Histories and Memories

Migrants and their History in Britain

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Caroline Attan

Introduction

Objects are involved in complex overlapping relations of significance. This paper examines how the choices and arrangement of significant objects articulate self-identity across discontinuity in life experience. In-depth interviews and observations of migrants and the descendants of migrants are used for this investigation. Some informants interviewed suffered traumatic life experiences due to persecution and loss of homeland and therefore the experience of discontinuity may appear extreme. The living room environment is chosen for the investigation of self-identity as it is used as a personal space and is shared with other family members and guests.

The interior of the home is filled with objects that are chosen, arranged and maintained by the inhabitants; these may be functional, decorative and have personal, cultural or religious significance. The living room is used both as a private and public domain to build social and familial relationships. It may be used to relax alone or in company and pursue leisure activities or to just collapse in front of the television; books, photographs, furniture and ornaments are in constant flux with those who occupy the home. My investigation concerns how individuals use the arrangement and display of objects and furniture to articulate their personal worlds. In particular the research demonstrates how relations of personal significance with certain objects play a role in the historical layering of experience and the re-integration of the self across major life transitions.
The reading and understanding of the organisation of the home environment and the choice and arrangement of objects and furniture exemplifies self-objectification; how the self is elaborated through object choice, arrangement and how this develops over time. The interior is constantly being re-shaped through physical interaction with those who inhabit it. The research shows how the furniture and objects in the living room become the vehicles of self-expression; they are placed by inhabitants and subsequently reflect their personal histories. Individuals are often aware that the objects express something of themselves to those who enter the room and that these objects are ultimately reassuring as they represent 'home'.

The investigation relates most closely to the work of David Patkin as he identifies significant objects that are taken from one cultural context to another and are used to establish new homes in new cultural environments. This article explores the arrangement of significant objects in the construction of homes and lives of individuals in a new cultural environment. The concept of home is found to be both 'mental' and 'physical' and therefore always exists in the memories of those who have migrated, even when a physical home has not been established. Memories of the past find expression in objects and are used to recreate the past in the present as they are both literally and metaphorically taken from one cultural environment to another. The construction of a new home is central to how individuals adapt to living in a new, cultural environment, as a certain sense of 'home' is never really left behind but re-established. As a result of in-depth interviews individuals are able to rise to a level of consciousness and articulate their relations with objects.

The interiors of the respondents' living rooms are furnished with objects and furniture that in some ways are displayed as an expression of personal experience; they are used to reflect their inner and outer selves. The objects themselves have the capacity to dictate lifestyles based on religious or cultural beliefs or may be indicative of the individual belonging to either a specific social group or are relevant to a particular generation. While Milena Vcens describes how objects cannot change people, although they may affect human reactions and responses, research discovers that as people change, so their relationship with material objects develops as layers of memories are attached to significant objects.

This study considers the relationship between individuals and significant objects from two opposite perspectives. One departs from the physical structure of artefacts and what they communicate to individuals and the other focuses on the materialisation of individuals shown through placement and selection of objects and how artefacts are used to articulate personal histories. Basically, this considers the effect the object has on the individual and the effect the individual has on the object. The co-existence of people and objects is so natural and taken for granted that the process generally passes unnoticed. This research draws attention to this process but has investigated it through a human perspective for as far as we are aware objects do not have a 'consciousness'. This perspective also accounts for the way people use objects as a form of self-expression and communication expressed here as 'objectification'. People continually create objects and the process is continually re-defined. It is evident that although objects are inanimate they do have 'autonomy' that suggests that they may influence and affect people in different ways.

The study is based on observations of the way objects and furniture is arranged by individuals in their living rooms and the dialogue concerning these objects. In-depth interviews with both migrants and non-migrants are used to reveal the layers of meaning attached to significant objects; the complexity of their relationship with objects; the significance of the placement of the object; and the way the individual reacts with it are recorded.

