

Transporting the Past: Suitcases, Briefcases, and Histories of Displacement

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Fig. 1 Briefcase from the Basch Family which held family documents. 2008.347.2, Henry and Rose Basch collection, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Archives, Washington, DC. Photograph by Author.

- 1 Around 1938, Henry and Rose Basch, a Jewish couple, fled from Poland to escape persecution by the Nazi government. They eventually made their way to Shanghai, China, where numerous other Jewish refugees were permitted to stay by the occupying Japanese Imperial government. Over 16,000 Jews would establish a community in Shanghai throughout the 1930s and early 1940s, including over 1,000 from Poland, joining Baghdadi and Russian Jewish communities that were established in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The Jewish people in Shanghai not only found community in exile but created businesses, mutual aid societies, schools, and maintained national and linguistic communities within their diasporas. While in Shanghai, the Basch family purchased a leather briefcase, which they used in their daily affairs. Nearly 70 years later, the briefcase they used was filled with an archive of papers related to their journey, as well as their struggle to bring more family members from Poland to Shanghai in the early 1940s (Fig. 1). In 2008 this briefcase and archive was donated to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM).¹



Fig. 2 Bag belonging to the Iwasaki family, which holds their family archive. Story documented in 50objects.org. Photograph by David Izu.

- 2 While the Basch family was in Shanghai, the Iwasaki family had a bag packed by the door of their house in East Hollywood, California, ready in case the FBI came to arrest Genichiro, the Japan-born patriarch of the family. In the weeks after the Japanese Empire attacked Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, thousands of Japanese Americans were arrested under suspicion by the FBI. Most were simply community leaders or involved with businesses and organizations with ties to Japan. None were convicted of conspiracy or acts of sabotage against the United States. Genichiro was not arrested, but the Iwasakis would use their emergency bag to carry their possessions to the Heart Mountain Incarceration Camp to which they were forcibly removed and imprisoned during WWII. The Iwasaki bag is now a repository of photographs and papers of their family history and time in the incarceration camps (Fig. 2).
- 3 Briefcases and suitcases evoke a certain portability of objects and the movement of their owners. Such items register semiotically as indexical of specific journeys and are symbolic in their ability to mediate histories of movement. Jewish Studies scholar Joachim Schlör argues that suitcases are integral to telling migration stories due to their ability to “hold memories” of movement.² The suitcase’s proximity to migrants and the ability of museum visitors to intrinsically connect the images of suitcases to people make

them ideal for teaching, speaking, and understanding histories of movement. However, the materiality of such items is less discussed. Suitcases, and their smaller cousins, the briefcase, hold things. They are both object and container, possessing a range of physical properties and material connections. Such items are also inherently material in their demands for care and curation, creating challenges for institutions that hold them to make sense of pasts of violence and trauma.

- 4 In focusing on luggage items, I look to understand the tensions which arise between the transition of objects connected to histories of violence from family collections to their curation and display by institutions. The power of luggage is in part due to its intimacy as an object that is prosaic but that also comes into close contact and touch with people, holding some of their most precious possessions. In doing so, they can be precious heirlooms through which families connect to their own histories of displacement. These are some of the attributes which make luggage attractive for museums, collections, and other displays to discuss these histories. However, in moving between the context of the family collection and the curated collection, the relationships which surround luggage items change, challenging institutions to contend with what it means to remove, sanitize, and care for objects.
- 5 In this essay, I employ Charles Sanders Peirce's tripartite categorization of signs as symbols, icons, and indexes to help think about the multiple meanings of luggage in museum and other collections.³ In Peirce's classificatory scheme, the mediation of signs means that they can often be layered with multiple meanings that render their categorical designation (index—icon—symbol) slippery and often overlapping. An index as a sign relates to its object by real relation to it as opposed to an icon which resembles an object or a symbol which relates to its object by convention.⁴ Perhaps the most well-known illustration of an index is smoke as a sign which relates to its object, fire.⁵ A person seeing smoke can infer the presence of fire considering the causal relationship between the two. Objects can be indexes through their relation to people as biographical objects, or through their evidentiary qualities which can be read to understand life histories, use, and physical associations.⁶ Icons refer to the ways in which signs refer to other things and objects through resemblance. A picture of an eagle might refer to an actual eagle. It is their resemblance which allows for the sign to be linked to its referent. Symbols are signs that refer to concepts and ideas that have no direct visual referent in the sign. Using the eagle again, the sign might refer to the United States as a national symbol, or in another context to the Roman Empire. In both cases, the relationship between the sign (eagle) and the object it refers to (the United States or Rome), is determined by multiple cultural relationships that link the two. The symbol is the most abstract of the three types of signs. By employing Peircean semiotics, I seek to show the various registers through which the power of luggage items is interpreted and in doing so demonstrate the importance of luggage in understanding histories of violence, removal, and loss.

