The travelling furniture: materialised experiences of living in the Jewish diaspora

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When doing research on experiences of living as a Jew in Sweden I have found that diasporic belonging is often mirrored in the artefacts that are regarded by the narrators as meaningful and worthy of memorialising. This article aims to further explore this area and investigate how a Jewish woman, by the use of a set of bedroom furniture, positions herself in a Jewish diaspora while she simultaneously creates and maintains her Jewish identity. The article is based on interviews with, and a life story written by, a Jewish woman I call Rachel. The interviews and the written life story are a part of a larger body of oral and written narratives, collected from two different sources: interviews with Jewish women who have migrated to Sweden and The Jewish Memories, archived at the Nordic Museum in Stockholm (Nylund Skog 2009; 2010). The overall purpose of the project for which the material has been collected, is to investigate how memories of migration and experiences of living in a diaspora materialise in narratives (Nylund Skog 2008; 2011). Rachel is in her eighties; she is a widow with five children and eleven grandchildren and lives in the Swedish capital Stockholm. She was born in Austria in the 1920s, fled from the Nazis to England with her younger sister in the early 1940s, and later continued to Palestine. She lived for a while in the Middle East and came to Sweden in the 1950s.

I will start with a short resume of Rachel's life. Thereafter, I will explore the meaning (or the meanings) of a story about bedroom furniture that Rachel told me on our first meeting, and often mentioned afterwards. The story will serve as an illustrative example and starting point for an investigation into how material objects in narratives are used symbolically and imaginatively, as well as concretely. The main theoretical purpose of the article is to discuss how materiality and narrativity are related.

Rachel grew up in Vienna with her mother, father and a younger sister. Her father owned and managed a pharmaceutical factory; her mother was a violin player. German was the everyday language of the family, and the daily life was in many aspects that of a well-established Austrian bourgeois family. It was only

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on special occasions, such as the most important Jewish holidays, that the Jewish heritage of Rachel's family was visible and celebrated. Growing up Rachel therefore considered herself an Austrian. In accordance with many Holocaust survivors, she describes her childhood as a very happy one. She recalls moments with her bearded grandfather under a peach tree, her mother playing the violin behind glittering glass doors in a large Viennese apartment, her dedicated father by her sick-bed when she was suffering from a minor cold, as well as hours of ice skating to music.

When Rachel was in her teens, her life changed dramatically because of *Anschluss*, when Hitler annexed Austria and made the country part of the Nazi empire. Overnight Rachel was forbidden to enter certain places, sit on park benches, travel by bus, and go to the theatre and to school. After some time of growing misery and marginalisation in Vienna, Rachel and her sister were given the opportunity to escape from Austria with a children's train to England. Some years later they left England and continued to Palestine where the family was reunited. In her life story Rachel writes that her life began when she was twenty three. By that time she had met Aram, the man of her life and the father of her children. In the 1950s it was Aram's business that brought them to Sweden, where they came to settle in Stockholm.

Rachel does not have a homeland in the geographical sense. She has no wish to return to Austria, Israel or the Middle East. She feels at home in London, England, where several of her husband's relatives live, as well as in New York, USA, where two of her children have settled, but she does not want to live anywhere other than Stockholm. Despite this, she does not feel Swedish or at home in Sweden. Home for Rachel is not a geographical place, but a feeling of belonging connected to her family. In that sense, Rachel gives voice to experiences that she has in common with a growing number of people all over the world. In Sweden there are approximately one million people born in other countries (Olsson 1999, 14). This situation colours and gives meaning to the story about the bedroom furniture that Rachel told me at our first interview.

> **R:** It is a rather funny story. You know, mum and dad had a bedroom in Vienna that my father ordered. I will show you. I have parts here. And my mum did not like it. She was much more, a little bit more modern and she was more like me, you know. Aram's taste. And then, when they were going to move. They were going to move and packed everything in Vienna, she thought the bedroom. *That* bedroom, that one will never be able to have in another country, because it is so baroque.

One had such very large containers, you know, such container cars that were filled and sent to Trieste. At that time one could at least still take such things, not so much, but furniture and such, one could bring. And from Trieste my parents were going to see where they ended up, and then it should not be that hard. So it was sent away, and the old furniture was left, it was left by mum at her parents.

Then after came, the war with Italy began. Then the Germans took everything there was, everything that mum had sent away. And then, when she came back to Vienna, the only thing that was left was this furniture that she didn't like. Hahaha and I *love* it!