Approximately thirty informants above the age of eighteen have been selected from a range of social, cultural and ethnic backgrounds. These migrants are predominantly from Czechoslovakia and Poland although migrants from other countries including South Africa, Germany, Cyprus, Guyana and Britain have been included in this research. Informants from Poland and Czechoslovakia are either Catholic or Jewish. The children and grandchildren of migrants were interviewed enabling me to focus on the effects of migration on the different generations of informants. Non-migrants were interviewed as a control group. The programme of interviews was predicated on recognition that what respondents say concerning the choice and arrangement of objects is often ambiguous as conventions of display may overlay personal significance; therefore the significance of chosen objects cannot be taken at face value. The common characteristics of these informants chosen as suitable subjects for this investigation draws on the remaining of the habitus through the creation and production of personal significance.

Twenty out of the thirty informants interviewed for this research project are Czechoslovakian or Polish or are connected to these countries through parents or grandparents. The study is based in North London, which, since 1945, has been richly populated with migrants from the above-mentioned countries. Therefore informants from these two countries were selected for interviews through local availability.

Czechoslovakian and Polish migrants interviewed in this study predominantly came to London immediately before, during and after the 1950s and many are Jewish and had escaped to London during the Second
World War to avoid persecution from Hitler's invasion of Europe and annihilation of the Jewish race. Once the concentration camps of Europe were liberated, survivors tried to return to their homes in Poland and Czechoslovakia only to discover that they were the sole survivor of their entire family. Some of these informants were sent by their parents on the Kindertransport and hoped to be re-united with their families after the war, only to discover that their families had not managed to leave the Nazi invaded territory and therefore had perished in the Holocaust. All these informants lost their parents, siblings and family and are sole survivors of their families and therefore the point of migration was that of extreme dislocation and loss.

Areas in North London subsequently became richly populated with refugees who had become displaced in Europe and subsequently a culturally rich community was established. Musicians, writers, academics, medical practitioners, psychoanalysts among others established their home in North London and remain there today.

Both countries were chosen for this research because they are significantly different in language, history and culture and yet are both 'Middle European' so that it is possible to compare and explore the differences. They also share similarities and therefore it is possible to compare how individuals from these two countries display objects in the principal living room as they are among cultures that share the use of the room for significant display. Although the study consists of predominantly Jewish informants the sample was random and restricted to availability and the research predominantly focuses on experiences of 'displacement' and the effects on subsequent generations. The re-making of personal worlds for migrants underlies the character of their creative work and creates significance for successive generations in their creation of their personal habitat.

Informants initially completed a questionnaire to establish basic factual information concerning the life histories of informants before commencing the interviews. This allowed the interviews to focus on personal and emotional responses to the living room environment. Generally the informant referred to specific objects and the objects were described with reference to past memories. It is at this stage that the common meanings attached to objects become less relevant as personal significance is discussed. During the course of the two-hour interviews a relationship with informants was established, revealing more complicated relationships with objects that were often not present in the room but hidden or lost. Informant intentions during dialogue, body language, movement are explored to identify elements not verbally communicated during the interview. These elements rely on the relationship between the interviewer and informant that requires a level of trust and friendship to be established.

Data was analysed to explore the patterns that emerged concerning different configurations of object and furniture that are used by different groups of informants and how the significance of objects changes according to their placement in the living room. The placement of the object in the living room defines the informants’ relationship with the object and the way the individual wants to represent themselves to others.

Analysis of the evidence presented by these respondents shows that both the perceived qualities of the object itself and its placement by the subject are used to layer memories. The significance of those memories is defined by hiding or postponing interaction with objects that evoke complex emotions. By placing them aside, like secret letters kept in a hidden compartment in a bureau, the confrontation of difficult emotions can be postponed.