Signifiers of Movement

- 6 I begin this essay with a discussion of the ability of luggage in different contexts to evoke the movement of people both as visual symbol and as pedagogical device. I then turn to the way the movement of luggage items through space and time creates an authentic aura.⁷ Layered on top of the visual signification, the aura of luggage constituted by their relationships to people and families makes them incredibly powerful. Finally, I turn toward the physical nature of luggage. How their material components and their capacities to store other objects and materials shape the different relationships that families and institutions hold with trunks, suitcases, and briefcases. The materiality of luggage forces separation and sanitization in their transfer between the family collection and the institutional collection. Throughout this discussion, I examine the different meanings these objects hold in personal collections and museums. Such objects bring to the forefront a question of curation which confronts museums: in researching, interpreting, and retelling histories of displacement, how does the luggage of the past matter?



Fig. 3 Hirokazu Kosaka, Wall of Suitcases and Trunks, Japanese American National Museum (JANM). Photograph by Author.

- 7 Luggage items like suitcases, briefcases, and trunks are powerful images which can captivate viewers and immediately invoke histories of movement. At the Japanese American National Museum (JANM), visitors enter the museum on the ground floor before ascending a staircase to see the core exhibition—*Common Ground: The Heart of Community*. Upon reaching the top of the stairs, visitors turn to the left and are immediately confronted by two large exhibits. The first is a reconstructed original barrack from the Heart Mountain Incarceration Camp, one of over 70 sites of incarceration that imprisoned over 125,000 people of Japanese ancestry during WWII.⁸ The barrack is made of wood, with tarpaper siding still present on some of the exterior façade and informational signage attached to contextualize the history of the building and the Japanese American incarceration experience. The second exhibit is *Wall of Suitcases and Trunks*, designed by artist and Buddhist priest Hirokazu Kosaka (Fig. 3). The wall is composed of over 80 suitcases and trunks and immediately brings the concept of movement to the observer.



Fig. 4 Detail photograph of a trunk from *Wall of Suitcases and Trunks*. Photograph by Author.

- 8 Kosaka explains that the inspiration for the wall came from his time working as a Buddhist minister at the Koyasan Temple in downtown Los Angeles in the 1970s.⁹ While there he presided over many funerals from the issei (first generation), those who were born in Japan and migrated to the United States before WWII. As part of his role as minister, Kosaka would meet with family members of the departed issei, listening to stories from their lives and of their journeys to the United States on steamer ships. These narratives of migration recalled his own journey from Japan to the United States as a child, crossing the Pacific with his younger brother without guardians, and being

looked after by the adult passengers on the ship. Many of the families Kosaka spoke to gave him their family member's suitcase or steamer trunk, unsure what else to do with such large objects (Fig. 4). Kosaka kept many of these in an attic in the temple building he worked in until he wrote a play to honor the migration of issei and featured *Wall of Suitcases and Trunks* as part of the production.¹⁰ The exhibit was then installed at JANM with the opening of the Common Ground exhibition. It is unclear if all the suitcases and trunks in the wall are originals donated to Kosaka from issei family members, or simply a large proportion of them.

9 The exhibit merges the luggage into a collective material signifier of movement. Iconically, they encompass a range of shapes, textures, and colors which signify luggage more generally. Their form transcends the specificity of context and can bring to mind any number of luggage containers a viewer may have encountered in their life. Symbolically, the suitcases represent movement and migration. The history of nineteenth- and twentieth-century immigration to the United States is integral to the narratives of the country as a “nation of immigrants” and a “melting pot.”¹¹ By highlighting the migration of issei, the wall folds Japanese American history into these larger narratives of American history. Though they allude to a specific period of transpacific migration between the end of the nineteenth century and start of the twentieth century, in the museum the objects are rendered into new semiotic registers by their proximity to the recreation of the Heart Mountain barrack.¹² The barrack recalls a period of forced removal and imprisonment between 1942-1946, a displacement which is visually reinforced by its proximity to the wall of suitcases.

10 The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum also uses the image of the suitcase to signify movement. A recent exhibition installed at the museum titled *Americans and the Holocaust*, discusses responses to the rise of Nazism and to the Holocaust in the United States. The exhibition's displays touch upon histories of racism and



Fig. 5 Exhibit displaying the number of immigration visas to the United States issued between 1932-1941 at the USHMM. Photograph by Author.

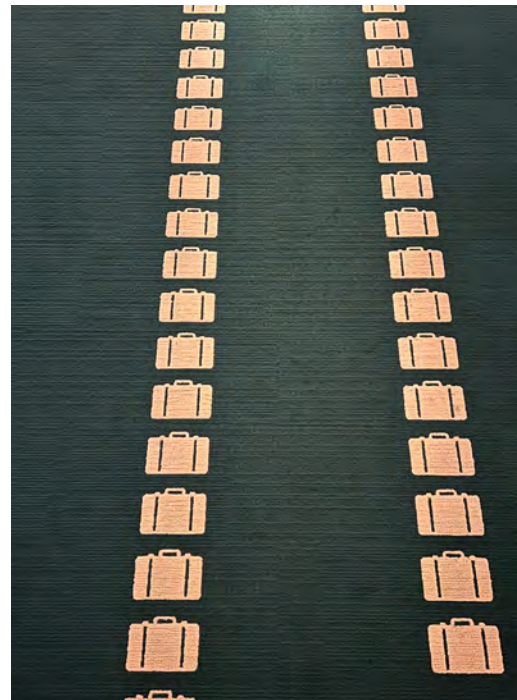


Fig. 6 Detail photograph of suitcase icons representing people waiting for immigration visas to the United States. Photograph by Author.