S: Because it reminds you of your childhood?

R: That's right, yes, and it is beautiful as well. At the moment it is too messy in the room, so I can't show you everything. I can show you some.

S: Yes.

R: And then, she had a small apartment, you know, two rooms. She furnished *every*thing with the furniture because there was a bed, a small sofa to lie on during the day, there was a breakfast table with chairs, there was a toilet table, and there was a very large wardrobe. It was two rooms.

S: Complete, then?

R: Complete, yes. That is how it was.

From the transcribed story it might seem as if I was given the opportunity to see the furniture that Rachel spoke about. That was not the case; Rachel only swept her hand in the direction of a room next to the one where the interview took place, and since I at the time did not fully understand the humour or the importance of the story, I did not insist on seeing the furniture. When I later started to think about the story and asked Rachel to see the furniture she did not want to show it to me. It was far too messy in the room where most of the furniture at the time was kept, she told me. I did not insist this time either. Finally, on yet another occasion five years after our first meeting, I was informed that I could see the furniture. The room had been cleaned, and at the moment housed one of Rachel's grandchildren.

The room where the furniture was kept is situated at the farthest end of a corridor that starts as a serving alley, and ends in a small hallway. We passed the dining room, the kitchen, where someone was busy cooking, a television room, where three grandchildren had gathered, walls dressed with bookshelves, several closed doors and finally we reached the small room (probably an old servant's chamber) where most of the bedroom furniture was kept. The furniture is painted in a light grey nuance, heavily decorated with ornamentation of flowers and

cherubs. The furniture consists of fifteen parts. At our visit a toilet table, some chairs, two bed ends, a cupboard for linen, a writing desk and a smaller cupboard were placed in the room.

Why did it take such a long time before I was invited to see the furniture? Why was it placed in such a remote part of the big apartment, despite the fact that Rachel said she loved it? Why did Rachel start the story by saying that her taste was similar to her mother's modern taste, and then end the story by saying that she loved the furniture that represented her father's baroque taste? And finally, why did Rachel tell me about the furniture in the genre of a humorous story? What is funny about the story?

In this paper I explore answers to these questions. But first I will briefly present the tradition of material culture that has influenced the analysis, as well as the theoretical basis of this paper.

Material culture and the materiality of narrativity

In Swedish ethnology and folkloristics there has always been an interest in artefacts, an interest connected to the development of the discipline and to museum objects and folklore collections. Initially the objects were regarded as physical artefacts and as symbolic representations. Today there is a renewed interest in material culture, and to the traditional research new questions are introduced, questions of how objects, in both the physical and imaginative respect, are given agency and are parts of larger processes of meaning production, in which the borders between subject and object are explored and questioned. These perspectives are represented by many renowned researchers such as the folklorist Henry Glassie and his research on the relations between storytelling and material culture (1999), the anthropologist Daniel Miller's work on the material aspects of consumer culture (1994; 2008), and the anthropologist Arjun Appadurai's research on the materiality of globalisation (1986). These are important sources of inspiration for this article since they, albeit in different ways, explore the material aspects of living in diasporas.

One reason for the growing interest in materiality is that traditionally researchers have been too concerned with the written word, relying on a hierarchy of knowledge that excludes perspectives and knowledge produced in ways other than writing. However, as Henry Glassie argues, the material can give corrective and other information than the written word (Glassie 1999). Material objects are therefore no longer considered lifeless artefacts. What we eat, how we dress and the things that we are surrounded by say something about our place in society. They are symbolically charged and communicative.

The importance we place on an object is not fixed; it changes as the object is transported over time and place (O'Dell 2002, 26). Objects are given biographies when they are taken from one place to another, from one person to another. People also change by these processes; they change status and enter new or changed hierarchies of value (Appadurai 1986, 18). At the same time, as objects can alter meaning when they travel over time and place, they also have a capacity for storing and maintaining information (Frykman 2001, 91). Objects can keep the owners' feelings and transfer them to new owners. They can also adjust to their new owners' needs without losing their old meaning. In that way objects can serve as timeless containers for human emotions (Wettstein 2009, 29). Consequently, material objects do something with us and we with them (Silvén 2004, 23), an important argument for wanting to dissolve dichotomies such as object and subject, human and non-human, and instead place the relations between human and materiality at the centre of research (Latour 1999, 308; see also Latour 2007).

