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**Book review:**

*The Exit Visa: A Family's Flight from Nazi Europe*, Sheila Rosenberg

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*The Exit Visa: A Family's Flight from Nazi Europe*, Sheila Rosenberg (London: I. B. Tauris, 2019), ISBN 978-1-78831-495-4, pp. 304, £20.

The events described in this intensely personal and – at the same time – politically instructive book took place more than 75 years ago: “the Holocaust” is in the process of becoming history, far removed from the daily lives of most readers, something for the history books. The generation of survivors will soon be gone. Museums and archives try to find new ways for the transmission of their stories, but it is hard to imagine how automated holograms could possibly replace the real human testimony and “continue the dialog between Holocaust survivors and learners far into the future” (USC Shoah Foundation). In this context, Sheila Rosenberg’s book about Hilda Schiff’s research into the history of her family represents a necessary form of intervention that appeals to the responsibility not of future but of current historians and journalists. The stories are still there – sometimes told but not written down, sometimes untold but preserved in letters, diaries, photographs, and other family documents. Many such documents are still kept in boxes in private households and have not (yet) found their way to accessible archives. All too often it is a matter of sheer luck or chance that somebody comes along and takes on the task of saving them, reading them, and using them for the continuation of the storytelling.

Recent conferences, research projects and publications (by Shirli Gilbert, Esther Saraga, Kathy Beinart, and others) have shown the potential of family letters as a source for our understanding of the manifold experiences and developments that are too lightly subsumed under the heading of “the Holocaust”. Most importantly, these documentary projects carry the stories of the Holocaust and of its complex memory forward into our own time. The narrator, Rosenberg, is therefore present in the book and relates to readers not just what has happened but also why it is important to continue the narrative. The book opens with a dramatic scene: “6 September 1942. A middle-aged Jewish man stands on the Swiss side of the border with Vichy France above Geneva.” The man had fled Vienna in November 1938 and been in Switzerland since then. He waited for his wife, saw her appear on the French side, called out to her, saw her walking towards him – until an official voice called out and she turned and went back, to be “lost forever” (p. 1). That was the story that Hilda, a

Kindertransportee who had been brought from Vienna to England, would hear from her father after they were reunited. It is the story of her mother, Toni Schiff, but it is also the story that Hilda later tried to research and to understand, first on her own and later with Rosenberg's help. As the latter writes in the prologue, it is the story of an individual family and at the same time "a European story" (p. 2), part of a larger, complex background that needs to be reconstructed in order to place the family story in its context.

The reconstruction begins with Hitler's "triumphant entry into Vienna" on 14 March 1938 (p. 7). A family's happiness is destroyed by the anti-Jewish persecution that immediately sets in, Hilda and her sister are brought to England, and one of the underlying emotions that run through the whole narrative is expressed in Hilda's regret "that she had no memory of their actual departure from Vienna and saying goodbye to her mother" (p. 11). Separated from her sister, Hilda grew up in London where she quickly learnt English. She received a number of letters from her mother, two of which, along with two small photographs, "remained Hilda's most treasured possessions for the rest of her life" (p. 15). In 1945, the sisters were reunited and then met their father, Moses Schiff, who had survived in Switzerland. He told them the story of the fateful meeting at the border, stressing the fact that he could not understand why their mother, Toni, failed to make "this leap to freedom" (p. 179).

It was only in the 1980s that Hilda began a journey of research – background reading, visiting archives, interviewing family members, travelling across Europe, to the United States and Israel – with the intention of finding out what had happened to her mother, and "as a pilgrimage to remember and honour her" (p. 31). From 1995 onwards, Rosenberg became part of this journey and she continued it after Hilda's death in 2010. Together, they "recreated" Toni Schiff's illegal border crossing from Germany into Belgium, where she had claimed political asylum. The account, based on archival documents, is interspersed with poems Hilda wrote: "This is the town in which you wrote those longing letters" – "Now I pace those self-same streets" (p. 98). From Switzerland, the father made attempts to be reunited with his wife, tried to find ways for both of them to get visas to Palestine or the US. After the German invasion, Toni Schiff, together with other aliens, was expelled to the region of Limburg. She experienced antisemitism in Belgium and was placed on the "Jodenregister" put together by the Association des Juifs en Belgique, an organization that, compelled to do so by the German occupation power,

collaborated with the authorities in the deportation of Jews from Belgium to the concentration camps in Eastern Europe.

Obviously, all the facts about the historical events are known – but the approach here differs from that of more traditional studies. We can see, step by step, how world history affected individuals and families, and we read about the historical facts from a contemporary perspective, for example, when Hilda and Sheila Rosenberg travel to Berlin and visit “the pleasant suburb of Wannsee” and “the villa where the conference had taken place” (p. 129). It forms part of Berlin’s memorial landscape and research literature (Mark Roseman’s book *The Villa, the Lake, the Meeting*) functions as a travel companion: history becomes part of the present day. The book thus moves continuously between the past and the present. We learn about Moses Schiff’s experiences in Switzerland, we read official documents and family letters in dialogue and, as the narrative moves towards that fateful day on the border, we find out about Toni Schiff’s efforts to enter Switzerland.

At a conference held in Oxford in 2000, Hilda presented a paper, “The Truths of Poetry” – a fitting title indeed since it took considerable imagination and empathy to find out, with the help of a Swiss researcher, that “the authority responsible for her [Toni Schiff’s] arrest and following deportation is clearly the French Vichy authority” (p. 182). As in the case of Walter Benjamin, there was no exit visa in Toni’s passport, and following her arrest she was interned in the camps of Rivesaltes and Drancy and deported from there to Auschwitz. In a poem, Hilda writes: “I was playing, I suppose, when it happened” (p. 247).

Does knowing what happened make it easier to commemorate and mourn? Is Auschwitz really the end of the “story”? A great deal has happened during the research process. Not least, a new and ongoing dialogue between family members has begun – between those who survived and now come to realize how the “long shadows” cast by the period from 1938 to 1945 affect their lives as well. The last words in this book are, again, given to poetry, to the impossible but necessary attempt to find words that express the impact of loss and displacement and the continuing dialogue between history and memory.

Joachim Schlör