xenophobia that intersected with economic depression, currents of isolationism amid rising migration, and antisemitism. One installation charts the number of immigration visas issued each year between 1933 and 1941 as well as the number of people waiting for visas (Fig. 5). The data visualization utilizes a grey outline of a person to represent 1,000 unissued visas, a golden outline of a person to represent 1,000 visas issued, and a suitcase to represent 5,000 people on waiting lists for visas. Between 1933 and 1938 there were thousands of unissued visas as the waiting list expanded from three to five years with tens of thousands of people entering a prolonged period of indeterminacy. Strikingly, while the images of visas issued are contained on a chart on the wall of the display, the same wall is unable to contain the expanding number of suitcases which leak onto the floor. By 1939, over 50 suitcases trail onto the floor of the exhibition room, representing over 250,000 people (Fig. 6).

- 11 The museum's display works on two registers. The icon of the suitcase suggests the packing of luggage, and the inability to unpack such items for those awaiting visas. At the same time, the mass of suitcases, like Kosaka's display at JANM, evokes a feeling of overwhelming numbers to the viewer. They are given power as a collected mass, unruly in their inability to be confined to the wall space, the normative area of organized information. The system of legal immigration through the issuance of visas is visually inadequate to handle the mass of people attempting to escape persecution. There is further irony in the use of suitcases as images, items which hold the belongings of individuals, and the display overflowing with suitcase images, unable to hold them on the wall. While the suitcase connotes an orderliness and containment for migration, the system of migration is disordered and unable or unwilling to accommodate those attempting to migrate.
- 12 The ability of suitcases to evoke a history of movement is not unique to JANM or the USHMM. Numerous museums around the world look to the suitcase as a symbol in discussing the movement of people. In Japan, a central display of the [Japanese Overseas Migration Museum](#) in Yokohama is a pedestal with multiple suitcases piled on top of one another filled with the kinds of objects that early-twentieth-century migrants would have packed. In the United States, a central component of the museum on Ellis Island, the main port of entry for immigration to the United States on the East Coast during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, is the [Baggage Room](#), which has multiple trunks piled up to replicate the baggage of newly arrived migrants from Europe. The National Museum of Australia lists the [suitcase](#) as one of 14 defining symbols of the country, a representation of immigration to the continent.¹³ Similarly, Jason De León [collected and displayed backpacks](#) left behind by migrants on the US-Mexico border, using the objects to illustrate the scale and materiality of undocumented migration.¹⁴ Suitcases are even used as pedagogical tools: in the United Kingdom to talk about histories of migration in classrooms; in Czech theatrical productions centering histories of movement; in Canada, the Musée de l'Holocauste Montréal developed a teaching tool for elementary school students oriented around the suitcase of a young girl named [Hana Brady](#).¹⁵



Fig. 7 Monument at the Merced County Fairgrounds commemorating the site's use as a temporary detention facility for Japanese Americans during WWII. Photograph by Author.



Fig. 8 Dorothea Lange, Photograph of young Japanese American girl named Kimiko Kitagaki with luggage awaiting transportation to the Tanforan temporary detention Facility.¹⁶

- 13 The suitcase is effective in signifying migration due to its iconicity; it looks familiar to those who have traveled and can act as rhetorical shorthand for movement. In Japanese American incarceration history, the suitcase is commonly deployed in literature and memorialization. A monument at the Merced County Fairgrounds in California, a site used as a temporary detention center for Japanese Americans awaiting transfer to incarceration camps, shows a bronze statue of a child sitting atop a pile of suitcases (Fig. 7).¹⁷ The image is evocative of many photographs taken by War Relocation Authority (WRA) photographers like Dorothea Lange in the days and weeks of forced removal when Japanese Americans had to pack their belongings before their incarceration (Fig. 8). Depicting children with suitcases waiting for removal further resonates with other memorials of removal such as [Frank Meisler's Kindertransport monuments](#). In these monuments and photographs, the presence of luggage visually connotes the state of dislocation of the subjects. It is notable that most of Lange's photographs depicting the hardship of removal were initially impounded by the WRA.¹⁸
- 14 Orders for removal stipulated that what incarcerated people could bring with them would be, "limited to that which can be carried by the individual or family group," a phrase taken up in oral histories and literature as "only what you could carry."¹⁹ This dictum inspired museum didactics at sites like the Minidoka Incarceration Camp, where a display asks visitors what they would pack to take to camp (Fig. 9). Similarly, Vancouver artist Kayla Isomura turned to this theme for her [Suitcase Project](#) which photographs yonsei and gosei (fourth and fifth generation Japanese Americans and Japanese Canadians) with the items they might take with them if they were incarcerated.

