"The book is small so it can be hidden": Leia Kreimer's Tiny Book from the Vapniarka Concentration Camp

Barbara Mann

1 "The book is small so it can be hidden." I don't remember who said this—was it the curator at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum who carefully handled the book on my behalf? A colleague? Maybe I read it somewhere about some other Holocaust object.[1] I was mesmerized by my encounter with this tiny, brown leather-bound square of a book created in 1943 in Vapniarka, by a Jewish inmate named Sender, and marveled over its very existence.[2] How, could such a small item have survived the conditions of the camp? And why was it preserved? What did its survival mean?

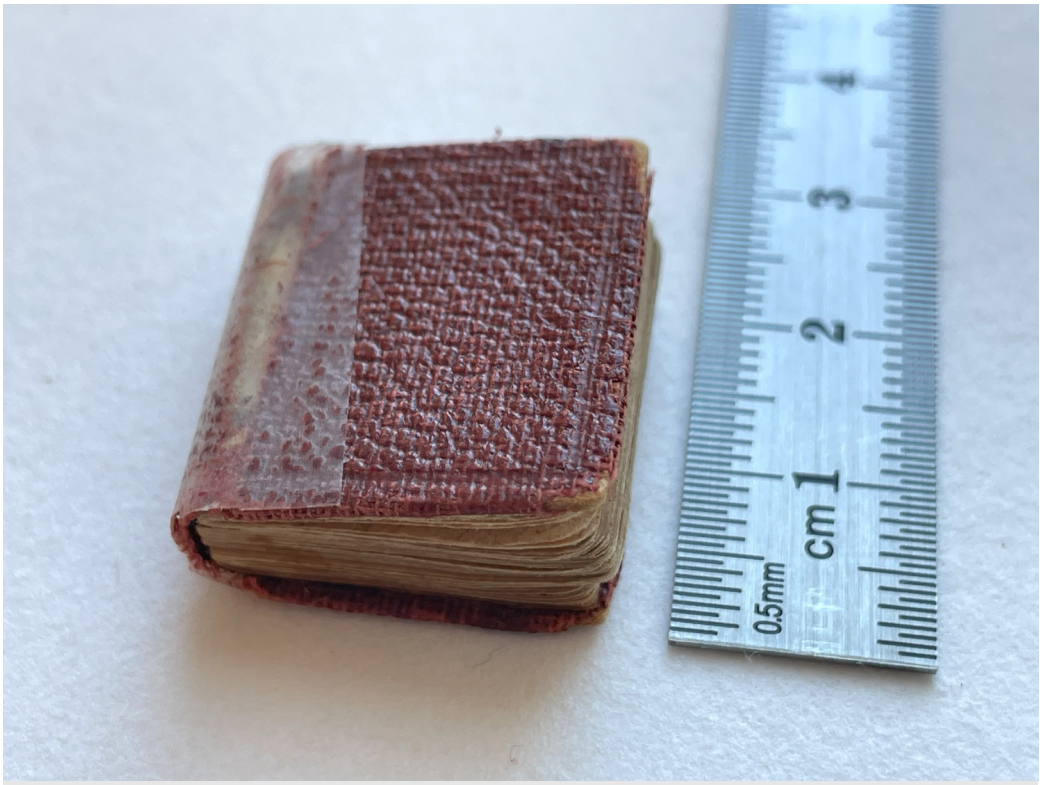
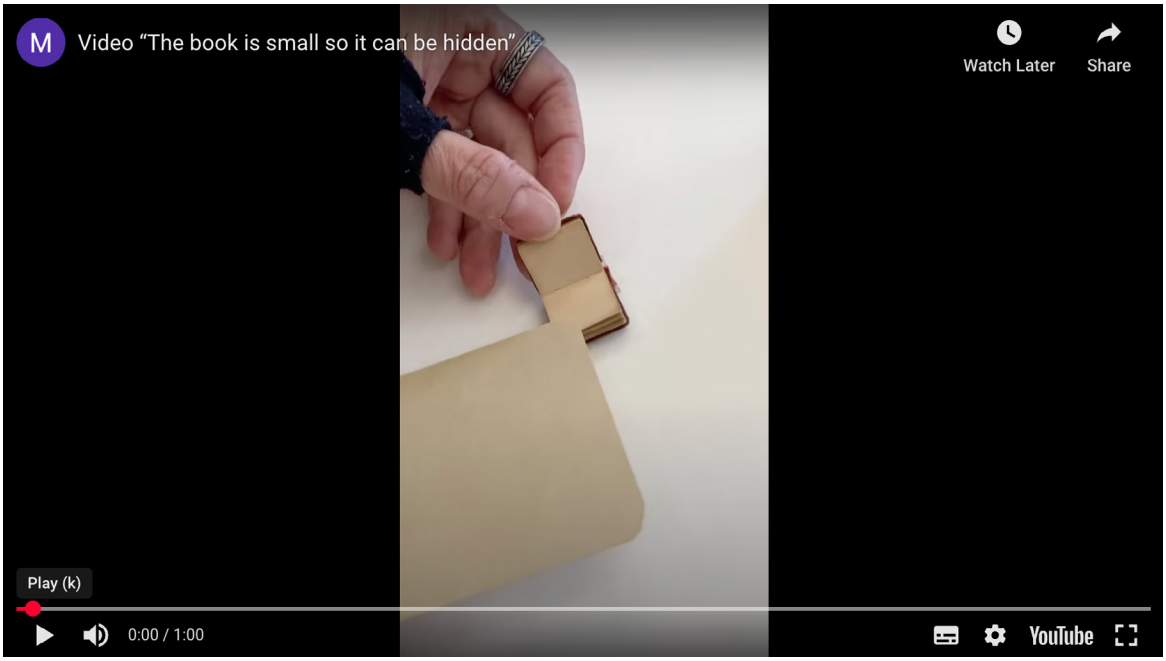