The Layers of Memory Attached to Significant Objects

Objects may be arranged in prominent positions in the living room to emphasise their importance to both the individual and a visitor, and these objects often conform to accepted social codes. For example, family portraits may be displayed in a prominent position on a shelf above the fireplace, to be seen by others.\footnote{Photographs may be used to disguise hidden meanings, as the image of the 'smiling family' may be far removed from the reality.\footnote{The 'making' of the objects is that which is displayed to others, the 'unmaking' is the individual's, often sub-conscious, continually changing and developing relationship and physical interaction with material things.}} Informant M displays one photograph among a cluster on a side table of herself, husband and two young sons taken just before the family returned to Poland. Her late husband was born in Poland and was forced to leave during the Second World War due to persecution against the Jewish population. He subsequently lived in Belgium and eventually settled in London where he married Informant M whose parents were Polish. They lived in a council flat and had sons but Informant M's husband did not believe in private ownership of property and subsequently since his death Informant M continues to live in this flat. He lost most of his family during the war but felt committed to his Polish identity and politics and this initiated his desire to live in Poland in the sixties. The family group with the husband and wife on either side of two young boys appear confident and happy. In reality, Informant M remembers her fear of her enforced migration to Poland, their failure at making a new life in Poland and subsequent return to London.
Jules didn't like houses so we lived in a flat and I loathed it, I was brought up in a house, in the summer it was claustrophobic. When we came back from Poland we were saving up to buy a house and then this flat cropped up and I knew I was never going to get my wish. I would have been much better off financially if we would have bought; but Jules felt that he'd rather not live in a house he could not afford, it's a silly thing to do, to pay rent all your life. In retrospect he was frightened to take on the responsibility, he was a very insecure person; you could easily shatter his confidence. He'd suffered, he'd lost his mother at six and been brought up mainly by an older sister who he adored and she died, perished in Poland. She was married, she had had a little girl, I had a lock of her hair, I don't know what happened to it. His brother survived but his wife perished coming out of Belgium on a truck, but the men walked across at the time of Dunkirk, I mean all these terrible experiences, we can think how lucky we are.

The diversity of the objects brought from a different cultural environment show the complexity of the migrant's feelings towards the divergence of their past and present experiences. Although their life experiences are significantly divided they also merge into one, as objects and furniture may both refer to their childhoods in a different cultural environment while simultaneously providing more recent memories of events and relationships with people up to the present. The layering of memories attached to objects allows for the simultaneous recall of different memories through physical and visual interaction with specific objects.

Hidden objects or objects that have hidden meanings attached to them may be found predominantly around the perimeters of the room: the exception being Persian rugs that have hidden meanings attached to them. These rugs are obviously placed centrally in the living room of the homes of older Czechoslovakian and Polish informants. An example of this can be seen in the experience of Informant D who is seventy years of age and lives alone in the same house in which she and her husband brought up their two children. She was born in Prague but her parents sent her to an aunt in Ireland on the Kindertransport to avoid Nazi persecution. Subsequently her family perished in a concentration camp and she eventually left her aunt's home in Ireland to marry and live in London. Informant D's Persian rug displayed in the centre of her living room reminds her of different stages in her past; her life with her late aunt who was like a mother to her, the gift of the rug from her aunt as a wedding present to her, her feelings of loss when her aunt died. The rug also reminds her of leaving Ireland, subsequently entering a new phase by moving to London, marrying and having a family and presently, during the interview, her concern that the rug needed repairing. Every time she walks into the living room not all these memories will surface, but the rug is the key to her memories, just like the title of a book evokes a sense of content and the memory of having read the book, without actually remembering every detail.

I like the carpet. It's an old Persian one and we had old Persian ones at home. Somebody bought it for me, my aunt who brought me up, we bought it together, I lived with her. I lived in Ireland until I got married and moved to London when I got married, I hated it. I liked Ireland, I like the country, I didn't like London at all, terrible, I felt claustrophobic.

Religious artefacts that have been inherited by the individual may be hidden away in a cabinet because the informant does not actually like the physical appearance of these objects. If they have been inherited, they may serve to remind the informants of that which they may be trying to reject, their cultural or religious inheritance. They are displayed in a cabinet because their physical structure signifies cultural and religious inheritance that may be used to hide layers of personal significance. Alternatively these objects are hidden because the real meanings attached to these objects are too painful for the individual to display in their living room and they do not wish to be constantly reminded. These objects are hidden so that the informant cannot be taken by surprise and therefore will consciously decide when interaction with the object is appropriate. For example, an elderly, male informant keeps the candlesticks he inherited from his late parents hidden in a cabinet. They were originally displayed and used by his late wife and himself, but now he lives alone he only brings them out occasionally because they remind him of a female dominated ritual which presently only serves to focus on his life alone in the house which he once shared with his wife and family.

