The ‘Vision of Home’. Nostalgia in Anna Mitgutsch’s *Haus der Kindheit* (2000)

Within the renaissance of Jewish literature in Austria since the late 1980s the theme of emigration and exile has played a prominent role.[[1]](#footnote-1) In many cases the experience of exile is part of the authors’ family memory. The parents of several of the Jewish writers had been forced to seek refuge abroad following Austria’s annexation to the Third Reich in 1938. One of them, Hazel Rosenstrauch, was born during her parents’ emigration in the UK and her given name references this biographical fact. Moreover, exile started to feature in these texts at a time when historians, notably those around the Dokumentationsarchiv des österreichischen Widerstandes [Documentation Centre of Austrian Resistance] in Vienna, began to take an interest in questions of restitution.[[2]](#footnote-2) In a different way, the authors’ own exile experience of growing up in a culture and language different from the one they had been born in features in some novels of Vladimir Vertlib and Julya Rabinowich, both of whom migrated as children with their parents from the former Soviet Union to Vienna.[[3]](#footnote-3)

In some of their fiction these writers explore the characters’ disorienting feelings induced by displacement and the resulting estrangement from place but also from time, an ‘illness’ the exiles seem to have passed on to the next generation.[[4]](#footnote-4) In Robert Menasse’s *Sinnliche Gewißheit*, for example, the ‘exterritoriality’ of their existence prevents the children of former Viennese refugees in São Paulo from establishing a synchronised relationship to their environment. The narrator observes that strangeness ‘ist unter Umständen etwas, das nicht am Ort liegt, an dem man sich befindet, etwa weil er weit weg ist – weit weg von wo? Nicht wahr? –, sondern an der Zeit, die immer falsch ist, die man immer falsch empfindet, weil sie so provisorisch kurzlebig ewig in sich rotiert.’ [may be something that is not dependent on the place where one finds oneself, perhaps because it is far away – far away from where? Isn’t that the question? – but dependent on the time, which is always wrong, which one always experiences as wrong, because in a provisional, short-lived way it eternally rotates within itself.][[5]](#footnote-5) This experience turned any subsequent home of former refugees, victims of the Holocaust and their descendants into a mere temporary dwelling place. Sitting on the proverbial ‘packed suitcases’, they were always ready to move on. The German-American sociologist Michal Bodemann therefore suggests that ‘the principal coordinates’ for the remigrants and their children are ‘coordinates, or geographies of time, not coordinates of place’.[[6]](#footnote-6) Political events in the mid-1980s, especially the so-called Waldheim affair, additionally exacerbated the former refugees’ and their children’s estrangement from place and increased their feeling of ‘Unzugehörigkeit’ [not-belonging] as the Austrian filmmaker Ruth Beckermann has argued in her eponymous essay.[[7]](#footnote-7)

Anna Mitgutsch, born in 1948 in Linz, Upper Austria, is one of the writers who have contributed to the recent renaissance of Jewish literature in Austria. Although she does not come from a Jewish family, for complex reasons, she converted to Judaism in the early 1990s. For about twenty years she lived away from her birthplace, in the United States and other countries.[[8]](#footnote-8) In 1995 she published *Abschied von Jerusalem* [Farewell to Jerusalem],[[9]](#footnote-9) the first of several novels with a Jewish theme. This was followed by *Haus der Kindheit* [House of Childhood][[10]](#footnote-10) and *Familienfest* [Family Feast].[[11]](#footnote-11) Each novel bears autobiographical traces, notably in the young female characters with an intricate biography who are drawn to Judaism. Each novel also explores a different aspect of Jewish identification in a secular world: the young female protagonist in *Abschied von Jerusalem* seeks to reinforce her Jewish identity by living in Israel; and in *Familienfest*, ritual allows the descendants of Jewish immigrants to renew their Jewish family bonds. In *Haus der Kindheit*, Anna Mitgutsch probes the feeling of not-belonging experienced by the returning refugee.[[12]](#footnote-12)