- 15 Museums use luggage as a signifier of movement when presenting different types of migration, from immigration to displacement. The image of the suitcase, what Schlör classifies as the “anonymous symbolic suitcase,” is actively employed in a range of contexts described in this section because of its iconicity and symbolism.²⁰ These qualities allow for luggage to represent histories of migration and visa issuance programs, or to be used in memorials or as a pedagogical device for teaching about displacement. However, in family archives, the symbolic and iconic qualities of luggage are rarely if ever mentioned. While these interpretive elements of the sign are important to institutional representation, in family archives, luggage as symbol or icon is much less present. In the next section, I move towards an area where institutional and family collection notions of luggage begin to coincide—albeit still in tension with one another—as indexes.



Fig. 9 Exhibit at the Minidoka National Park Site Visitors Center, asking visitors to consider what they would pack into a suitcase if they were forcibly removed to an incarceration camp. Photograph by Author.

Itineraries and Authenticity: The Significant Object

16 In the basement of the [Panama Hotel in Seattle](#), there is a pile of suitcases left behind and never retrieved by Japanese Americans as they were forcibly removed. The suitcases are maintained by the hotel owners, undisturbed as a reminder of the removal. These objects are visible through glass in the floor of the hotel café (Fig. 10). As visitors look down, they can see the original objects and speculate what might be inside, the things left behind and never returned to after the mass removal and incarceration. For visitors to the hotel, the power of these objects lay not in their resemblance to the removal of Japanese Americans, but as the actual abandoned objects. Moreover, as objects left behind, they are indexical of the material loss of the Japanese Americans who could not take these objects with them. Like the example of smoke as an index of fire, abandoned objects serve as an index of people who lost those objects. They remain in the hotel because their original owners had to leave them.²¹ This ability for luggage to point towards histories of movement, displacement, and loss, makes them potent for museum displays.

17 As Oren Stier writes, at Holocaust related museums, the suitcase is a powerful index because it carries a trace of authentic experience.²² The suitcase is an object held by survivors or once held by the victims of genocide, resonating with aura and poignancy. In addition to the images of the suitcases used in the Americans and the Holocaust exhibit, the museum has a display of [luggage piled outside of a railcar](#) in its permanent exhibition, luggage which belonged to Jews who were deported to killing centers. These items are inscribed with names and the numbers assigned to families, relating them to individuals and actual lived experiences. In Poland at the Auschwitz-Birkenau Memorial and Museum there are [approximately 3,800 suitcases](#) (Fig. 11). Like other masses of objects collected by the institution, the large number of suitcases sparks a reaction from visitors, as they invoke the scale of crimes committed there.²³ The suitcases signify the people who held them, and the displacement they endured traveling from their homes to ghettos to concentration camps.



Fig. 10 Suitcases belonging to Japanese Americans who were incarcerated during WWII and kept in the basement of the Panama Hotel in Seattle. Photograph by Wendy Lau-Ozawa.



Fig. 11 Suitcases and luggage belonging to holocaust victims, displayed at the Auschwitz-Birkenau Memorial in Poland. Photograph by Laura Levitt.



Fig. 12 Exhibit of Suitcases brought by Japanese Americans to WWII Incarceration Camps on display at JANM. Photograph by Author.

- 18 Pieces of luggage, suitcases, and briefcases, which can be traced to particular people and particular moments, are imbued with an aura of authenticity through their use in historical moments—having been in the possession of people who carried them through migrations, exiles, and diasporas. For museums and museum visitors, the relevance of objects possessing historicity is situated in their itineraries, where they traveled throughout their lives as objects, and in their authenticity, the object as a witness to historical moments.
- 19 At JANM, there is a small display which comprises suitcases that directly relate to the incarceration. Five suitcases are stacked against one another with names and WRA designated family numbers written on their sides. These suitcases and trunks have individual accession numbers listed next to them, linking them to specific donors, chains of custody, and stories (Fig. 12). What makes these objects relevant to the museum are the specificities of their history, brought by families to incarceration camps. They are displayed due to their past itineraries, specific movements through space and time connected to historical moments.²⁴ The information card beneath the case outlines each individual object's accession number and the donor:

Gift of the E. Masuyama Family (2003.272.1)

Gift of the Minamide Family (98.89.1)

Gift of Yoshio Sato and Hanako (Takeoka) Sato (2018.3.1)

Gift of the Hasuike Family (95.129.1)

Gift of Janice D. Tanaka (94.62.1)