As this previous example has shown, objects are often hidden because the informant has an ambivalent relationship with them and the hiding may act as an expression of denial. They are also hidden because they are not used to communicate to others; the dialogue with the hidden object is private and used for private moments to refer back to and remember deceased relatives or partners. Informant R keeps a book hidden in a cabinet in which he is able to trace his ancestry and connections to Scottish royalty. During the interview Informant R opened a glass cabinet full of books and brought out his most precious hidden object, opening the page at a genealogical chart that demonstrates his ancestral lineage.
It may have little to do with what I am like as an individual, but I spend time thinking about it so it must have some kind of effect. I think about Scottish things connected with the country and one thinks about one's name and so on and its connection with the country. It gives one too much confidence, pride in one's family and national connections, because the family were Scottish standard bearers and were present at all the Scottish battles.

The inherited religious or cultural artefact may be the only repository from the past to enable the children and grandchildren of migrants to try to piece together their ancestry through the objects that have survived. These inherited objects may be placed in a cupboard because the informant does not personally like these objects, but they are unable to let go of the past. The existence of the object may one day help them to understand more about themselves, the object acting as a key to enter past worlds. While certain objects may concretise a relation between common cultural and biological inheritance and personal experience of migration, when the key objects/archetypes appear in the homes of the grandchildren of migrants who have no direct experience of their ancestors' cultural identity, they are defined anew, and may be used to refer to 'inherent' trans-generational experience. Inherited objects may be the only repositories of a lost cultural heritage linking the individual to deceased parents or grand parents. The relationship the individual establishes with inherited objects may be complicated by their inability to personally experience parent culture but also by their desire to establish their own personal cultural identity and create their own futures.

An inherited art deco china cabinet stands in the corner of the living room of the home that Informant S shares with her husband and young family. Most of the objects displayed within it belonged to deceased relatives, china, glass, old photograph albums and religious artefacts are displayed in the same way as they appeared in her late mother's home. A way of life, which belonged to the informant's childhood, is represented in the contents of the cabinet. Photograph albums are displayed, full of images of Russian relatives who have long since perished in several wars, including the Russian Revolution and Hitler's invasion of Poland. Objects that represent the early-married life of her late parents, china tea sets and cut glass cocktail glasses acknowledge a lifestyle that has disappeared. Inherited objects are not chosen but forced upon the informant and represent a cultural or religious inheritance behind which personal significance is usefully hidden. Informant S explained that objects are hidden in the cabinet because they provoke memories of the past that support a sense of identity linking the

informant with their cultural or religious inheritance; they also provoke feelings of temporality and loss as the informant enters the void between deceased ancestors and the present.

The most significant example of the importance of the object as sustaining people through their lives, is that of refugees who are now elderly and continue to furnish their living rooms in the style of their lost childhood homes. They use objects, even if they are replaced objects, to enable them to continually remember and refer to the past in order to live comfortably in the present. Refugees often lose the language of their thoughts and may be lost in translation. Objects serve as a link between two cultures because they are a more abstract form of communication than words.

Informant D displays her silver ornaments on a shelf above the radiator, not quite in view when entering the room. Her mother packed these objects into her suitcase when she left Prague forever on the Kindertransport and they are the only objects she has left from her lost family. They are slightly hidden because they are still anxious that they were brought into England illegally, the ornaments are 'sustaining' but they subconsciously make her feel uneasy, for she has lost her country of birth, her parents and family, and may never really feel 'at home' again. She expresses fear when describing these objects and asks me to turn the tape recorder off during the interview, as she is scared that somebody might discover that these objects were smuggled in illegally.

That's my husband's clock, it was again a very old clock, brought from his house, he was an only child, those figurines were a wedding present from somebody, who knows? I brought nothing over, you couldn't on the children's transport, you couldn't carry anything. The silver came from home; most of it, it came from Prague, I had a trunk sent and I had better not talk about it (informant D became very nervous when describing how these objects came to England). That was amongst the clothes etc. ... managed to get quite a lot of (at this point she asked me to turn the tape off.)