The fictional story that Mitgutsch composes in *Haus der Kindheit* constitutes what has been termed a ‘narrative of return’.[[13]](#footnote-13) In this type of narration, children of Holocaust survivors seek out their parents’ former home in the hope of learning more about their own origin. In Mitgutsch’s novel, Max Berman, the youngest of three boys born to Jewish parents in Austria, left the country with his family in 1928, aged four. In New York, were they settle, the father, a medical doctor by training, soon abandons the intention to requalify,[[14]](#footnote-14) turning his interest instead to politics (17-18) and leaving wife and children. The latter become increasingly impoverished and are forced to move to ever cheaper accommodation, eventually ending up in the Bronx (28). There, Max’s mother Mira finds a substitute family among the other immigrants who worship at the local synagogue. Yet on her children, particularly on the youngest, she continues to impress her longing for her former life, notably for the house that her father had built in their home town H for her and her sister. This longing assumes materiality in a photograph of the house. The photograph’s importance for Max’s own story is signalled by its evocation in the opening sentence of the novel: ‘Das Photo stand auf der Kommode, solange Max sich zurückerinnerte. Es machte jede neue Wohnung, in die sie einzogen, zu einem weiteren Ort des Exils. [...] wie ein Schwur verpflichtete es dazu, ein Versprechen einzulösen. [...] Das ist unser Haus, sagte seine Mutter [...] in ein paar Jahren fahren wir vielleicht dorthin zurück.’ [The photo was on the sideboard as long as Max could remember. It turned every one of their flats into another place of exile. Like an oath it obliged them to fulfil a promise. This is our house, his mother would say, in a few years we might return.] (7) Mira dies without ever returning. On learning that her loved ones had been murdered she loses interest in the house and even stops speaking German. In 1945, as a soldier in US uniform, her son gets a chance to visit the town of his birth and to look for the house. He discovers that strangers live there and that they resent his inquiries about the former owners. After Mira’s death in 1974 he returns once more, this time determined to claim for himself the house on her behalf. Finding the tenants still ensconced there he seeks restitution but realises that this could be a prolonged legal process. Documents to prove the murder of his mother’s family cannot be obtained nor can the rental agreement of the people living in the house be terminated.[[15]](#footnote-15) It is not for another two decades that, with the help of Spitzer, the head of H’s small Jewish community, Max finally takes possession of his house. By that time his father and both his brothers are dead, too, leaving him as the sole heir. Having just recovered from a life-saving operation, Max returns to the house of his childhood with the expectation of living out his days there. Yet the more he strives to make the house his own, the more it ceases to resemble the house in the photograph and the mental image he had created of it.

Since Max was very young when he left his place of birth, the photograph on the sideboard plays a central role in his visualisation of it. But in Mira, too, the cherished image of the family house fuels what Hilde Spiel, one of the towering figures of Austrian exile literature, called the ‘Vision der Heimat’ [vison of home]. By way of exemplifying this vision as the preeminent factor in the exile’s homesickness, Spiel lists a number of sense perceptions which triggered this psychological state in her own experience. The majority of these are mental images of places that are combined with memory of colour, such as a green pasture studded with yellow dandelions; or of the summer heat in a Döbling garden.[[16]](#footnote-16) Although the visual seems to have been crucial in the exile’s longing for return, it was the other senses that intensified this memory and anchored it in time. The focal position of the photograph in the family’s successive homes in exile emphasises its importance as Mira’s ‘vision of home’;[[17]](#footnote-17) Max’s predilection for the photo suggests that he has inherited this vision. However, because Max, unlike Mira, has little personal recollection of this former home he reads the photograph as a reference to place rather than to time. Although he does consider time when pondering another photo that shows him among the three generations of his family gathered on the wide steps leading up to the entrance (10), it is clothes rather than the house that allow him to date the picture. The women’s hats which remind him of ‘umgestürzte Blumentöpfe’ [flowerpots turned upside down] and their loose fitting summer dresses with the dropped waistline that catch his eye date the scene to the early 1920s. What is more, the ladies’ outdated fashion[[18]](#footnote-18) and even the ‘mask’-like faces in the photo appear strange.[[19]](#footnote-19)

This and the defamiliarising effect of other photos on Max is a result, too, of the circumstances of their discovery. He finds them after his mother’s death in a box among her belongings. Without an opportunity to ask for the stories relating to these photos Max has to resort to his imagination in making sense of them. Through ‘imaginative investment’ he engages in what Marianne Hirsch has termed ‘postmemory’.[[20]](#footnote-20) According to Hirsch, the creative power of postmemory helps the children of Holocaust survivors access the world of the obliterated previous generation. Photographs play a central role in Hirsch’s conjuncture of transgenerational memory.[[21]](#footnote-21)

In *Haus der Kindheit* the photographs not only assist Max with his ‘imaginative investment’ in illustrating his mother’s stories, they also allow him to create his own mental image of his place of birth, his own ‘vision of home’.[[22]](#footnote-22) Because he lacks personal memory of his childhood house, his vision of home cannot be underpinned by the sense perceptions that Spiel referred to and that depend on the experience of time, as suggested by the seasonal images of nature that she mentions.

