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## Menachem Kaiser's Quest for Family Heirloom and the Aftermath of Historical Trauma

Menachem Kaiser's debut *Plunder: A Memoir of Family Property and Nazi Treasure* (2021), winner of the 2022 Sami Rohr Prize for Jewish Literature, is a third-generation account of a Jewish Canadian writer's multiple journeys to Poland, where his family, many of whom perished in the Holocaust, had once lived.<sup>1</sup> Speaking with writer Maia Ipp, who accompanied Kaiser on a trip to Poland, and Arielle Angel, editor of *Jewish Currents*, which published their conversation, Kaiser points out some generic limitations of the staple "3G (third-generation) memoir," such as its sentimental tenor and contrived sense of illumination experienced by a first-person narrator. "A lot of these 3G books are, I feel, stuck on that first stage of horror and grief," he notes, adding that readers:

want very personal stories with big, universal themes. They want to hear about someone who went somewhere and had a series of epiphanies. Often what gets neglected is geography [and although] there is a relationship with history..., if it's not anchored in the place, it gets very diffused. (Angel)

1 A Polish translation of *Plunder* was published in May 2023; a Dutch edition was published in 2021 and a German edition is forthcoming.

A generalized relationship to history bespeaks the “3G” memoir’s investment in postmemory (Hirsch) and, more specifically, in trauma transmitted from the generation who experienced the Holocaust first-hand to their children and grandchildren, for example, via lacunae of silence engulfing events and figures from the past. Attempts by third-generation vicarious witnesses to address trauma experienced by Holocaust survivors may prompt a problematic identification with them, an eventuality which should exact an obligation to mark the distance dividing contemporary writers from past actors and events (LaCapra). The genre is thus ridden with ethical and esthetic pitfalls, as Kaiser’s mocking mention of serial epiphanies suggests.

The “3G” memoir answers also to a different ethical imperative—and a related esthetic challenge—to instill and preserve an awareness of the Holocaust in those who may have only a tenuous personal connection to it, or no such connection at all. Difficulties posed by this challenge, which the passing of time makes increasingly common, have occasioned debates about the appropriateness of blockbusters such as Steven Spielberg’s *Schindler’s List* (1993), which lionizes non-Jewish Germans at the expense of Jewish background characters (Loshitzhky), and of such out-on-a-limb depictions as Roberto Begnini’s sentimental comedy *La vita è bella* (*Life Is Beautiful*, 1997) about a father heroically protecting his young son from knowledge that they are inmates in a Nazi camp (Gilman). How can contemporary representations of the Holocaust and of its aftermath, including those by second- and third-generation writers, avoid instrumentalizing historical trauma?

Finally, writers tracing their family members’ fate in the Holocaust face objective obstacles which may prevent them from learning about the past. How does one research events whose archive “has been demolished as a component of genocidal violence” so that, like Walter Benjamin in *Theses on the Philosophy of History*, one is “writing about the past when finding oneself among the debris of violence” (Navaro 163)? Yael Navaro suggests that writing in the aftermath of mass violence requires a “negative” methodology, one acknowledging the cognitive and ethical limitations of such a project.

Attuned to these challenges, Kaiser speculates that the “3G” memoir’s generic possibilities will likely be exhausted: “It could be that for the next 30 years, we’ll just have memoirs of people going to Poland” (Angel). Could these travelogues become less formulaic without losing sight of the Holocaust and of the aftermath of trauma? *Plunder* raises this very question and attempts an unexpected answer.