The photographs of her family that are hidden in a drawer by her bed are so private and evoke such painful memories, that they cannot be displayed. In this respect the most important of these 'sustaining' objects is the one which is hidden. The object that is hidden need not be disguised, as the act of 'hiding' is a greater form of disguise. The hidden object cannot take the informant by surprise, the process of hiding enables the individual to refer to the object at a chosen, often private moment, and it serves as the catalyst for poignant memories.
Informants who have experienced loss will use the process of hiding as a way of communicating with the past and as a form of self-identity. Gradually, they refer to the hidden object less as the period of bereavement moves further into the past; whereas the process of arranging and displaying objects plays a significant role in reflecting the way the individual appears to organise thoughts and memories. Objects on display denote meanings within their physical structure, which concatenate layers of hidden meanings and significance; these denoted meanings form the basis of object choice and display. People use the arrangement of objects as a form of personal expression by allowing public meanings attached to chosen objects to disguise ‘private’ meaning.

Objects that symbolise loss are frequently hidden whereas objects that are an expression of happiness and success are displayed in primary positions. In this culture death is rarely seen and more frequently hidden. The ceremonies surrounding the rituals of burials provide flowers to symbolise the continuity of life and the reality of death: the dead body, is hidden in a coffin. Cultural influences dictate that the objects and images that surround death are hidden in the home. Family photographs are generally displayed in the living room to demonstrate the informants’ relationship with family members and to memorialise happy events. Often the layers of memories attached to the image in the photograph may not always precipitate positive feelings but the images displayed are often conventionally acceptable. The following is an example of an exception as this specific photograph would not generally be displayed on the wall of the living room.

An unusual photograph that is displayed by one informant portrays her late husband holding his grandson during his ritual circumcision. The image is displayed in the living room because it supports an extraordinary story of survival: both the informant and her late husband were Auschwitz survivors and this image represents both their personal survival and the survival of an entire ‘race’. Informant A was born in Kniazow, Poland and as a child was forced to leave her home forever and spent the war in Auschwitz. She had been separated from her family and was unaware until the liberation of the camps and her return to Poland that her entire family had been murdered by the Nazis. In Poland she met her husband and they moved to Paris and decided to migrate to London to bring up a family in a religious Jewish community. At a personal level, it is the last photograph of her late husband that replaces the lost images of her murdered family. This image, which under normal circumstances would never conventionally be displayed, represents that which is now present as well as the lost past. Informant A proudly indicated the personal significance of the photograph of her late husband holding her grandson during his ritual circumcision and the layers of memories this image evokes for her personally. ‘With my husband, yes.

My son has to make a picture which he is very proud of. This is just before my husband died. My son tells his son all the time about it.’ The hiding of the object separates the object into public and private domains and the existence of the hidden object, which when discovered during in-depth interviews was the object that the individual would try to retrieve if they had to leave their house suddenly, proved that the object itself materially supports the self and the act of hiding was part of the process of separating and integrating a personal world.

One informant, who lost her home in a fire in which everything was destroyed, comments on how this has affected her identity so profoundly that for many years she felt totally disoriented. She has now rebuilt her home and replaced objects and furniture, almost exactly as her original house appeared; but she will never replace the family albums, which record her sons as children. The loss is enormous, she can still see the images in her head but the absence of these albums means that there is always something missing in her living room.

Czechoslovakian refugees, over seventy five years of age, all hid photographs and letters from their parents who perished in concentration camps. These objects are often the only material evidence to survive their childhood. These hidden objects link them to a past and a point in time, the annihilation of their families, loss of homeland and subsequently their childhood. They have been traumatised by these events in a way which does not allow them to use these hidden objects as a way of rationalising the past in order to move forward, but instead leaves them with the residue of the past which they find incomprehensible. The existence of these objects and images is still used as a way of condensing their life experiences in order to retain a sense of self identity, even when informants find events in their past incomprehensible.15

Those informants whose partners/relatives died of natural causes (unlike those mentioned previously who suffered the devastation of knowing that their close ones were murdered) have established a relationship with these hidden images, objects which continually changes and develop. The deceased remain, as they were, locked in time, whereas the individual is constantly changing. Therefore the relationship they have with these objects is in constant flux; they often refer to these hidden objects with warmth and humour as if these objects (meaning the deceased) have found a permanent but comfortable place in their inner lives. They no longer represent bereavement but act as props for their personal growth.