In this article I focus on the relationship between narrativity and materiality and consider them interrelated processes. Things create stories, stories give rise to objects. Objects are charged with meaning by stories (Gustafsson Reinius 2005), and stories are created with the help of things (Miller 2008). To let things talk, or talk through things, can be a way of avoiding painful memories, as well as keeping them (Wettstein 2009). Objects can also assist in expressing that which is hard, or perhaps impossible, to express orally or in writing (Jackson 2002). I argue that this is the case with the bedroom furniture in Rachel's stories. The furniture represents and symbolises that which for her is meaningful and important, but hard to express.

Since I first contacted Rachel and asked her for an interview, we have spent several hours recording her stories, hours when she has tried, in as nuanced a way as possible, to tell me how it was, and is, to live as a Jewish woman in a violent and changing world. For many years Rachel did not consider herself Jewish, but as she has become older her feeling for Jewishness, for her heritage and for where she belongs, has grown more and more important. I argue that this process, in which Rachel's Jewishness has gradually become more important, is mirrored in the rather funny story about the bedroom furniture. In the following I will pursue this argument and furthermore I will argue that the bedroom furniture symbolically represents and materialises Rachel's Jewish heritage.

The Jewish furniture

The bedroom furniture was bought and brought home to the Vienna apartment by Rachel's father, who was born a Jew. According to Rachel, he had a different and more old-fashioned taste than her mother, who was not born a Jew. The bedroom of the bourgeois Vienna apartment hosted the complete set of fifteen pieces, and seemed at the time to carry the same importance in the family's life as their Jewish heritage prior to *Anschluss*. It resided in the background out of the immediate eye of the stranger, but was still of importance for the private and procreative life of the family.

When Rachel's parents fled Vienna, the furniture was left behind and placed in the care of Rachel's mother's parents, who were not Jewish. In the story Rachel's mother acts as if she is able to choose whether to be Jewish or not, as if Jewishness is something that one could adopt or dismiss according to one's wishes. When leaving Vienna Rachel's mother did not want to be known as Jewish and left the furniture behind. According to the story the furniture (and symbolically the Jewish heritage) would not fit in any other country. When Rachel's mother years later returned to Vienna she used all of the furniture to furnish her two-bedroom apartment. Symbolically, then, the Jewish heritage dominated the apartment and defined the life of Rachel's mother.

Following the roles of the furniture and the places where it has been kept, we can see that there is an obvious parallelism between the furniture and the Jewish heritage, and that the furniture in the story represents and/or replaces Jewishness, which might be harder to pinpoint and describe orally. We can also see that the growing importance of the furniture in the story is comparable to the growing importance of the Jewish heritage in Rachel's life. Further aspects that strengthen such an interpretation are that it is possible for Rachel to love and consider the furniture beautiful, despite the fact that it does not represent her taste. It is not the aesthetic dimensions that decide a Jewish heritage. The beauty of the furniture resides somewhere other than in its appearance.

Rachel also puts a lot of thought into choosing when, and under what circumstance, I am to see the furniture. It is as if she wants to control how I encounter and understand her Jewish heritage, symbolically and materially represented by the furniture. When I finally get to see it, it is placed at the farthest end of a corridor, in a small room, at the time used by one of Rachel's grandchildren. It is not spread all over the apartment; it is not in the bedroom or in a basement or a storage room. Where the furniture is placed and what is put in and on it, does tell a lot about the meaning given to it. And it is Rachel's family and relatives who are present on the furniture, in the form of photographs and other memorials,

and inside it, in the form of letters, documents and artefacts. All of these are things that through Rachel's stories come to gain meaning, and are placed in the Jewish family story, which is so important and defining for Rachel's life. One example of such an item is a small manicure case. Rachel showed me the case on the same occasion when I was shown the furniture. When I was about to leave the servant's chambers she ushered me into the dining room where she carefully and with slightly trembling hands opened the case. It is in leather and skilfully made with small compartments for nail polish, cuticle cream, cotton buds, a nail file and a pair of very small scissors. Marked in the leather a hotel logotype is barely visible. The case is from a hotel in Paris, which Rachel and her husband Aram visited in the early fifties. Rachel told me that she has kept the case because it reminds her of happy times, of the first time when she and Aram were together with his entire family.