- 21 The general process for donating objects to JANM starts with a staff member encountering a prospective donor, often initiated by the donor. The objects under consideration are referred to the collections task force which is a subcommittee of the Board of Trustees and includes JANM trustees, governors, and content experts, and from there the case is brought before the Board of Trustees. The collections manager noted that the decision-making process is subjective as each person or unit—the staff member, collections taskforce, and Board of Trustees—must assess the object on a range of criteria: duplication of objects already in the museum’s possession, the condition of the object, its size and storage requirements, and perhaps more difficult to discern, the story behind the object. How does the object connect to Japanese American history and culture, and how does it tell that story? To determine this, JANM staff might ask the prospective donor for more background information alongside independent research around the object. This information will then be used to craft a justification as to why a particular object or collection would complement JANM’s collection.
- 22 These kinds of accession assessments aren’t unique to JANM; the USHMM indeed uses a similar process. A prospective donor contacts a curator, and the staff member assesses the donation in relation to the Holocaust. An in-person assessment of the piece, which may take place at the museum, the collections repository at the Shapell Center, a field office, or in the homes of the donors themselves, allows curators to evaluate the potential acquisition. If the curator and the donor are in agreement after the in-person assessment, the object or collection is transferred into the temporary custody of the USHMM. In the meantime, the curators hold weekly informal meetings to discuss issues or potential donations. Potential donations are brought before an internal committee that meets every four weeks and the final decision is made. If both the museum and the donor then agree, a final deed of gift is signed over to the museum, formally transferring the collection to the USHMM. Two central considerations used by the curators and the collections committee to assess potential donations are the museum’s mandate to rescue the evidence of the Holocaust and the need to care for the collections in perpetuity.
- 23 For both JANM and the USHMM, the ability for objects to contribute to the museums’ missions, whether in the realm of evidence gathering or telling stories, guides their decisions on whether to accept objects.²⁵ At the USHMM, when considering a briefcase or suitcase, curators might ask who is offering the object, a survivor or descendant, and whether there are direct memories associated with it. Similarly, at JANM, a curator will ask what stories are associated with the objects, and who is offering the object. In both cases, the chain of custody is crucial—from a historical moment to the moment of donation, it is important to trace what happened to the object. This not only provides

contextual information, but aids in establishing authenticity. The objects are assessed by their proximity to history. In her discussion of the procedures of police custody, Laura Levitt notes that the chain of custody encompasses not just the acquisition of objects or evidence, but the “ongoing work of custody, the holding and processing of objects over time, from start to finish.”²⁶ For the objects of history, the ways in which they have been held and processed before entering into contact with museums are crucial to their legibility to archivists and curators. As indexes, suitcases and briefcases are not considered based on their appearance and aesthetics as they might be in an art or craft museum. At museums like JANM and USHMM, the objects must signify a story that can link them to historical moments and people. This is what makes them significant and worthy of institutional acceptance.

- ²⁴ The indexicality of suitcases and briefcases, their authentic histories and links to the experience of people, makes them powerful to families who curate their own collections as well, but in a distinct way from museums. There is an intimacy in the objects which not only relates authentically to a past history, but to a family member, with affective ties. The Iwasaki family bag (Fig. 2) was never donated to a museum. A community history project called [50 Objects](#) recorded the bag’s story. Inspired by object-based histories, 50 Objects works to utilize the power of things to narrate the history of Japanese American incarceration during WWII. Many of the objects it selects are part of museum collections, but many others are part of family collections. Founded by community activists and historians in the wake of a 2015 auction which threatened to commodify objects made by Japanese American incarcerated, the 50 Objects project centers community-based knowledge and the affective relationships that survivors and descendants have with objects connected to incarceration history.²⁷ The bag itself is in the possession of Amy Iwasaki Mass, who, as a six-year-old, saw the bag packed by the door when she feared the FBI would take her father away. When holding the bag, she tells community historian Nancy Ukai that she recalls her family’s journey, the uncertainty of removal, and a time of racial animosity.²⁸ The bag has an intimate connection to her past, and her ability to embrace it, to hold it as she tells her family’s story. It thus moves beyond the ability of museums to convey a more abstract sense of history.
- ²⁵ In some cases, museum collections’ aim to preserve the past for the broader public comes into conflict with the more intimate relationships between families and these objects. A [suitcase held](#) by the Auschwitz Museum was inscribed with the name Pierre Lévi. The suitcase was lent to a museum in Paris for an exhibition where Michel Lévi-Leleu, the son of Pierre Lévi, recognized it. Lévi-Leleu obtained a court order to keep the suitcase in France as he argued it should be returned to the family. The Auschwitz Museum objected, arguing that it was an important object in telling the history of the Holocaust. Eventually the [case was settled](#) with the museum agreeing to a long term loan to keep the suitcase in the Paris Shoah Museum with the Lévi-Leleu family renouncing its claim to ownership of the suitcase. Such an instance shows both the power of the suitcase and the tension between institutional and personal ownership of such items. By holding an object to tell the history of the Holocaust, the museum intervenes in the ability of a family to engage in more intimate means of holding. This is not an issue that is particular to suitcases, but a tension with which museums are

continuously struggling as they attempt to answer the question of who has the rights to hold objects of the past.²⁹ As Jane Henderson argues in her critique of museum conservation practice, the holding and preserving of materials for the future excludes actors in the present who may articulate other relationships with such objects.³⁰ As the next section will discuss, institutions do more than simply hold objects, they institute a range of practices to consider accessioning objects and their subsequent care.

