

*From The Chaffin Journal 2022*

## **My Mother Museum**

### **First Gallery**

My father lost her cookbook after multiple moves, the black-and-white student's notebook in which she wrote down her favorite recipes in bold, foreign-looking script. It was the one possession of hers I wanted most after she died. I relished watching her cook with the ease and flair of a professional chef in our dimly-lit Washington Heights kitchen with a view of another Depression-era apartment building across the street. Same gold and brown bricks, with an equally ridiculously English name like The Windermere in a neighborhood that had been filled with German-Jewish refugees and was slowly becoming Hispanic. But the book was unique, my mother as curator.

### **Second Gallery**

The small cameo brooch of a woman in profile must be fifty years old or more but looks brand new because she never wore it. A friend brought it back for her from Italy is all I remember her saying. But who? Was it the Polish man I heard about from a family friend after she died, the man she "should have married," a socialist from Vilnius like her instead of my born-on-a-farm father? Why did she keep it if she never put it on/why did she never put it on? What did it mean to her? I'm asking these questions too late. It nestles in its white cardboard box lined with cotton, untouched, pristine, a buoy in a mysterious sea.

### **Third Gallery**

The cream-colored enameled compact weighs over half a pound, is embossed with leaves and a bird in flight. Embossed in gold and made in France: *modèle déposé*, registered design. There's room for a lipstick, there's a mirror inside on the left, there's a lidded compartment for face powder on the right. It's an object out of a film noir, the kind of thing a lustrous femme fatale would use with magical, elegant hands to make herself up while people stared at her effrontery, her chic. Oh, she was definitely chic. One of her students from Belgium said "*Elle avait du chien*": French for desirable, intelligent, and strong. I see that in some photos from the late 40s. By the 50s the look has disappeared and she's an American housewife.

### **Fourth Gallery**

Hanging in her closet in a plastic dry cleaner's bag like any ordinary dress was the slave labor camp dress she was wearing when freed by Americans in eastern Germany, April 15, 1945. Dark gray strips that seem almost purple on light gray stripes. Thin, grim cotton with a roughly-sewn beige number patch above her heart. The number helped me access German records of her incarceration in ghettos and camps. Was this relic kept as evidence that she might not have survived if WWII had lasted longer? That the crimes she endured were real? It won't tell me. Can you really call it a "dress" or even a "uniform"? Reality seems too big for such small words, for the bomb lurking there day after day.

## **Last Gallery**

This particular lined notebook has not been lost, but I wish it had been. Black-and-white exterior, starker still inside: a record of her deepening dementia caused by years of chain smoking. Here, instructions are repeated about when to take which pill. Bits of news randomly copied from the *New York Times*. Worst of all, grotesque, are the definitions of "Memory" she transcribed from a dictionary. *Remember, Remember, Remember* says every miserable page. The desperate lament of a mind drifting out to sea, the words of a voluble, witty, multi-lingual woman ordered at first, then scrambled, finally misspelled, broken, gone. I want to destroy it but I can't—it's her anguished Last Will and Testament.

## **Gift Shop**

CLOSED