Kaiser’s memoir has at least two notable predecessors. While unacknowledged, they are important to mention because *Plunder* is a rhetorical tour de

force on a par with them. The similarity to Jonathan Safran Foer's novel *Everything Is Illuminated* (2002) lies in Kaiser's use of outrageous humor, especially when describing local helpers. For example, Kaiser's impressions of his lawyer, an elderly woman nicknamed the Killer, are unrelentingly comedic, as is her daughter and helper's misnomer, "forever book," a literal (mis)translation from Polish for mortgage register. To give another example, a scene in which Kaiser socializes with Nazi-era treasure hunters in Lower Silesia swiftly descends into slapstick as they all sit around a bonfire downing beers and shots while Menachem, whom they have nicknamed Manhattan, and who is himself drunk, attempts to have a meaningful conversation. Kaiser's humor exoticizes these locals, for example, by citing their imperfect English and their propensity for excessive drinking, in a manner reminiscent of Foer's work; both writers use humor to subvert the convention of a sentimental pilgrimage with its attendant epiphanies. *Plunder*, however, is nonfiction. This may make readers more interested in the story: "I do wonder if people are less patient and less receptive if you don't have a familial connection," Kaiser remarks (Angel). On the downside, writing nonfiction prevents him from simply inventing things; for example, little is learned about his long-dead grandfather, whose papers originate his quest. (Kaiser admits to creating a minor composite character, however, suggesting how easily the divide between fiction and nonfiction is crossed.)

Another prominent predecessor is Daniel Mendelsohn's monumental memoir *The Lost: The Search for Six of Six Million* (2006). Like Mendelsohn's account of his investigation into his ancestors' past, *Plunder* consists of twists and turns which read like a detective story. Moreover, like Mendelsohn, Kaiser interlaces his narrative with argumentative points drawn from the Judaic tradition, though he eschews Mendelsohn's erudite style.<sup>2</sup> For example, when noting the various blind alleys down which he goes again and again—mistakes that "put into relief and reinforce the distance between you and whatever or whoever it is you think you are connecting with... [and which thus] (e)xpose the fiction of sentimentalism,"—Kaiser compares a no-longer relevant narrative detail, in this case, a house which he mistook for the one that had belonged to his grandfather's family, to

an object that is *kadosh*, holy [but which] loses its holiness—like a Torah scroll that loses a couple of letters and thus becomes unusable—it does not then become spiritually meaningless, does not revert to a mundane

2 Mendelsohn is a classics scholar and author of a previous memoir *The Elusive Embrace* (1999) about his identity as a gay man, in which he draws on the ancient Greek tradition.

object; rather it becomes an object that once was holy, and must be treated accordingly: you cannot put it in the trash, you have to give it a proper burial. (Kaiser, *Plunder* 171)

Kaiser's investigative approach and his palimpsestic commentary are strikingly like Mendelsohn's, creating a sense of emotional and intellectual distance from the past.

What distinguishes Kaiser's work from his predecessors is meta-level critique of the "3G" genre as dependent on a market niche in which it prospers. This critique rings loud and clear even though multiple passages have apparently been excised. In the *Jewish Currents* conversation, aptly titled "Selling the Holocaust," Kaiser is forthcoming about the extent to which his original manuscript and the book that finally saw the light of day differ. Paradoxically, the reason behind the revisions, which he insists he does not regret, was commercial, "I've been warned not to say this, but I didn't go into this without careerist ambition," he admits. And with a nod toward his growing readership, he adds, "(a)t some point I came to terms with the fact that I'm not writing for me, even though it's my story" (Angel). Kaiser's acknowledgement and exploration of his own mixed motives for delving into a past indelibly marked by atrocities of the Holocaust—in particular, of motives which may be read as ulterior—make his memoir stand out. The very title, *Plunder: A Memoir of Family Property and Nazi Treasure*, speaks to his unusual approach. Kaiser opens with a description of his idyllic childhood but soon enough his close-knit extended family is rent apart by a conflict over inheritance and a wedge is driven between his father and his father's brother. In turn, Kaiser's subsequent decision to visit Poland is triggered by a sheaf of papers belonging to his long-dead grandfather, documenting the man's erstwhile attempt to obtain compensation for a house in Sosnowiec which his family had owned before the war. With copies of these documents in hand, Kaiser hires the Killer to help him win back the property, and his journey is launched.