As is shown by Rachel's story the furniture has changed its importance when it has moved around, at the same time as it has kept its meaning. It seems as if it has never fit easily in the life of its owner. When I asked Rachel's daughter why the furniture was placed at the far end of Rachel's apartment, she answered me with a laugh and said it is because it is obvious it does not fit anywhere. The furniture is just too much, she concluded. During the interviews Rachel said that she thought the furniture was too large and demanding, and that it had too many pieces. In that perspective the Jewish heritage symbolically appears overwhelming and as impossible to store and successfully hide. Sooner or later it will be exposed, if one is to trust Rachel's story in which her mother's life in the end was totally invaded by the furniture.

The diasporic furniture

When I analyse Rachel's written life story elsewhere, I argue that it is to be understood as one of the stories that reproduces the Jewish diaspora (Nylund Skog 2011; 2012). Rachel's country of origin or homeland (if such exists) is in the diaspora – a mythical place of no return, a place that does not exist in any other way than in the mythical world (Brah 1997, 192; see also McLeod 2000, 210–211). I would like to argue that the furniture is a materialisation of the homeland, of a place of belonging. In Rachel's story the furniture carries all the conflicting feelings of belonging and marginalisation, of hiding and exposing as the Jewish homeland Zion in the diaspora. The circumstances under which the story was told strengthen such an interpretation.

Rachel told her story about the furniture when we, during the first interview, talked about how she and her husband Aram settled in Sweden. In the following

quote we see how she then placed herself, and consequently also the furniture, in the Jewish diaspora.

S: But a big part of Aram's family ended up in London. You were not considering going there to live?

R: There was a question about it, but I still wonder if Aram did not think that it was too many relatives there. He wanted to be a little free, (**S:** Yes.) free himself from the pressure of the family. On the other hand, I would have appreciated if *my* family had been close by. You know, we are spread all over the world, those who survived, in Australia, in Canada, in France, in Israel. I am here.

S: But your mother came, when she became older?

R: Yes, she came here. It was that daddy; you know nineteen hundred and forty seven, after the war, at first opportunity he wanted to go back to Vienna. And then it was a group of Austrian Jews that went back to Vienna and everybody got what they owned before, *almost*, everything that was in the British, French or American zone. My daddy's property was in the Russian zone. So we got nothing and when we finally got something, they had emptied the whole factory of all its valuable machines, so it was an EMPTY shell (**S:** Hmm.) that they got nothing for. For the land and an empty building.

S: Uhm.

R: So it was, I think he became very *disappointed*.

S: Yes.

R: In any case; he died at forty-nine, forty-nine years old (**S:** Oh.) from the consequences of the concentration camp. They had kicked him in the kidneys; he had constant bleedings and high blood pressure and everything that came with that. So he died because of what he had been through. Very much pain, you know. Forty-nine years. It is nothing.

S: No.

R: Nineteen forty eight, so he never got to meet Aram or the kids.

S: Tragic, but your mother stayed in Vienna?

R: Then she stayed in Vienna and then my sister was in the army in forty eight, but then she came. I think my mother went one more time to Israel. She stayed because she then, it was not finished yet with our property, so daddy died before (**S:** Uhum.) he knew that they had emptied the factory completely.

S: Maybe it was for the best.

R: Yes, that's so, and mummy lived then in Vienna. It is a rather funny story.

Here it becomes obvious that the rather funny story about the bedroom furniture is to be considered as part of Rachel's family story and as yet another of the narratives that keeps the diaspora alive and intact. Here Rachel describes her father's early death and that the family did not have any property left after the war. There was nothing material left to inherit. Only an empty shell, she says, with a loud voice. The only thing left to fill the empty shell with was the bedroom furniture. It seems the only stable thing in a changing world.

This passage offers a possible answer to the question of why Rachel considers the story a funny one. Exactly what it is that is funny about it is hard to understand. One suggestion is that perhaps humour stems from the impossible task for her mother to get rid of the furniture, although she tried to leave it behind. Another suggestion is that there were so many and large pieces that it was enough to fill a whole apartment. A third suggestion why the story is rather funny is connected to the moral of the story, which I argue is about Jewish heritage. The story says that it is not possible to escape, hide or ignore Jewish heritage. It is not something that you can shake off and leave behind, and if you do, it comes back and overwhelms you, as the furniture did with Rachel's mother in the story.

Diasporas are created by objects, but also by the objects' stories. When bodies and objects reappear they gain new shapes and meanings (Ahmed 2011, 163–164). When Rachel's mother returned to Austria, the bedroom furniture surely represented a different meaning from when she left the country. It was after the death of Rachel's father that her mother furnished an entire two-bedroom apartment with the bedroom furniture. Considering that objects have an ability to remind us of absent human experiences as embodied (Gustafsson Reinius 2008, 39), it is not unlikely that the furniture at that time came to fill out some of the empty (Jewish) space left behind by the father's death.