Materiality: Space, Composition, and Holding

- ²⁶ Symbolism, iconicity, indexicality, and authenticity are not the sole considerations institutions use to assess the value of including objects in their collections. Objects are also judged for their materiality, which is to say, the material and physical qualities of the things themselves.³¹ Objects take up space, release gas, undergo chemical changes, deteriorate, degrade, rot, and host micro- and macro- parasites. They are subject to the demands and vulnerabilities of the physical world. Consequently, in institutional environments, precautions and protocols contend with objects' materiality. Space and material composition are two crucial dimensions which impact the assessment of objects.
- ²⁷ Institutions which curate objects must consider space, the area and volume taken up by objects in their storage and presentation. Museum collections, as well as archaeological and anthropological collections held by other institutions, have faced a crisis of storage space for more than 50 years. The tripartite issues of under-resourcing, real estate, and ever-growing collections produced by archaeological excavations, curatorial collection, and donations, put pressure on institutions to figure out how to deal with all the things that come into their possession. This is compounded by the need to track these things, producing gigabytes of metadata to document the meanings, conditions, and placement of things.³² Thus, when considering accessioning an object or collection, an institution must consider registration and storage. Though I focus on questions of storage and care in this section, keeping track of things is itself a practice fraught with inconsistencies and challenges, even as institutions from museums and libraries to courts and police forces attempt to professionalize the practices of object tracking with technologically oriented solutions.³³



Fig. 12 Exhibit of Suitcases brought by Japanese Americans to WWII Incarceration Camps on display at JANM. Photograph by Author.

- 28 Luggage items such as suitcases, briefcases, or even steamer trunks, present particular challenges inherent in their design. As objects meant to hold things, they tend to be large and filled with empty space. For museums like the USHMM, luggage can take up a considerable amount of room when it is not on display, stacked on shelves as bulky oversized items too large to fit inside drawers or cabinets (Fig. 13). Similarly, at JANM, the curator articulated the difficulty in figuring out how to store luggage, which is commonly offered to the museum by descendants. These objects take up space and institutions struggle to accommodate their volumetric demands. In discussing *Wall of Suitcases and Trunks*, the JANM curator speculated that it would be tough to justify the space required to store the work if it weren't on display. Although she noted it could potentially be accessioned as a piece of art, the massive amount of space they would require in a storage facility challenges the ability of the institution to consider accession. The materials demand too much room.
- 29 The composition of items is another concern for museums considering accession. Institutions often divide object-based collections by material type, a practice that helps to coordinate the storage requirements of different objects. At the USHMM, collections specialists place non-oversized objects, as opposed to larger ones like those seen in Fig. 13, into locker storage based on their materiality (Fig. 14). There are lockers for paper, wood, metal, fur, and fabric items among the many different types of materials. There are also different temperature and humidity-controlled rooms to provide for cold storage of materials that degrade faster at higher temperatures or to assure differing levels of moisture appropriate to the needs of different materials. These separations

limit the interaction of materials with each other, ensuring maximal preservation. Material science research on the long-term durability of objects has provided scientific insight into object care and helps shape conservation decisions.³⁴ Pieces of luggage, particularly those manufactured in the twentieth century, present unique challenges due to their mixed media composition, often combining synthetic materials, leather, metal, cloth, and paper as well as chemical treatments to assist in weathering. Each material brings with it its own conservation concerns and necessitates specific approaches to avoid degradation.³⁵

30 Consequently, when choosing to accession pieces of luggage, museums must consider the materials they are composed of, how to handle these materials, and how to store them. At JANM and the USHMM, objects entering the collections often go through a quarantine period when they arrive at the institution. This allows for an assessment of the object's conditions and a chance to contend with any possible parasitic travelers on the objects. From mold to insect larva, newly acquired objects can contain potentially dangerous contaminants which would impact not only the donated objects themselves but could spread to other parts of the collection. Freezing objects is a common practice to attend to these possibilities, allowing for minimal harm to be done to the objects themselves while neutralizing the threats of insects or fungi.³⁶

31 The composition of the luggage itself is not the only consideration institutions make when accessioning items or planning the long-term curation of objects. A crucial quality of items of luggage is their ability to hold. By design, these bags and cases are meant to contain things, whether clothing, books, sundries, or food. They are meant to transport items from different locations. What they hold and how these holdings relate to the composition and history of the luggage itself impacts how institutions care for their collections.

32 At both the USHMM and JANM, curators note that people often bring family archives to the museum in suitcases, briefcases, and trunks. These evocative pieces of luggage transport the past to the present. Archives do important work in curating the materials from which the writers of history draw some of their primary sources. Michel-Rolph Trouillot's discussion of historicity in *Silencing the Past* is helpful in understanding the power of family archives and their curation. Trouillot distinguishes between the materiality of socio-historical process, what he terms historicity 1, and historical



Fig. 14 Storage area at the USHMM's Shapell Center with lockers dividing objects by different material type. Photograph by Author.

narratives which are produced about the past, historicity 2.³⁷ Trouillot's bifurcated historicity concerns the divide between what happened in the past and what was said to have happened and the ambiguity that the word history conjures as referring to both. For Trouillot, the actions of the past occur (historicity 1) after which people, often in official institutions, assemble archives. Historians subsequently produce historicity 2, creating narratives and assigning significance. For Trouillot, archives are an essential part of narrative assembly, constraining the production of historicity 2. The archive creates the conditions of possibility that the historian uses to access what occurred in the past (historicity 1). In this way the archive can both be inclusive in expanding knowledge of what has happened, or exclusionary and silencing when a lack of resources is available to trace certain moments or people. Family archives can powerfully increase the resources used in the construction of historicity 2, challenging institutional archives, or filling in the silences left by gaps in archival holdings. The accumulation of archives by families challenges the power of institutions to control the assembling of historical sources. For every item that comes into an archive there is an expansion of access to historicity 1, a widened view of the past. Institutions play an expanded role in the access to such materials as well as their arrangements and storage, none of which are neutral actions.