A focus on property, rather than on more elusive ghosts of the past, distinguishes Kaiser's memoir from the usual pilgrimage plot. On the one hand, the stakes are raised because money is involved, and readers' interest is sparked in an unexpected way; on the other, emphasizing property chops away at the sentimental presumption of a vicarious identification with long-dead relatives. Instead of learning about their lives or the ways they died, Kaiser zeroes in on real estate, which seems, *prima facie*, the more palpable object. This deliberately crass focus makes his account more authentic by suggesting that the "3G" memoir is itself a business venture whose generic conventions obscure

the economic aspect. But the goal of reclaiming property proves more elusive than might be expected while it also produces some surprising results. As he tries to locate his family's house and attends to the painstakingly slow court proceedings, Kaiser meets others questing for objects from the past. He gets to know an informal community of people whose hobby it is to search for lost, abandoned, and hidden valuables, mostly dating to World War Two. He notes:

My experience with the treasure hunters ended up being very freeing: it put the blankness I felt toward my grandfather's story into relief and allowed me to be honest about my ambivalence. And the story got so weird that I felt I had no choice but to try and write it. (Angel)

Lower Silesia, where the treasure hunters operate, is thought to be rife with Nazi-era troves left behind by the retreating German forces and the fleeing German population. To illustrate, in 2015, Polish and international media were momentarily captivated by reports of a train supposedly hidden inside a mountain near the city of Wałbrzych, a former mining center which, pre-war, was called Waldenburg. The train reputedly contained gold and looted artworks, perhaps even the famed Amber Room, stolen by the Nazis from St. Petersburg and itself a veritable epitome of wartime trove. Ultimately, a frenzy of excavations yielded no result. Kaiser, who relates this anecdote, visits Wałbrzych because he is interested in a stupefying, if relatively little-known secret Nazi project called Riese (Giant), which the Third Reich undertook toward the end of the war. Riese is an uncompleted underground complex of enormous maze-like tunnels and chambers inside some mountains near Wałbrzych. It was built by Jewish slave laborers, inmates of the Gross-Rosen camps, most of whom died from extreme exertion combined with inhumane treatment and harsh conditions. The exact purpose of the project remains unknown. Parts of the Riese complex are now accessible to guided tours and it is at least somewhat likely that other parts remain undiscovered. Unsurprisingly, the Riese complex is of great interest to treasure hunters. The legend of a train filled with gold, hidden inside a mountain, relies in no small part on the existence of this maze of underground tunnels.

Kaiser meets the treasure hunters through a Polish nonfiction writer Joanna Lamparska, who has published extensively on alleged wartime troves, and who mentions Kaiser in her recent book, reciprocating his mention of her (Lamparska 70). Through this connection Kaiser learns that virtually the only primary source on the Riese complex is a part-diary, part-memoir written by one Abraham Kajzer, a survivor of Gross Rosen who, as an inmate, kept

a secret diary on scraps of cement paper which he hid in latrines. This other Kajzer lost his family in Auschwitz before he was transferred to Gross Rosen, and then from one Gross Rosen camp to another. He eventually managed to escape and found refuge when a young German woman hid him in the cellar of her family's farmhouse. After the war, Kajzer recovered his notes from the now defunct camps and, in 1947, presented them to Adam Ostojka, a writer and publisher in Łódź. The notes were translated from Yiddish into Polish, and the diary/memoir was published only in 1962 as *Za drutami śmierci* (Behind the Wires of Death), with a preface by Ostojka. The reason for the delay of some fifteen years is unknown. In those intervening years, Kajzer left Poland for Israel, where he rejoined his sister and remarried, and where a Hebrew version of his book appeared as early as in 1952 as *Bein Hamitzarim* (Dire Straits). This edition garnered little attention, however. By contrast, the Polish version has been reissued, given a new introduction, and has had multiple reprints, becoming a must-read for anyone interested in the Riese complex. It is currently available at several Riese museum shops. Like the Riese complex itself, whose mysterious purpose and impressive scale may inspire awe before recalling the Jewish slave laborers who constructed it, Kajzer's diary is apparently examined by treasure hunters for its incidental geographic and technical detail rather than because it gives testimony to the Holocaust. As Kaiser notes, the Hebrew edition was a noble but insignificant book, while the Polish one proved significant but ignoble (Kaiser 2021b: 212). Its publication history and diverse reception in Israel and Poland function in *Plunder* as a token symbol for the very question Kaiser is raising about the problematic territory in Holocaust writing between the merely crass and the overly sentimental.