The emphasis on place in Max’s vision of home encourages him to assign his mother’s photos the status of documents. They are the only physical trace that connects him to his family and they play a crucial role in his quest to regain the house. Property, as Lisa Silverman has explained, constitutes a ‘mediating element between past and future’,[[23]](#footnote-23) the photographs depicting the house that was taken away from Max’s family therefore trigger more than an emotional effect. To Max they document ownership, making him the rightful heir of his family’s real estate. This is why it is important to him that the photo depicting the family scene mentioned previously is ‘weniger zufällig und privat als die anderen Fotos, so als markiere es ein Innehalten, eine stolze Selbstbehauptung in der Geschichte dieser drei Generationen.’ [Less coincidental and private than the other photos, as if it marked a pause, the proud self-assertion in the history of these three generations.] (11) Moreover, in Max’s understanding, the photograph testifies not only to the existence of the people who by the time he consciously contemplates the image had perished or died in exile, but also to the family’s imminent demise. The proud self-assertion he detects in the demeanour of the figures captured in the photo signals to him their sense of belonging and settlement. By building a home in H, Max’s grandfather created a visible sign of his family’s Austrianness.[[24]](#footnote-24) To Max the photograph documents that his forebears, who had immigrated from Eastern Europe, had finally arrived. Yet as the descendant of Jewish refugees, Max also knows that ‘the history of these three generations’ was about to end. Three of the adults, Max’s maternal grandfather, his mother’s elder sister and her husband were to be killed in the Holocaust. He himself escaped this fate with his parents and brothers only because they had left Austria before Hitler assumed power. A great deal of the photograph’s ‘evidential force’[[25]](#footnote-25) therefore lies in its implication of loss and death.

By claiming back the property Max therefore, in addition to restoring his rightful inheritance, hopes to be closer to his family. This is why changes made to the house following the family’s enforced departure affect him. While viewing the house watched by a suspicious neighbour, a photographic image of his mother comes to his mind that gestures toward a connection between her and the house more intimate still than the one expressed in the group photograph. It shows her on the terrace ‘in einem langen hellen Kleid, den Kopf in einem überraschenden, fragenden Lächeln leicht vorgereckt, den Arm an der weißen Säule abgestützt und unter ihrem Ellbogen der kleine steinerne Löwe auf seinen Hinterpranken.’ [in a long light-coloured dress, her head tilted slightly forward with a surprised, inquisitive smile; her arm resting on the white column and below her elbow the small stone lion on his hind paws.] (66) The lion statuette which Mira’s posture seems to protect becomes a signal of ownership when, on his return, Max notices its absence (ibid.). His surprise about the disappearance of the little lion demonstrates to what extent he has clung to the historical integrity of the house that the photographs suggested to him. What is more, the lion represents one of the few objects of which he seems to have a personal memory because it is connected with a sense perception similar to those cited by Spiel: ‘Wenn er, der Dreijährige, Vierjährige, nach einem Regenguß die Hand [das Maul des Löwen] hineinlegte, wurde sie feucht.’ [When he, the three, four-year-old after a rain shower put his hand into the mouth of the lion, it became moist.] (9-10)

Max’s irritation at the lion’s removal testifies to the ‘over-determined’ symbolic status this object has in his perceived claim on the whole property.[[26]](#footnote-26) Given the lion’s association with the Hebrew tribe of Judah, its removal from the house (together with that of a sofa with lion feet) can arguably also be taken as alluding to the destruction of its Jewish owners.[[27]](#footnote-27)

Max’s perception of the photographs as evidence of rightful ownership also leads him to disapprove of the signs of domesticity that relate to the new occupants of the house, such as the children’s swing and the wellington boots by the door: ‘Er sah darin eine Selbstbehauptung, die sich überheblich und wie selbstverständlich über zugefügtes Unrecht hinwegsetzte, als wäre dieses Unrecht nie geschehen.’ [He took this as a self-assertion that ignored injustice in an arrogant and matter-of-fact manner as if this injustice had never happened.] (66) The scene repells Max not only because domesticity signals a rootedness that he disallows himself (129) but also because it demonstrates that strangers have established a home in the place where his own family had been denied a future that house and garden seemed to promise (34). What tops Max’s sense of injustice is that the law gives the occupiers the right to refuse him access (35). Max must accept that neither scant memory nor photographic proof has the power to restore to him ownership of the house. However, a different, perhaps more painful realisation is that, even after regaining the house, he cannot regain the house of his childhood. Max is evidently touched by the photograph’s ‘symbolic status’ that according to Hirsch ‘tend[s] to diminish distance, bridge separation, and facilitate identification’.[[28]](#footnote-28) Yet, what he is inclined to take as documentary evidence possesses neither legal status nor does it help him when he finally embarks on renovating the house. On the contrary, the photo’s symbolic value makes it a poor template for Max’s restoration project. Indeed, more distressing for him than the struggle to recover the house is his realisation of the futility of its renovation: ‘Hatte er nicht das Haus restaurieren wollen, um in die Vergangenheit zurückzukehren, die Träume seiner Mutter zu beleben? Aber das Haus seiner Kindheit ließ sich nicht zurückgewinnen. Je weiter die Restaurierungsarbeiten voranschritten, desto mehr verblaßten die alten Bilder.’ [Had he not wanted to restore the house to return to the past, to bring to life his mother’s dreams? But the house of his childhood could not be won back. The further its restoration progressed the more the old pictures faded.] (227) A return of and to his family’s property does not permit a return to the past. In resolving to live in the family house long enough to experience each season once, Max tries to reconnect time with the place that he left as a small child. But his hope to recognise the shadows and the light ‘in den Räumen zu verschiedenen Tageszeiten’ [in the rooms at different times of day] (166) will not be realised. He must acknowledge that because his ‘vision of home’ is tied up with his childhood it cannot come true.