Informant G came from a small village in Cyprus and left after her marriage to live in London although her husband returned to Cyprus for extended periods leaving her with a large family to care and provide for. After her husband’s death she lived with her daughter, son-in-law and
children and occupied a kitchen and an upstairs bedroom. Later, unable to physically manage the stairs, she lived in a room downstairs among all her photographs and possessions. She never learnt to speak English and therefore spent her time with family and friends. Informant G hides a lace curtain in her cupboard that she embroidered for her wedding. The curtain represents her gift at being excellent at needlework and symbolises her married life, her children. The curtain is not used, therefore, but put away and often reflected upon as the repository of her past life in a different cultural environment. It represents the loss of country of birth, but also serves to remind her of whom she is, her special gifts and where she comes from. These are all positive aspects of the role of the hidden object, that of self-enrichment and the object supporting the individual through the process of self-discovery and personal identity. Informant G took the curtain out of her cupboard and proudly held it up for me to photograph.

This is something I got for my dowry. I made this before I was married. It's 55 years old. I did it myself, you hang it around your bed. It might have got stolen if I left it there. There is a sheet the same but I brought it all. When a couple are sleeping, these had to be out of silk, that was the fashion. It had to be very good silk. They wanted to sell this because they are expensive now. But I won't sell it ... I made this and my parents were very poor and it is important to me for that reason. It reminds me of my childhood and all the pain I went through doing all this, because I worked all day so that we could eat at night. I made this for my dowry.

Informant G is now deceased and her daughter has placed all her mother's photographs and religious artefacts alongside the lace curtain in a cupboard. The process of hiding these objects is her daughter's way of dealing with the finality of death and to find meaning in her own past through the process of migration. The past is separated from the present through the act of 'hiding', just as her mother's personal history is now separated from her own. Personal enrichment through knowing the faces of ancestors is significant in contrast to those who do not possess photographs from the past and feel a profound sense of loss of family and identity. Informant A describes how her most terrible loss as she ages are the fading memories of the images of her murdered family as there are no photographs or portraits to act as a catalyst for memory.

The arrangement of objects in the living room environment is a self-conscious process in which objects are positioned for the effect they may have on the self and others. That which is hidden is significantly absent, therefore the objects displayed refer to a layer of meaning which can be physically integrated into a generally socially accepted home environment. Hiding is a conscious process of omission, hidden objects are delegated to a deeper internal layer, but are not sub-consciously hidden as the hiding of an object is a very conscious physical process: it does not happen by chance. In-depth interviews reveal that the informant is conscious of why they have displayed objects and talk extensively about the personal significance of individual objects but also reveal different layers of significance attached to objects. It becomes evident that the object that is hidden has the capacity to evoke experience. Informant O displays two silver thimbles on a shelf, which were the only objects she has inherited from her mother. This is the object of her childhood that should represent her dependency on her mother and a warm nurturing relationship; these are meanings we generally understand as representing memories of parents. The thimbles represent her father's trade as a tailor and how her mother used these thimbles to finish off seams on garments. The thimble is used by the informant to articulate her feelings of resentment towards her mother for her lack of mothering. Her mother pawned her wedding ring and all other objects because she needed money to spend on herself. It is also the reminder that she has no objects from her father who died when she was a child and who she loved deeply.

These thimbles ironically represent the lack of objects given to her by her mother, but prove that she succeeded in nurturing two sons and continues to do so even though she was not personally nurtured by a parent. These thimbles remind her that she never really loved her mother, although they are displayed because she misses her and wishes to remember her. They are placed between the photographs of her adult sons in some ways to prove that she is deeply involved in her children, which has ultimately given them confidence to succeed (defying her mother's lack of nurturing).

