denial and assimilation, which was not unique to Mandelstam but likely also affected Stepanova’s family, was shared by many Jews in early 20th-century Russia, underscoring the tension between cultural inclusion and ethnic isolation.

Stepanova’s exploration of Jewishness delves into themes of Jewish self-awareness and, as a result, examines the distinctive nature of Jewish memory. Reflecting on the roots of her own ‘obsession’ with memory (Vasil’eva 2018, 49), she cites a passage from *Deuteronomy 8:11*: ‘Take care to keep all the orders which I give you today, so that you may have life and be increased and go in and take as a heritage the land which the Lord, by his oath to your fathers, undertook to give you’. Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi’s seminal work, *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory* (1982), elucidates how remembrance is central to Jewish tradition: an imperative to remember not only personal responsibility but also the community’s collective duty to preserve its traditions, laws, and history (M. Stepanova 2021, 209). This drive to remember—often described as a survival mechanism—became especially crucial during times of exile, persecution, and suffering. Memory, in this sense, served as both a shield and a guide, allowing the Jewish people to maintain their identity through periods of great adversity. However, Jewish tradition does not adhere to a historicist model. An example of this perspective is the *Megillat Taanit* (the scroll of fasting), the ancient scroll that records the ‘red letter days’ in the Jewish calendar, which correspond to holidays or days exempt from fasting (M. Stepanova 2021, 209-210). In this text, events are not presented as mere historical facts; rather, they are organized according to the natural cycles of the seasons. While days and months are named, years are omitted. This structure underlines a cyclical view of time, cantered on the eternal rhythm of the Torah, rather than a linear progression of history. The events chronicled in the scroll are not confined to the past; through the act of reading, they transcend time, continually becoming part of the present and repeated (Vasil’eva 2018, 49) in the lived experience of the community: ‘in this way the Judaic memory is free from the need to commit everything in history to memory, free to choose the significant and essential, to cut away the inessential’ (M. Stepanova 2017, 211). The limitations are of a different kind; the imperative *not forget* coincides with the imperative *duty to focus* (M.

Stepanova 2021, 211). It is from this perspective that Stepanova approaches the consideration of the events of the Holocaust (Vasil'eva 2018, 49):

«[...] Acts of punishment were meted out in accordance with their foreign calendar, although without discerning between days of mourning and days of feasting. The massacre of Jews at Babi Yar took place on Erev Yom Kippur and the destruction of the Minsk Ghetto was timed to coincide with Simchat Torah. The clearing of Warsaw Ghetto began at Passover. Even such violent plungings into the black hole of catastrophic knowledge can be considered a sort of confirmation» (Stepanova, 2021, p. 211).

The Catastrophe, as she frames it, becomes an event in the continuum of the past. However, when viewed through this lens of cyclicity, it is subjected to the commandment do *not forget*. This commandment underscores the enduring obligation to remember the Holocaust, not merely as a historical fact but as an integral part of the collective Jewish memory, demanding perpetual reflection and transmission across generations. Nevertheless, ethical implications of the commandment 'not to forget' take on a particularly significant dimension when considering the documentation of the Holocaust, especially through photographs that capture suffering and violence. Stepanova poses a crucial question: did Holocaust victims, such as the naked woman about to be killed, want their final moments to be documented and made public? Is the preservation of such memory indispensable, or does it risk objectifying their suffering? (Vasil'eva 2018, 49). In this context, we can also consider Patrizia Violi's reflection on photographs: 'To what extent does one have the right to exhibit an image without the consent of those depicted in it, especially when, in the case of traumatic photographs, the individuals may no longer be alive to provide consent? Furthermore, what compels us to subject ourselves to viewing such images?' (Violi 2021, 138). It is a delicate and dangerous balance between 'not to forget' and 'colonizing' memory, where the act of preserving the past can sometimes transform into an attempt to control or shape, thereby losing its true significance.

Thus, the aspects of the past, with its gaps and uncertainties, and the assimilations of identity, reveal that the work—originally conceived as the history of the Ginzburg-Fridman-Gurevich-Stepanov family—ultimately speaks of something else:

«If I had expected a small box of secrets to be hidden at my journey's end, something like one of Joseph Cornell's boxes, then I would have been disappointed. Those places where the people of my family walked, sat, kissed, went down to the river's edge, or jumped onto streetcars, the towns where they were known by face and name – none of them revealed themselves to me» (Stepanova, 2021, pp. 427-428).

It is about memory, which in turn reflects the book's circular structure, spanning from the title to the final chapter. Stepanova transforms what could have been a simple narrative of shattered hopes and fragmented memories into a profound reflection on the fragility of reconstructing history. This fragility is embodied in the figure of Frozen Charlotte, to whom the final chapter, titled *The Daughter of a Photographer*, is dedicated. Frozen Charlotte serves as a metaphor for the past: a breakable, immobile figure, forever trapped in time:

«I feed each one from its swaddling, and they lay on the dining table in a line so you could see all their dents, all their cracks, the earth ingrained in the china, the absences where feet, legs, hands should have been. Most of them still had heads, and some even had their little socks, they only item of toilet they were permitted. But on the whole they were naked and white, as if they had just been born, with all their dents and flaws. Frozen Charlottes, representatives of the population of survivors; they seem like family to me - and the less I can say about them, the closer they come» (Stepanova, 2021, p. 428).

The fragility of the past lies in its inherent inaccessibility to the present; it can be preserved, rethought, and retold, but never returned in its original form. This gap underscores a poignant reality: memory, no matter how carefully guarded or jealously maintained, remains a fragmentary echo, a construction that bridges but never truly reconciles the gap between what was and what remains. The past does not belong to us, and according to Stepanova, we should not strive to belong to it either (I.Tolstoj 2023).



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