Max is made aware of the irredeemability of time through the spatial impression he receives of the house when first inspecting it after gaining access: he is struck by the smallness of the rooms which in his memory had seemed big and stately. The adult’s sense of space is at odds with that of the child because the dimensions of rooms are experienced in relation to the size of the viewer. Revisiting the house therefore has a defamiliarising effect on Max that is similar to that exercised by the photograph of his forebears. Max’s imprecise memory seems to have colluded with Mira’s stories, in which the house appeared as ‘herrschaftliche Villa […] deren hohe stuckverzierte Räume sie lebhaft vor sich sah, auf dessen Terrasse sie an die Marmorbalustrade gelehnt über das Tal blickte (15).’ [stately villa, whose high stuccoed ceilings she vividly saw in front of her; on whose terrace she looked across the valley leaning against the marble balustrade]. The house’s aggrandized representation fuels Max’s imagination, leading to inevitable disappointment when he compares his vision of home with the house that he encounters. Post-war reality not only frustrates Max’s expectations of a utopian fairy-tale place; [[29]](#footnote-29) it also casts doubt over the family’s former affluence and status in the community.[[30]](#footnote-30) In the terminology of the media theorist Vilém Flusser it is the photograph’s ‘magic character’ that inclined Max to adopt his mother’s fairy-tale image of the house.

Flusser, himself a Jewish refugee from Nazi-occupied Europe, claimed that photos obscure the world (‘verstellen’) rather than (re)presenting it (‘vorstellen’).[[31]](#footnote-31) This effect is exacerbated in historical photography, especially when sepia colouring is present. It is Max’s longing that conflates the documentary, indexical truth of Mira’s photographs with their symbolic meaning.[[32]](#footnote-32) This is why, in his desire to realise his dream of return, he initially does not realise that his longing for the house is actually a longing for his lost childhood.

It is in the contrast between the photo of the house on his mother’s sideboard and a more recent one, which Max took on his first visit after the war, that his confusion between the symbolic and indexical significance of the old photo becomes apparent. Next to the photograph, which fuelled his mother’s longing of return, the new one seems ‘nackt, beinahe anstößig und so beliebig wie ein Urlaubsfoto’ [naked, almost offensive and as arbitrary as a holiday snapshot] (8). In Max’s perception, the more recent image lacks the aura of the ‘unrepeatable and irreversible time’[[33]](#footnote-33) that the ‘sepiafarbene[] Melancholie’ [sepia-coloured melancholy] (8) of the older picture signals to him. In contrast to the ‘offensive nakedness’ of the new picture, the reddish-brown ink gives the older image a warm glow and softens sharp contrasts making it more akin to homeliness than the starker image taken more recently.[[34]](#footnote-34) Max’s preference for the sepia-coloured picture suggests that he has succumbed to its magic power, signifying his nostalgic predisposition. Mira was apparently not entirely immune herself to the photograph’s magic power that grips her son. Evidently, in order to evade the photograph’s impact, she buried it ‘mit dem Gesicht nach unten’ [face down] (8) at the bottom of her wardrobe when return ceased to be an option for her. On rediscovering it after his mother’s death the picture rekindles Max’s own vision of home and his resolve to gain back the house.

The photo’s magic power encourages Max to see something in the picture that is closely connected with his longing and therefore is only visible to him. His creative imagination with which he invests his reading of the family photos has a goal that reaches beyond postmemory. He craves a reality that is measured against an imagined past; and he is determined to recreate this reality. Svetlana Boym has referred to this disposition as ‘restorative nostalgia’.[[35]](#footnote-35) Annette Kuhn has claimed that family photos figure as traces and clues, arguing that they ‘evoke memories which might have little or nothing to do with what is actually in the picture.’[[36]](#footnote-36) Indeed, it is Max’s imagination that willingly accepts Mira’s stories about the grand family home and together, her narrative and his vision formulate the request from beyond Mira’s grave to regain ownership and to restore lost status. In Max’s reading the photograph’s magical and documentary qualities combine to produce restorative nostalgia, which according to Boym promotes ‘a transhistorical reconstruction of the lost home.’[[37]](#footnote-37) Reconstruction for Max points to restoration in a dual sense: restitution of ownership and renovation of the returned property. While he achieves the former, the latter fails because it is tangled up with the impossible restoration of his childhood, i.e. the redemption of time.