Informant L now lives alone in a flat she once shared with her parents and husband who have subsequently passed away. Her family were religious Jews and she still carries on the traditions and her flat has not changed since the fifties. The rooms are full of furniture, china, and silverware and although she rarely uses the objects, they remind her of the life she has lost, with her husband and her mother living in this flat in the fifties. Her family were refugees from Germany and they constantly entertained all the young refugees who lived in the locality. The objects are preserved as they were but the livelihood of people eating and talking has long gone. The objects are repositories of the past but, in her memories, the objects incorporate hidden objects that come to life through her dialogue. The actual hidden object is one that is kept in the kitchen; a chopping board and knife would not conventionally be displayed. Informant L brings it out of the cupboard to demonstrate her mother making noodles and rolling out dough. Through
her interaction with these utensils, the sounds and smells of her mother’s busy cooking fills the silence of the living room as she describes her late mother. The object represents what was; it is hidden because she does not attempt to make it appear to look as though it refers in any way to the present. Informant L places the chopping board and knife on her Persian rug and emotionally describes her memories of her late mother.

My mother was very, very house proud, she never stopped working at home. It was never clean enough, she was a great housewife, you are talking and she has created a meal out of nothing, on Thursday, she started to prepare for Shabbat, she made kuchen, she made her own noodles and she rolled it out, and she had a white cloth and she used to put the cloth on the table and rolled out the dough, and then it got dried out she chopped the noodles, she made broad noodles, narrow noodles, squares. She made kuchen with six plait{s}, that was every week ... when she made chopped liver it was all hand chopped the fish the same, all the smells and the cakes, she loved cooking, I miss it all.

Some objects that have an obvious, figurative meaning, through their structure, for example Informant N’s grand piano, may be displayed with the certain confidence that outsiders will not be able to access the hidden layers of meaning. His memories of his late wife playing the piano are evoked by the physical presence of the piano, not only through evoking memories of her music but memories of making the music occur. The grand piano belonged to Informant N’s late wife and has not been played since; it evokes happy memories but also reminds him of her loneliness and loss. The piano stands in the room almost waiting for her return, the lid tightly closed on the keys. Only Informant N could conjure these precise memories which refer to his relationship with his deceased partner.

Conclusion

The hidden object may literally refer to the object that is missing, which has been lost in the past but remains in the informant’s memory. The object that is missing may also affect the arrangement and choice of objects displayed in the physical world. Informants who lost their childhood homes and were displaced have furnished and arranged objects in their living rooms that almost exactly replicate their childhood homes before 1945. This is exemplified by Informants A, D and L who have replicated the living rooms of their lost childhoods in Czechoslovakia and Poland. Younger informants also display objects that refer to their childhood homes but these are often hidden or placed in a less prominent position in the living room. The china cabinet belonging to Informant S demonstrates the need to place objects that trigger complicated emotions slightly out of sight. Memories of objects affect the way individuals relate to the world of objects in adulthood as every interaction with the physicality of things is memorised in the body and subsequently re-enacted.

The placement of the object in the living room defines the informants’ relationship with the object and therefore those placed in prominent positions are displayed for others to see. Informant A displays the photograph of her late husband holding her grandson during his ritual circumcision because she is proud of this significant event. The photograph is both public and private as she associates many layers of memories and significance with the image; whereas objects placed in cabinets on high shelves are not used as a focal point in the room. The reason for this varies, but often the emphasis is placed on uncertainty; the informant does not want to communicate something immediately to those entering the room, although that which is private is ultimately completely hidden.

The object that is physically hidden is that which has been de-materialised, so that the memories it represents are much more significant than the physicality of the object. Many informants who had lost close relatives or partners kept images and letters hidden for private contemplation. Informant D hides the photograph of her murdered family in a drawer by her bed and Informant N hides his late wife’s passport and letters for private contemplation. The hidden object can also be found in the object that is present in the room, through layers of hidden meanings the hidden object emerges. Persian rugs displayed in the centre of the living rooms of Informants A, D and N all remind the informants of their childhood homes in different cultural environments. The layers of individual memory attached to these rugs weave unique personal histories that precipitate different layers of memories and emotions for each individual. The process of arranging objects in the living room mirrors the way memories and experiences are organized as sustaining a sense of ‘self’. Although the process initially appears subconscious and self-defining, it is used as an expression of creative empowerment that each individual has over their immediate environment. This form of display may usefully disguise reality whereas objects that provoke ambiguous feelings are placed in less prominent positions and those that are used for private contemplation are often hidden.
Appendix - Short Synopsis of Informants' Life Histories.