Fig 1. Leia Kreimer's tiny book from Vapniarka at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. Photograph taken by Scott Homolka, Chief Conservator at the USHMM.

2 As I later learned, the book's diminuitive size may well have been what saved it: it likely survived by being hidden on occasion in someone's mouth. The question of sustenance and survival in the camps is complex. What exactly is nourishing about creating a book in physical and emotional extremis? A book is generally considered a non-essential personal item. That is, unlike clothing, or artifacts related to food, shelter or safety, books do not appear to fulfill essential human needs. And yet, even within the extreme conditions of life in the camps, people chose to keep and—in some cases—create books. Leia Kreimer's tiny book, made for her as a gift, is one example.[3] Its production,



exchange, and ultimate survival illuminate the enduring resilience of the book as a cultural form that is both text and object.

3 The story of this tiny book—what Igor Kopytoff has referred to as the "biography" of the object—is embedded in its relation to a difficult past.[4] As mentioned above, the book belonged to Leia Derera (Kreimer); it survived the war with her and was donated to the USHMM in 2004. Kreimer died in 2022 at the age of 103. The book is part of a vast collection, donated over the years by Shoah survivors, their families, and their descendants. Each of these objects represents a piece of history and, if pressed, can tell a story of both trauma and resilience. One might wonder how life in a concentration camp inspired or even allowed for the creation of something like a book, or any personal item not immediately, directly tied to the daily struggle to stay alive. And yet, the Shapell Center's collection of items made in or retrieved from the camps astounds in both size and variety: clothing and other textiles, often refashioned from some camp-issued article or fabric; pins, jewelry, and other kinds of personal objects such as combs, small boxes, and picture frames; and an array of handmade, handwritten volumes and sketchbooks, or other repurposed books including religious texts and journals. These objects were all either made or refashioned using the materials at hand, a kind of creative *bricolage* that drew upon the meager materials of prisoners' living spaces or places where they worked, in or outside of the camps. Many of these objects were used by multiple individuals—exchanged or shared—a reflection of the camps' dire material conditions. But they survived with someone. They are themselves physical evidence of, and testimony to, survival.

4 Leia donated three objects that she received while imprisoned at the Vapniarka camp: a small box made of copper bullet casings and seashells; a sailboat-shaped picture frame, and the tiny book. At Vapniarka, Leia performed menial labor and cared for prisoner patients in the infirmary. The book appears to have been given to her as a

token of appreciation for this care; its final page contains a handwritten inscription in Romanian—"a sign of gratitude for your time, Sender, 21.1.1943." The book itself is less than an inch all around, with a reddish-brown textured leather-covered cardboard front and back cover. The 45 white paper pages are discolored with age and feature a single poem, scrawled across several inner pages in black ink, and a dedication and date in pencil near the back. The binding is sewn and appears to have been repaired at some point with tape.