It seems that, from early on, Mira’s stories about the grand villa but also the experience of the New York museums that he visits with his father, shape not only Max’s longing for the family home but his ideas about buildings in general. Although he is fascinated with big empty spaces and how light affects them, his first ‘restoration’ project, on which he embarks aged eleven, is an attempt to spruce up the humble flat he shares with his mother and brothers (24). Although Mira quickly restores the old order, thus denying Max the possibility to establish a home in exile, as Katrien Vloeberghs has observed,[[38]](#footnote-38) Max remains true to his childhood interest. He studies architecture and specialises in revitalising old interiors. An unsuccessful attempt at creating an aesthetically pleasing shelter for Manhattan’s homeless, moreover, demonstrates his idealism while showing that his approach to buildings is not only restorative but extends to adaptation (162). Max is described as an ‘Augenmensch’ [eye-person] (41), whose aesthetic principles have been shaped by his ‘European dream’ of ‘verzierte[] Balustraden [and] verspielte[] Erker[]’ [embellished balustrades and playful bay windows] (44). Judging by these ornaments, Max’s aesthetic ideals derive from the architecture of the *Gründerzeit*, suggesting that his ideas about buildings actually pertain to the period predating the time during which his grandfather erected the house.[[39]](#footnote-39)It is clear that his restoration projects are guided by the desire to reconstruct or rather construct a surrounding of which he has no first-hand experience but which in his imagination is all the more vivid. Thus unrestricted by experience he is free to remake places of the past according to his own vision of them. While this practice earns him the respect of his clients and a comfortable life, it is doomed when applied to the house of his childhood. Because its restoration is guided by ‘restorative nostalgia’ his efforts are rendered as mimicry that only increases his feeling of alienation.[[40]](#footnote-40)

If Max’s story appears as the specific case of a private individual, one of the novel’s subplots indicates that there is no escape from ‘restorative nostalgia’ for people with Max’s biography. In a kind of parallel action to Max’s restoration project, his friend Spitzer is overseeing the rebuilding of the city’s synagogue. This doubling of the restoration effort lifts Max’s struggle for the reconstruction of home to the level of that of a whole community. The similarities between the two projects cannot be overlooked, especially as Spitzer’s initiative, too, is spurred by a photograph, which constitutes the blueprint for his restoration project. It shows a ‘klassizistischen Tempel[] mit einer breiten Treppe zum Portal, Rundbogenfenstern und Säulen, ein rundes Fenster mit sechseckiger Steinmetzarbeit an der Stirnseite’. [classicist temple with a wide flight of stairs leading to the entrance, Romanesque windows and columns, a round window with hexagonal masonry work in the gable]. (83) Like the image of Max’s house, that of the old synagogue speaks of a loss that is all the more painful because of the signs of grandeur it documents. The image references a sizable and affluent community, the destruction of which no rebuilding of the synagogue can make undone. Spitzer, who returned to live in his former home town after the Holocaust, has his doubts about the project (84) although he himself cannot let go of the past. He seems to cope with the obliteration of Jewish life in H by disregarding the changes effected by the post-war order. Symbolically, at least, he reinstates Jews to H’s topography, an operation which the Austrians failed to undertake in actual fact after the war.[[41]](#footnote-41) He is described as a judge whose job it is to restore lawful ownership by referring to H’s shops by the names of their original Jewish proprietors (245). On his walks through H he also makes detours to avoid places that evoke painful memories (179-180). Spitzer who perceives of his role as the ‘Hüter des Erbes’ [keeper of the heritage] (253) of H’s Jews, considers himself to be somebody who has been left over. After the demise of the town’s Jewish population, he views the cemetery as the place where the history of its Jews ‘wird […] lebendig’ [comes alive] (244). Because the children of the few returning survivors are emigrating, his birthplace increasingly assumes the character of a Jewish necropolis. In fact, it is a necropolis which is rapidly turning into a museum because there are not enough male Jews to conduct Jewish burials (86f).

It seems only logical, therefore, that the rebuilt synagogue be dedicated to a different purpose. Its empty Ark of the Law signals that it does not have a religious function. Of the once sacred building where Max’s parents were married only the walls have been recreated. They now enclose a venue for concerts and cultural events (315). The disappearance of the community has removed the need for a place to worship. At best, the reconstructed building constitutes a visible – if ‘naked’ – memento to the disappearance of the once vibrant Jewish community whose function is limited to prompt future tour guides to talk ‘vorsichtig’ [cautiously] about its history (315). The synagogue’s former congregation that was either murdered or driven into exile will live on, if at all, in stories about the place which articulate and testify to the structure’s past use. Stories might therefore be a more effective way than photographs to connect places with their past.