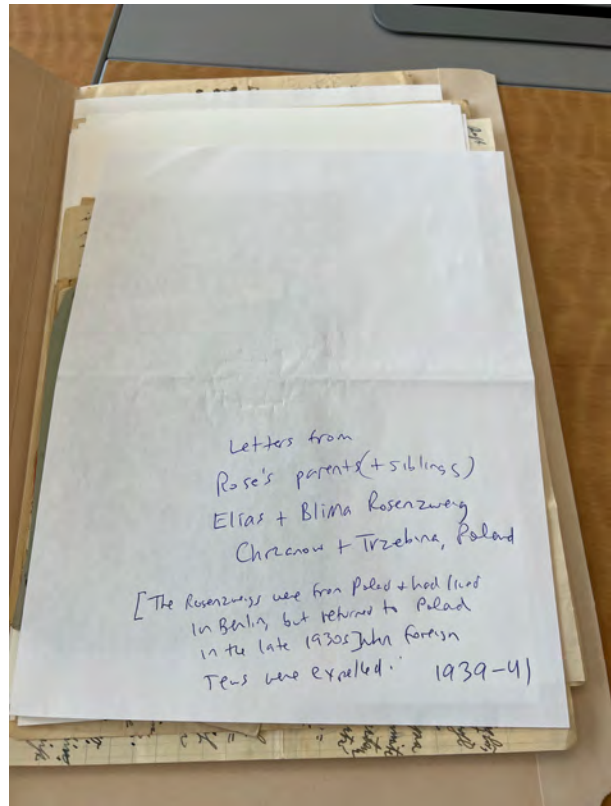


Fig. 15 Folder containing personal correspondence from the Basch Family. 2008.347.1, Henry and Rose Basch collection, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Archives, Washington, DC. Photograph by Author.

- 33 Through the ability to hold archival materials in themselves, luggage pieces in family collections become transportive objects for the production of history. They can hold the materials which produce Trouillot's historicity 2. Moreover, in the hands of families, these luggage-based archival repositories themselves are subject to idiosyncratic curation and organizational logics. A "family historian" determines which papers and objects are relevant for entry into the repository. The Basch family briefcase was one such repository. It held papers from the family related to their time in Shanghai: folders with visas in them, official state documents, photographs, and correspondence (Fig. 15). The briefcase was an archival repository, a fact acknowledged in its [title on the USHMM catalog](#): "Leather briefcase used to hold family papers by Jewish Refugees." The object is listed both in its association to Jewish refugees, the Basch Family, as well as its use as an archival repository. This is in contrast to another entry for an almost identical briefcase used by a different Jewish refugee family in Shanghai, simply listed as "[Briefcase](#)." The Basch family briefcase's use as a repository of papers is integral to its identification in

the museum's collection. Despite this close affiliation with the papers, they are stored separately, subdivided into acid-free folders which are rehoused in an acid free box like the ones visible in Fig. 16. Not only are they separated out, but they are stored in completely different sections which divide documents from objects. Such separation is unsurprising given the differing material requirements of the briefcase itself and the papers within. Conservation guidelines for leather luggage note such items should not be used as storage containers lest the contents damage the leather or vice versa.³⁸



Fig. 16 Archival boxes from the USHMM's Shapell Center containing the Schultz and Bodnar Families Papers. Photograph by Author.



Fig. 17 The Iwasaki bag with its archive of family documents. Photograph by David Izu.

- 34 Amy Iwasaki Mass also uses her family's bag as an archival repository. She keeps the bag at home in a closet stored next to the Christmas ornaments, and stores family documents in it, including immigration papers, books, and photographs (Fig. 17). The Iwasaki bag's continued usage as an archival repository marks its personal connection to the Iwasaki family. The piece of luggage was a witness to history, itself an object marked by time and indexical of the family's forced removal and incarceration. It is also a memory object, something deeply intimate to its owner who can touch it and recall the past. At the same time, it holds an archive of materials collected and curated by its owner. The Iwasaki family's use of the bag as an archival repository with a mixture of material types stored inside, contrasts with the separation of material types that the Basch family briefcase underwent. Though the storage of these materials inside of the

leather bag in a closet may not conform to best practices of conservation, its meaning transcends functionality. Here, other relationships are prioritized over conservation.