During an interview five years after the first one, Rachel again mentioned the bedroom furniture. Then I asked her how she has created a home for herself.

> **R:** There was nothing when we moved, except that furniture, the bedroom furniture that my mother did not like. It was there. Really, it is true. Enormously large. You will see them one time. (**S:** Yes, some time.) Yes, and it did not fit in the modern society. That she had to leave behind in Austria, during those circumstances that I told you about before. Then, she thought it was just as well to leave them in Vienna, in the care of her parents and they should guard them. They succeeded. (**S:** Mm.) Then, when mother came back to Vienna, she had nothing. She rented an apartment and could actually furnish the whole apartment with the bedroom furniture. Hahaha, (**S:** Haha.) so that is that, also when I did not have the possibility.

S: When did it come here? How did it come here? When did it come to Sweden, the furniture?

R: When mother moved here later.

S: So then it came?

R: And then there was room for it. Then it came. (**S:** Yes.) They were left in Vienna (**S:** Yes.) and mother furnished the apartment with them, but I think that she didn't have room for the large wardrobe. But anyway, my husband helped her bring all of it here. She furnished her small apartment, and the rest we kept in the basement, and now I have brought it all up.

If the furniture for Rachel's mother came to symbolise and embody her dead husband, the same seems to be the case with Rachel. After her husband Aram's death she brought all the pieces of the bedroom furniture together in her big apartment. The furniture offers and offered both women a safe place of belonging. By bringing the furniture together, they also symbolically gather dispersed Jewish relatives in one place, both emphasising and diminishing the conditions and experiences of living in a diaspora. That the bedroom furniture consists of fifteen pieces is not without importance. The many parts make a physical dispersion possible and accentuate the parallel between the bedroom furniture and the Jewish relatives spread in geographical space. In the Jewish diaspora that Rachel depicts, people are connected not by place, but by stories of a shared past and future. The same is the case with the bedroom furniture.

The furniture connects people to past places, histories and genealogies, as well as reminding them of the absence of other people, places and environments (Ahmed 2011, 164). In the same manner as the homeland does not exist in any way other than in the mythical, the furniture cannot bring to life lost worlds, only conjure new ones. It carries stories connected to many different times and places that are not accessible in the present in any other way. It is in this sense that the bedroom furniture is diasporic.

Conclusion

Rachel's story about the bedroom furniture highlights many aspects of the interrelated processes of narrating and materialisation. It also illustrates the complexity of the process of materialisation itself. For example, I have shown here that the context defines objects, in this case the furniture, by the use of other objects, such as the photographs that are placed on the furniture or the letters and documents that are stored in them. Without these objects, and the stories connected to them, it is nothing more (or less) than bedroom furniture. The furniture here

functions as a timeless container for Jewish memories, but also as a catalyser for the stories of escape and travel that Rachel's family and relatives share.

One reason why it took such a long time before Rachel showed me the furniture is related to the part it plays in her life story. Had she shown it too early I might not have been able to see its importance and symbolic meaning, I might just have regarded them meaningless grey ornamented Austrian pre-war bourgeois pieces of furniture. This might also explain why the furniture is placed in such a remote part of the apartment; this makes it possible for Rachel (and her relatives) to tell their stories before showing the furniture, and in that manner control how they are considered. By emphasising that her taste is similar to her mother's, Rachel also maintains that the furniture should not be regarded by its appearance, an aspect that further strengthens my interpretation of the furniture as Jewish and diasporic.

Consequently, I argue that Rachel's hesitation to show me the furniture is connected to her wish to present her Jewish heritage and family story in a controllable and advantageous way. She wanted the room to be tidy and the furniture and the objects around it organised in a proper manner. Perhaps Rachel did not want the Jewishness to appear as chaotic and unorganised. She also charged the furniture with meaning by the well planned and careful presentation (Gustafsson Reinius 2005, 40). Furthermore, I do not think it was a coincident that I was allowed to see the furniture when the room was in use by one of Rachel's grandchildren. It was as if Rachel waited until a situation occurred when the Jewish heritage was in use to present it to me. It was not until such an occasion presented itself that I was introduced to the actual materiality of Rachel's rather funny story.

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