A similar conclusion has been reached by the cultural geographer Doreen Massey who conceptualises places in terms of ‘collections of […] stories’.[[42]](#footnote-42) Max, too, tries to gain access to the house of his childhood through stories. Although it was his mother’s stories that induced Max’s nostalgia, it is also the stories of the last few Jews in his former home town that help him overcome the defamiliarising effect caused by restorative nostalgia. Max’s ‘Vision of home’ first arises in his mother’s bedside stories: ‘wenn sie abends an seinem Bett saß, reihten sie alles, Wünsche und Träume und verklärte Erinnerungen wie Bausteine aneinander, reichten sich gegenseitig Bilder zum bestaunen und bauten daraus einen prunkvollen Palast mit einem marmornen Säulengang über dem weiten Bogen eines Flußtals […].’ [when she sat at his bedside in the evening they put together, like building blocks, their desires, dreams and transfigured memories, offered each other images to marvel on, constructing a glittering palace with a marble colonnade above the wide bend of the river.] (15) Having returned to H without Mira, Max looks for the stories hidden in the fabric of the town’s buildings in order to forge his own relationship to the place of his childhood. He scours the city’s architecture for the material presence of its effaced Jewish population,[[43]](#footnote-43) but he also tries to persuade Spitzer to tell his story. Frustrated by the inconclusiveness of the architectural traces and by Spitzer’s silence, Max turns to the town’s archives in search of the life stories and the singular fates of the town’s historic Jews (259). Once again he engages in an ‘imaginative investment’, not unlike the one that leads him to restore the house of his childhood.[[44]](#footnote-44) And yet writing a chronicle of H’s Jews seems to be more successful. It requires him to ‘storify’ the bare facts preserved in the archive and by the buildings.[[45]](#footnote-45) He must construct a narrative by, for example, translating ‘Zollordnungen und Mautbestimmungen’ [customs and toll regulations] (182) behind which the odd Jewish tradesman appears into an account of the town’s medieval and early modern Jewry; in a similar way he also tells the stories of the Jewish ritual objects he finds at flea markets (184-185). In other words, he takes it upon himself to lend his voice to the silent evidence of facts and artefacts. His chronicle has in common with the stories about the town’s Jewish population prompted by the rebuilt synagogue that both are testimony to a people and their way of life while simultaneously gesturing to their absence. While the story is retrospective and signifies loss, Max’s effort in creating it is driven by its potential to symbolically reinstate that which is lost.[[46]](#footnote-46) Additionally, telling the story of H’s Jews allows him to ground his own belonging to H in the town’s history. Although his forebears had arrived in H relatively recently, he is inclined to interpret as a hidden relationship between himself and the town’s historic Jewish community the coincidence of his birthday falling on the Jewish calendar date on which one of its previous inhabitants, a fourteenth-century Jewess, had died (186). Together with his desire to reinsert the Jews into H’s historiography (259) Max constructs a space for himself too.

Eventually he even manages to create this space in his own house. He achieves this with the help of Jewish ritual. Narrative’s capacity to symbolically reinstate a lost community is enshrined in the Sabbath ritual and that of the Seder in particular.[[47]](#footnote-47) Max utilises both in his desire to connect to his birthplace. For example, when he invites a group of friends to celebrate the Sabbath in his newly renovated house, he not only symbolically recreates the family that he had lost. Engaging in the ritual, even without its narrow religious meaning, allows him to connect to the people whom, as a child, he had witnessed celebrating it: in raising his glass of wine he performs a postmemorial act by taking the place of his grandfather who had once blessed the Sabbath wine in the same room (267).[[48]](#footnote-48)

Through listening to and narrating stories and through engaging in ritual Max succeeds in overcoming his restorative nostalgia that rested on mental images of place. With the new stories in his head and the chronicle in his suitcase he is able to accept his existence in exile by abandoning the ‘narrative of return’ and the yearning for his childhood home: ‘Von Coney Island Beach würde er wie als Kind über der Wasserfläche den Horizont absuchen und ohne Sehnsucht wissen, dort drüben stand sein Haus und wartete auf ihn.’ [Like he did as a child, from Coney Island Beach he would scour the horizon above the water’s surface and know without longing: over there stood his house and was waiting for him.] (317) Max’s story ends with the dawning of a new self-understanding which renders unnecessary the realisation of his vision of home through the ‘narrative of return’.