Confronted with a piece of life writing by another man named Kaiser/Kajzer (in Polish, these names are homophones), Kaiser begins to investigate Kajzer's past and, to his great surprise, learns that Abraham Kajzer was his grandfather's first cousin. His family's seeming ignorance about a close relative who survived the war is itself an enigma which Kaiser leaves unexplored, suggesting that *Plunder* is built around deliberate and accidental omissions as much as around revelations. Moreover, once the treasure hunters learn that Kaiser is related to the man who wrote the book which they revere, they hail him as Kajzer's grandson, a misunderstanding which Kaiser tries but fails to rectify. Kaiser is thus misrecognized, however involuntarily, as a direct descendant of a man whom the treasure hunters celebrate as a hero, albeit for the wrong reason—one of the mistakes that “put into relief and reinforce the distance between you and whatever or whoever it is you think you are connecting with.” As the discovery of Kajzer's diary puts Kaiser in touch with his newly found Israeli

relatives and with the children of the German woman who had safeguarded Kajzer as a fugitive and who may have been his lover, Kaiser eventually learns more about Kajzer than he ever does about his grandfather. At one point, as he is watching archival 8 mm footage of his grandfather's family trying to act natural in front of the camera, he thinks that the essence of being a family may lie in pretending to be one. His search thus leads to disenchantment rather than epiphany, but also to discoveries different from the ones he had expected.

To claim his inheritance Kaiser must legally assert that his relatives, who co-owned the house in Sosnowiec, are deceased. Claims to this effect are filed with two different courts, in the cities where they had lived before the war. One of the judges immediately rules that Kaiser's relatives have died, even though the exact circumstances of their deaths are unknown, as is of course typical of Holocaust victims. The other judge is more inquisitive and more obstinate, and she rules against the claimant. Kaiser and the Killer appeal her decision, but they lose again, prompting a suspicion of anti-Semitic intent which Kaiser recognizes as ingrained in his family's attitude toward Poles. He hires another lawyer who explains that the Killer had made a technical mistake in her original filing and thus triggered the wrong legal procedure; one judge generously overlooked her error, but another did not, so the latter claim must be filed anew. *Plunder* thus ends without the property being reclaimed. Kaiser remarks that, in the meantime, the Polish judicial system has come under duress from the right-wing regime, as has also Polish historians' right to investigate the Holocaust.

In the memoir's closing scene, Kaiser is involved in another man's treasure hunt, as he and his American acquaintance attempt to recover some golden eggs which the man's father-in-law allegedly hid in an attic many decades earlier. The scene of their search ends in suspense, although Kaiser hints that if the treasure should be missing, it may have been retrieved by another person. The lack of a resolution to this final treasure hunt supplies a fitting end to a narrative which deliberately underscores the economic aspects of Holocaust remembrance, and which withholds the satisfaction of an ultimate revelation.

To read *Plunder* only as critique of the "3G" memoir would be too narrow, however. By focusing on property, Kaiser gives material substance to trauma, and he does so on multiple levels. His family is affected by a rift between its close-knit members, as illustrated by a fight over money between his father and his uncle. Such familial rifts may feel like open wounds, especially to a child whose idyllic perspective is suddenly disrupted. Another rift apparently occurred, for reasons unbeknownst to us and perhaps to Kaiser himself, between his grandfather and his grandfather's first cousin. Although both men have died, the aftermath of their estrangement is made manifest when Kaiser

unexpectedly learns of the latter man's existence. It reverberates in unwitting mistakes, as when the treasure hunters confuse the two relatives by wrongly referring to Kaiser as Kajzer's grandson.