5 Remarkably, another tiny book produced in Vapniarka also survives: a volume dedicated to Dr. Arthur Kessler, who oversaw the camp's infirmary. Hirsch and Spitzer discuss this artifact from the Kessler family archive as a "testimonial object" in relation to their broader exploration of postmemory.[5] While the Kessler book contains more text, and an evocative series of drawings from the camp, the books are identical in size and appear to be created from similar materials—leather covering cardboard around paper with a simple thread binding. The fact that Leia worked in the infirmary further substantiates the connection between these two books. While we may now retrieve and engage with Leia's tiny book as an individual memorial object, its production and circulation were embedded within the context of a community. Indeed, as Hirsch and Spitzer note, the little book "in the Kessler family archive, as well as woodcuts and drawings by various artists, attest to the lively cultural and artistic life that was thriving in the camp even at its worst moments."[6] Together, the two books constitute a set, and raise the tantalizing question of how many more were created and might still remain in the possession of survivors and their descendants.

6 Within the broader category of material culture connected to the Shoah, books occupy a special position, connected to the centrality of a wide array of textual practices in traditional Jewish cultures. Books have been at the heart of Jewish worship and religious behavior for centuries, including the weekly recitation of portions of the Hebrew bible in communal settings. Scrolls, prayer books and other volumes associated with religious observance were handled with reverence. When they became worn, these volumes and scrolls were typically buried in a *genizah*, a special archive dedicated to the storage of sacred texts that are no longer in use, with a specific set of liturgical traditions accompanying their burial. The book's status as a sacred object thus actually exceeded its material utility, its afterlife lingering in both symbolic and affective terms.

7 Even as Jewish societies transitioned from more religious to more secular norms and practices, books retained some trace of this "sacred" status; their physical concreteness as objects became an iconic feature of modernist Jewish art and culture, and modern Jewish literature's generic features borrowed from and mimicked the "aura" of transcendent forms.[7] The historical privileging of textuality may have made Jewish books a particular target during the war, when the destruction of books—in schools, libraries, archives, and private collections—paralleled the murder of their Jewish owners.[8] In fact, the looting of personal and public libraries, followed by the systematic destruction of books, was part of the Nazi plan to eradicate both Jews and their culture. German forces destroyed hundreds of libraries and nearly 200 million books. Efforts were made during and after the war to save these books and repatriate them to their

owners.[9] Some, like this tiny brown book, survived as part of a personal collection of artifacts, almost like souvenirs.

8 Of course, the circumstances of this book's production—under conditions of extreme duress within a concentration camp—distinguish it from the vast libraries of books which either disappeared or were destroyed during the war. Compared to these collections and to other material artifacts created by camp inmates, the list of books made in or retrieved from the camps is relatively brief. Some were brought into the camps and repurposed in some fashion while others, like Leia's book, were made there. Within both the ghettos and camps, books related to religious life may have possessed a meaningful psychological quality for the item's owner, some sustaining link to their previous life. Such an emotional property might also hold for other books found in the camps, including personal journals, children's literature, and poetry. These kinds of affective ties to "evocative objects" constitute a form of sacredness, especially as we encounter the surviving books in their current archival resting places.[10] Indeed, although the Shapell Center is not a genizah, the objects in its care—including or maybe even especially the books—are treated with respect bordering on reverence.

9 Leia Kreimer's tiny book contains a short text in Romanian written on consecutive pages: the poem "Si Daca" ("And if") (1883) by Mihai Eminescu. Eminescu has been called Romania's "national poet" and this poem is a late-nineteenth-century Romantic lyric through and through, imagining the soothing presence of an absent beloved as the

Fig. 3 Kreimer interior pages with poem. United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. Photograph taken by Scott Homolka, Chief Conservator at the USHMM.

sensory effects of nature outside the speaker's window. We may imagine that Sender (or someone else) knew this poem by heart and felt it to be an appropriate expression of gratitude for Leia's care and companionship.

Şi dacă . . .
Şi dacă ramuri bat în geam
Şi se cutremur plopii,
E ca în minte să te am
Şi-ncet să te apropii.

Şi dacă stele bat în lac
Adâncu-i luminîndu-l,
E ca durerea mea s-o-mpac
Înseninîndu-mi gîndul.

Şi dacă norii deşi se duc
De iese-n luciu luna,
E ca aminte să-mi aduc
De tine-ntotdeauna.

(English translation by Brenda Walker)[11]

And if . . .
And if the boughs beat the pane
And poplar trees shiver,
You're there in my mind again
Slowly coming nearer.