Informant A

Informant A lives in her own home but only uses the top floor as a 'live-in' help lives on the ground floor. She is over 70 years of age and is presently recovering from heart surgery. Her husband died a few years ago and her married children and grandchildren live locally. Born in Krakow, Poland, she was forced to leave her home forever as a child. She spent the war in Auschwitz and after the liberation of the camps returned to Poland only to discover that she was the sole survivor of her family. In Poland she met her husband and they lived in Paris but later moved to London in order to bring up her children in a 'Jewish Community'.

Informant D

Informant D is 76 years of age, Jewish and lives alone in the same home in which her late husband and herself brought up two children. She was born in Prague but her parents sent her to Ireland as a child on the Kindertransport to avoid Nazi persecution. Subsequently all her family perished in camp and she eventually left her aunt’s home in Ireland to marry and live in London. She worked as a medical secretary and is now retired but helps at the local hospice.

Informant G

Informant G was over 75 years of age when interviewed, she has now passed away. Subsequently I have spoken to her daughter concerning her own hidden objects that comprise of those she has inherited from her late mother. Informant G came from a small village in Cyprus, which she left after her marriage to live in London. Her husband often returned to Cyprus leaving her with a large family to look after. After her husband’s death she lived with her daughter and son-in-law and grandchildren and occupied a kitchen and a bedroom upstairs. Later, unable to physically manage the stairs, she lived in a room downstairs among all her photographs and possessions. She never learnt to speak a word of English and therefore spent her time with family and friends.

Informant L

Informant L who is 79 years old was born in Germany but left with her parents to come to London after Kristallnacht due to Nazi persecution. She now lives alone in the flat she once shared with her parents and husband who have subsequently passed away. Her family were religious Jews and she still carries on the traditions and her flat has not changed since the fifties.

Informant M

Informant M was born in London, although her parents were Polish and her late husband was born in Poland. She is eighty years of age and lives alone in a council flat but enjoys good health and a busy social life. Her late husband and herself were Jewish by birth and she continues to practice Judaism whereas he rejected religion due to his communist beliefs. Both their sons have married Christian women and no longer practice any faith. Informant M has always enjoyed her cultural heritage and has subsequently been more involved in cultural and religious activities since her husband died.

Informant N

Informant N is 78 and was born in London just after his parents emigrated from Poland. Brought up in a traditional Jewish environment he continues to practice his inherited traditions. He has many children and grandchildren from two marriages, but lives alone in the house he shared with his second wife who is now deceased.

Informant O

Informant O is in her mid-seventies and lives alone with her husband in the same house in which they brought up their two sons who are now married and have families of their own. Her parents came from Poland but her father died when she was young and she virtually brought up her younger brother.

Informant R

Informant R is in his sixties and was born in Scotland and is very proud of his Scottish ancestry. He moved to London as a young adult and met and married his German wife and they have lived in the same house all their married life. They have four adult children who spasmodically return home to stay for extended periods of time.
Informant S

Informant S is 40, Jewish and shares the family home with her husband and three children. Her parents were born in London although her grandparents were born in Russia and Poland and came to Britain as young adults. Informant S continues Jewish customs and traditions that she experienced in her home as a child although some of these traditions have changed encompassing Middle Eastern traditions since her husband’s parents were Syrian.

Informant T

Informant T is in her mid-forties and lives with her two sons and her husband. Her father was Polish and survived life in a concentration camp. Informant T has kept letters sent from her father from camp. The interview focuses on issues concerning her feelings of loss since a fire destroyed her old home and the memories of lost objects affect her profoundly.

Glossary of Terms

Balshatra (Yiddish) A woman capable of running her household effectively.
Shabbat (Hebrew) The Sabbath
Challah (Hebrew) Bread made with eggs and sugar is especially baked for the arrival of the Sabbath on Friday night.

Part IV

Irish Remembrances and Representations