The aftermath of historical trauma persists also in the present condition of Poland, as described by Kaiser, especially in its self-conflicted relationship to Polish Jews, their history, and the symbolic and material heritage they left behind. The word "plunder" in the memoir's title may suggest the looting, repossession, and appropriation of Jewish property by non-Jewish Poles in the aftermath of the Holocaust and wartime upheaval. And while Kaiser's suspicion that a ruling against him is rooted in anti-Semitism is dispersed, contradictory outcomes of exactly parallel legal proceedings point to an underlying ambivalence toward Jewish genocide victims, the circumstances of their deaths, and their descendants' outstanding property claims.<sup>3</sup>

While the Nazi treasure hunters are mostly amateurs enjoying outdoor adventure, a visit to the home of the most successful among them reveals that his quest is not just financially motivated, but an obsession. An impressive collection of Nazi memorabilia suggests to Kaiser that the man is acting out a desire for revenge, implying some unfinished emotional business with respect to World War Two—an aftermath of historical trauma materially in evidence in Lower Silesia, which changed hands at the end of the war. Interlacing layers of historical trauma include the fate of Jewish inmates laboring in the Gross Rosen camps, the subsequent flight of the German population, and the newly arrived Poles resettled from territories lost to the Soviet Union. The entire region is an open wound, something that the abandoned Riese complex embodies and represents.

The aftermath of historical trauma thus extends beyond Holocaust survivors and their descendants, without excluding them. The town of Sosnowiec, where Kaiser's relatives' house is located and where the memoir's closing scene takes place, is situated at a geographical point at which the three parts into which Poland had been split prior to 1918 physically met; the city's very location is therefore a marker of historical trauma. The plight of the Jews of Sosnowiec, palpably manifested by their forcibly abandoned and abruptly hidden property, such as the house Kaiser is trying to reclaim, and the golden eggs sought by another man, functions in a palimpsestic relation to other instances of historical violence. If

3 This ambivalence was confirmed several months after *Plunder* was published, when Poland adopted a law limiting the filing of long-standing property claims. This development, criticized by descendants of Holocaust victims and by others, is readable as an extratextual coda to Kaiser's memoir both because it speaks to this ambivalence and because it reinforces the sense of irresolution inherent in his narrative.

the staple “3G” memoir, as Kaiser notes, has a diffused relationship with history due to its neglect of geography, *Plunder* offers a corrective by treating places as indelibly marked by the aftermath of specific events, prominently including the Holocaust. Kaiser’s “negative” method of avoiding vicarious identifications and false epiphanies is reinforced by an unexpected focus on the interdependency of emotional and economic investments, which are themselves firmly anchored in historically determined places. This focus grounds the memoir in the available material evidence and saves it from sentimentalism.

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## | Abstract

TOMASZ BASIUK

### Menachem Kaiser's Quest for Family Heirloom and the Aftermath of Historical Trauma

Menachem Kaiser's *Plunder: A Memoir of Family Property and Nazi Treasure* (2021) critiques the generic limitations of the "3G" (third-generation) memoir by pointing to its frequently sentimental tenor and facile epiphanies, perpetuated by the publishing market. *Plunder* focuses instead on material traces of the past and on Kaiser's effort to reclaim property left behind by his relatives in Poland. This approach allows Kaiser to address the aftermath of historical trauma without vicariously identifying with Holocaust victims or survivors.

**Keywords:** "3G" (third-generation) memoir, aftermath, Holocaust, trauma

## | Bio

Tomasz Basiuk – prof. at University of Warsaw. Basiuk teaches at the American Studies Center, University of Warsaw, Poland. His interests include representations of the Holocaust, contemporary life writing and fiction, and queer studies. He published on Benjamin Wilkomirski's *Fragments* (2005, with Agnieszka Graff). His work on life writing includes *Exposures: American Gay Men's Life Writing since Stonewall* (2013) and *Queers in State Socialism: Cruising 1970s Poland* (2020, with Jędrzej Burszta). He also published on the novelist William Gaddis (*Wielki Gaddis: realista postmodernistyczny* 2003, in Polish).

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