1. See my book *Contemporary Jewish Writing. Austria after Waldheim* (New York, 2013). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See for example Brigitte Bailer-Galanda, *Wiedergutmachung – kein Thema, Österreich und die Opfer des Nationalsozialismus* (Vienna, 1993). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See Julya Rabinowich, *Spaltkopf* (Vienna, 2008) and *Die Erdfresserin* (Vienna, 2012). Vladimir Vertlib, *Abschiebung* (Salzburg, 1995), *Zwischenstationen* (Vienna, 1999) and *Das Gedächtnis der Rosa Masur* (Vienna, 2001). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See Hilde Spiel, ‘Psychologie des Exils’, in *Österreicher im Exil 1934 bis 1945. Protokoll des internationalen Symposiums zur Erforschung des österreichischen Exils von 1934 bis 1945*, ed. by Dokumentationsarchiv des österreichischen Widerstandes und Dokumentationsstelle für neuere österreichische Litarautur (Vienna, 1977), pp. XXII-XXXII (p. XXXV). – I have supplied my own translations of excerpts in this essay because my discussion is based on the original German versions of the texts. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Robert Menasse, *Sinnliche Gewissheit* (Frankfurt am Main, 1996), pp. 218-219. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Y. Michal Bodemann, *A Jewish Family in Germany today. An Intimate Portrait* (Durham/London, 2005), p. 17. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Ruth Beckermann, *Unzugehörig. Österreicher und Juden nach 1945* (Vienna, 1989). On the effect of the Waldheim affair on Jewish writers in Austria see Reiter, *Contemporary Jewish Writing*. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Unpublished interview with the author, Vienna, June 2009. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. (Berlin, 1995). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. (Luchterhand, 2000). I will be quoting from the paperback edition (Munich, 2005). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. (Munich, 2003). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. For a detailed discussion of these novels see Reiter, *Contemporary Jewish Writing*. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Marianne Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory. Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust* (New York, 2012), p. 205. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. In most states where exiles from Nazi Germany found refuge, medical personnel had to pass additional exams in order to practice. See Hans-Peter Kröner, ‘Medizin’, in *Handbuch der deutschsprachigen Emigration 1933-1945*, ed. by Claus-Dieter Krohn, Patrick von zur Mühlen, Gerhard Paul, Lutz Wincker (Darmstadt, 1998), p. 786. This is one of several historical details that authenticate Mitgutsch’s novel. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. This conforms to Austrian restitution law. See Siegwald Ganglmair, ‘Österreich’, in *Handbuch der deutschsprachigen Emigration 1933-1945* ed. by Claus-Dieter Krohn, Patrick von zur Mühlen, Gerhard Paul, Lutz Wincker (Darmstadt, 1998), p. 1192. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. See Spiel, ‘Psychologie des Exils’, p. XXXV. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. The photo’s prominence in Max’s story has been stressed in a number of scholarly essays on Mitgutsch’s novel. E.g. Kristin Teuchtmann, *Über die Faszination des Unsagbaren. Anna Mitgutsch – eine Monographie* (Frankfurt am Main, 2003). Monika Shafi, ‘“Enteignung” und “Behausung”: Zu Anna Mitgutschs Roman *Haus der Kindheit*’, in *Modern Austrian Literature*, 36:1/2, 2003, pp. 33-54.  Christa Gürtler, ‘Abschied von einem fremden Haus’, *Die Rampe. Hefte für Literatur. Porträt Anna Mitgutsch*, ed. by Land Oberösterreich (Linz, 2004), pp. 73-76. Christina Guenther, ‘Identity, History, and Space in Josef Haslinger’s *Vaterspiel* and Anna Mitgutsch’s *Haus der Kindheit*’, in *Visions and Visionaries in Contemporary Austrian Literature and Film*, ed. and introduced by Margarete Lamb-Faffelberger and Pamela S. Saur (New York, 2004), pp. 199-210. Anthony Bushell, ‘Return of the Native or The Neighbours Are Back. Anna Mitgutsch’s Novel *Haus der Kindheit*, in *Neighbours and Strangers. Literary and Cultural Relations in Germany, Austria and Central Europe since 1989*, ed. by Ian Foster and Juliet Wigmore, German Monitor (Amsterdam, 2004), pp. 85-104. Katrien Vloeberghs, ‘Architektur der Unbehaustheit in Anna Mitgutschs Roman *Haus der Kindheit*, in *Dossier 28: Anna Mitgutsch*, ed. by Kurt Bartsch und Günther A. Höfler (Graz 2009), pp. 105-123. Konstanze Fliedl, Gebäude und Gedächtnis. Zu Anna Mitgutschs *Haus der Kindheit*, in *Profile 20: Grundbücher der österreichischen Literatur seit 1945*, ed. byKlaus Kastberger und Kurt Neumann (Vienna 2013), pp. 292-301. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Siegfried Kracauer argued that historical photography turns erstwhile fashion into fancy dress. See ‘Photography’, in Siegfried Kracauer, ‘Die Photographie’, in Siegfried Kracauer, *Das Ornament der Masse. Essays*, with a ‘Nachwort’ by Kertin Witte (Frankfurt, 1963), pp. 21-39 (especially p. 22). [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Kerstin Teuchtman has related Max’s reference to masks to Roland Barthes’ theory of photography in *Camera Lucida* and Marianne Hirsch’s development of it in *Family Frames*. See Teuchtman, *Über die Faszination des Unsagbaren*, p. 60. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Marianne Hirsch, ‘The Generation Postmemory’, *Poetics Today,* 29:1, 2008, pp. 103-28 (p. 107). [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Hirsch first developed the concept of ‘postmemory’ in *Family Frames.* *Photography, Narrative and Postmemory* (Cambridge, Mass, 1997) and more recently in *The Generation of Postmemory.* One of Hirsch’s examples is Max Sebald’s novel *Austerlitz* (2001). As a non-Jew, Sebald shares with Mitgutsch what Hirsch calls the intergenational ‘affiliative’ postmemory. See Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory*, p. 36. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. The creative character of Max’s imaginative investment is perspectivised through the photographic work of his friend Nadja. Nadja, who is Max’s junior by a generation, uses photographic technique to make the objects in front of her camera strange, thereby preventing them from becoming the medium of nostalgic memory. For a more extensive discussion of Nadja’s role in the novel see Reiter, *Contemporary Jewish Writing*, pp. 157-60. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Lisa Silverman, ‘Repossessing the Past? Property, Memory and Austrian Jewish Narrative Histories’, in *Austrian Studies*, 11, 2003, pp. 138-53 (here: 149). [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Silverman has attributed wider applicability to this phenomenon. See ibid., p. 141. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida. Reflections on Photography* (New York, 1981), quoted in Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory*, pp. 110-111. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. On the role of objects in narratives of return see Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory*, p. 206. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. The lion as symbol for the tribe of Judah has been seen critically. See <http://www.biblestudytools.com/dictionary/lion/> (accessed 4.3.2015). [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Hirsch, ‘Generation Postmemory’, p. 116. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. See Shafi, ‘“Enteignung” und “Behausung”’, p. 41. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. The anecdote of the Bernhardine syndrome, which, according to Spiel, gripped the exiles, comes to mind here. See Spiel, ‘Psychologie des Exils’, p. XXIX. The expression is actually copyright Robert Neumann, whose autobiography *Ein leichtes Leben. Bericht über mich selbst und Zeitgenossen* (Vienna and Munich, 1963) contains the bon mot ‘Ein deutscher Dackel unter misstrauisch ihn beschnüffelnden englischen Bulldoggen – und er sagt: “Zu Hause war ich ein Bernhardiner!”’ (p. 21). The expression was popularised by a Hermann Leopoldi song (text by Robert Gilbert) ‘Märchen vom Bernhardiner’ available online at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7wcgEEu-N6c> (accessed 4.3.2016). [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. On the magical meaning of the photograph see Vilém Flusser, *Für eine Philosophie der Photographie*, ed. by Andreas Müller-Pohle, Edition Flusser 3 (Göttingen, 1983), p. 9. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. The indexical nature of the analogue photograph was first claimed in the 1940s by André Bazin and suggests the veracity of the image. See Steven Skopik, ‘Digital Photography: Truth, Meaning, Aesthetics, in *History of Photography*, 27:3 (2003), 264-271 (p. 264). [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York, 2001), p. 13 has identified the ‘conception of unrepeatable and irreversible time’ as a factor of nostalgia. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Digital photography now allows the imitation of the chemically produced effect, suggesting that the meaning it adds to the photograph still has currency. See Scott Williams, ‘The Chemistry of Developers and the Development Processes’, in *The Focal Encyclopedia: Digital Imaging, Theory and Applications*, ed. by Michael R. Peres (Amsterdam, Boston etc., 2007), pp. 654-664 (p. 664). [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, p. 351. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Annette Kuhn, ‘Remembrance. The Child I Never Was’, in *The Photography Reader*, ed. by Liz Wells (London and New York, 2003), pp. 394-401 (pp. 394-395). [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, p. XVIII. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. Vloeberghs, ‘Architektur der Unbehaustheit’, p. 112. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. Shafi somewhat misleadingly calls Max a ‘fin-de-siècle Ästhet’. See Shafi, ‘“Enteignung” und “Behausung”’, p. 42. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. Boym attributes this effect to restorative nostalgia. See *The Future of Nostalgia*, p. 354. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. For the connection between property ownership and national identity see Silverman, ‘Repossessing the Past?’, p. 152. In an unpublished interview with me in 2009, Mitgutsch confirmed that H is modelled on Linz, the town in which she was born and grew up. See also my book *Contemporary Jewish Writing*, pp. 157-160. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. Doreen Massey, *for space* (Los Angeles, London and New Delhi, 2005), p. 130. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. Massey has argued that the past is materially present in places. See Doreen Massey, ‘Places and their Pasts’, in *History Workshop Journal,* 39 (1995), 182-92 (p. 186). [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. Konstanze Fliedl has interpreted both Max’s sources for the chronicle and the photographs as basis for a reconstruction. See Fliedl, ‘Gebäude und Gedächtnis’, p. 294. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. I do not see the categorical difference between Max’s ‘textual’ and ‘communicative’ strategies that Shafi has suggested because both are rooted in story-telling. See Shafi, ‘“Enteignung” und “Behausung”’, p. 41. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. The story resembles language in Lacan’s theorising. See ‘The Function and Fieled of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis’, in Jaques Lacan, *Écrits. A Selection*, trans. and ed. by Alan Sheridan (London, 1977), pp. 30-113 (p. 103). [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. In Mitgutsch’s subsequent novel *Familienfest* the members of a Boston immigrant family ground their identity in the Passover narration of the Exodus. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. On the function of repetition in postmemory see Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory*, p. 108. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)