- ³⁵ The separation of papers from the Basch Family's briefcase incorporates these materials into the larger repository of the USHMM archives and the bag into its object collections. These incorporations into the museum will aid in the preservation of the materials for many years into the future, providing access to researchers and members of the public. At the same time, these materials are removed from the personal, losing the intimate qualities connected to their families as they are moved into a sterilized environment. Further, they are subject to the classificatory schemes of the institutional archive, a process which will inevitably color the use of such documents in the production of historicity ². The keywords attached to these documents "Refugees, Jewish—China—Shanghai—History" and "Shanghai (China)—Jewish Refugees" influence the connections that are drawn in search results and the other documents and papers they will be put in relation with. In contrast, the Iwasaki suitcase will remain vulnerable to the degradations of time as it is kept by a family with much less control over its environmental conditions. The mixture of material types may hasten such deterioration, though perhaps on a timescale not noticeable within the next decades. This item, however, will remain with the family that cares for it, accessible for the telling of family histories and to the meanings and affects layered onto it. Its ability to develop historicity ² is preserved on a smaller scale than papers available in research institutions. For better or worse, the people who decide what enters into the Iwasaki family archive, who has access to it, and how it is arranged—archons as Jacques Derrida may have described them—stay for the moment within the Iwasaki family.³⁹

Concluding Ruminations

- ³⁶ When objects like briefcases and suitcases are kept by families to mark their own histories of movement, they are imbued with multiple values. They can be deeply personal, evoking memories of the past and loved ones long gone. They can also hold the family's historical archive, containing a multitude of objects and materials which tell stories like building new lives in a Shanghai refugee community or migration to the United States and eventual removal to incarceration camps. For museums they are powerful as iconic and symbolic signs of historical trends of migration and displacement. They are also indexical, authentic items which traverse the very geographies which they then represent. Such items can and often do move between these two states, from family collections to museum collections, though at times with frictions. Briefcases and suitcases can also form assemblages, such as when incorporated into an artwork like *Wall of Suitcases and Trunks* or when combined with contents of family collections and archives. They are imbued with new meanings while in contact with sets of other objects, meanings that can be lost or obfuscated when partitioned, separated by material type, or divided into individual pieces. Further, the intimacies of such objects can be difficult to access when they are transferred from personal possession to institutional collections.

- 37 At the same time, luggage still occupies a liminal position. Some bags are unambiguous in their ability to produce narratives of history. In *All That She Carried*, Tiya Miles details the history of a sack containing a small number of items given by Rose, an enslaved woman in South Carolina, to her daughter Ashley before they were separated. The great granddaughter of Rose, Ruth Middleton, then embroidered the sack with this story. Such an item makes its historicity known both in its physical qualities as well as the narrativization by Ruth. In contrast, as detailed above, each item in *Wall of Suitcases and Trunks* is of undetermined significance for an institution like JANM. Though collectively powerful it is also collectively burdensome for conservation. When divided up, the itineraries of each component are obscured by a lack of clear connection and record keeping.
- 38 Luggage items are powerful in part because of their ability to hold and move. Briefcases like that of the Basch Family or the bag of the Iwasaki Family are prized because they were able to hold things and move them. Luggage can transport the past. The Basch and Iwasaki bags are seen as significant both for the stories attached to them as well as their role as repositories, but such determinations ask: what containers come to matter? Mollie Wilson Murphy, a Black girl living in Boyle Heights in the 1940s, kept a trove of letters from correspondence with her Japanese American friends who were sent to incarceration camps across the country. Eventually, in 2000, she donated these letters to JANM, bringing them in two grocery bags that she had kept them in.⁴⁰ Should these grocery bags be considered for accessioning into the collection? They were not kept by the museum, but what would have warranted their inclusion? If they were historic? If they were of more durable materials like leather as opposed to paper or plastic? Such questions and lines surround the ambiguity of luggage. They are both prosaic and powerful, activated when in contact with certain signifiers and dormant when left unmoored by narrative support. Their materiality can help them endure and hold, but also provide challenges to institutions which look to contain them.
- 39 Loss and the impossibility of reproduction are intrinsic to histories of displacement. Ma Vang in her accounting of the archives of Hmong refugees starts with a discussion of a lost baggage tag. Noting the items listed in the bag, Vang draws out not only its personal and spiritual contents, which held great meaning to the family that lost the bag, but also the bag's place in the larger story of dispossession and displacement faced by Hmong refugees.⁴¹ Historian Leora Auslander recounts the longing and anger of Parisian Jews who petitioned the state in the post-war years to reclaim furniture and other items seized from them. In doing so, they not only sought out their lost items but articulated their relationships to the state and French society. Moreover, they announced their loss of home, a home defined by material things.⁴² In histories of displacement, loss is a recurring aspect, and luggage holds a particularly potent position as an item that can help take some of the things that matter.
- 40 Still, a suitcase cannot hold a homeland. As poet Mahmoud Darwish poignantly wrote of his own displacement, "my country is not a suitcase, I am not a traveler."⁴³ For the Basch and Iwasaki families, their suitcases and briefcases cannot contain their lost homes. Their luggage can, however, contain their memories and archives, forging new affective narratives of history. Both pieces held family archives and were held by families

themselves, clutched in periods of exile and uncertainty and relied upon to carry the possessions that remained. Suitcases and briefcases, trunks and sacks, can transport the past, and in doing so remain central to understanding the loss of displacement. The narrative efficacy of luggage is exactly why institutions like JANM and USHMM look to luggage to study and interpret the past as well as to tell these stories of displacement to the public. However, the tensions between the practices and meanings of family collections and institutional collections remain. Consequently, both families which hold these material archives and institutions which may accession them must navigate with care the potential transition of such materials between these repositories.

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