And if the stars beat down
On the lake to light its depths,
It's to soothe every pain
And calm all my thoughts.

And if the thick clouds part
To let the full-moon through,
It's so I'll keep you in my heart
And be eternally with you.

10 The world described in the poem seems about as far as one can imagine from the concentration camp "universe."[12] It doesn't appear to be "about" the camps in any direct way. Furthermore, as we would expect, it contains none of the markers of trauma that are the hallmarks of "poetry of the Holocaust." Theodor Adorno famously claimed that "poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric"—not a prohibition, but more a *warning* about the ethical challenge of making art of suffering.[13] But what about poetry during concentration camp life? What role do we imagine poetry, or any artistic expression for that matter, could play in the daily life of concentration camp inmates? The relatively minor but moving example of the book Sender gave to Leia, sometime before he died on December 13, 1943, suggests that poetry meant *something*, a way of denoting an emotional attachment associated with life before and outside the camps; the tiny book is a concrete manifestation of this emotion, presented as a gift, reminding both giver and recipient of their shared humanity.

11 Writing about the Holocaust is large: it "comprises all forms of writing, both documentary and discursive, and in any language, that have shaped the public memory of the Holocaust and been shaped by it."[14] Poetry and documentary, Yiddish and German and Hebrew and Spanish, fiction and memoir—all this is Holocaust literature. Two corpuses that are intimately associated with Holocaust memory are themselves hybrid genres: unclassifiable and unwieldy, the Oneg Shabbes archives and the *yizker* (memorial) books suggest physical objects—bookends, as it were, on either side of history. The Oneg Shabbes archives were composed and compiled in the Warsaw Ghetto during the war, buried in milk cans and other metal containers under the decimated ground of the ghetto, and recovered (in part) in 1946.[15] They are a collectively produced

record of Polish-Jewish life before and during the war. Yizker books were written in the war's aftermath by survivors for their descendants; each book is named after a town, and the hundreds of books together offer myriad microhistories of Jewish communities and their destruction.16 Next to this towering edifice of books sits the tiny book from Vapniarka, with its sentimental lyric about weeping poplars and a barely decipherable dedicatory scrawl. I remain enthralled by its small and mighty presence.

Citation Guide

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Notes

1. See Bożena Shallcross, *The Holocaust Object in Polish and Polish-Jewish Culture* (Indiana University Press, 2011).

2. On Vapniarka see Marianne Hirsch and Leo Spitzer, "There was never a camp here!" in *Ghosts of Home: The Afterlife of Czernowitz in Jewish Memory* (University of California Press, 2011), 197-231, and my discussion below of the tiny book.

3. For details about the book, its provenance and Leia Kreimer see "Handcrafted miniature book of poetry created for a labor camp inmate by a fellow inmate," United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, accessed March 2, 2025, https://collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/irn515199

4. See Igor Kopytoff, "The cultural biography of things: commoditization as process," in *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, ed. Arjun Appadurai (Cambridge University Press, 1986), 64-91.

5. See Marianne Hirsch and Leo Spitzer, "Testimonial Objects," in *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2012), 176-199.

6. Hirsch and Spitzer, "Testimonial Objects," 183.

7. Regarding aura, Jewish cultural production provided the paradigm of what happened to "art in the age of mechanical reproduction," in Walter Benjamin's terms. See also my book: Barbara E. Mann, *The Object of Jewish Literature: A Material History* (Yale University Press, 2022), 114-156.

8. See Jonathan Rose, ed., *The Holocaust and the Book: Destruction and Preservation* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2001).

9. See Rose, *The Holocaust and the Book* and David Fishman, *The Book Smugglers: Partisans, Poets, and the Race to Save Jewish Treasures from the Nazis* (ForEdge, 2017).

10. See Sherry Turkle, ed., *Evocative Objects: Things We Think With* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011).

11. Mihai Eminescu, "And If", in *Romanian Poetry*, trans. Brenda Walker, accessed March 2, 2025, https://poetry-romanian.blogspot.com/2014/03/and-if-mihai-eminescu.html

12. An expression associated with the testimony of Yehiel Denur aka "Ka-Tzetnik," at the Eichmann trial in Jerusalem in 1962. See also Iris Milner, "The 'Gray Zone' Revisited: The Concentrationary Universe in Ka. Tzetnik's Literary Testimony," in *Jewish Social Studies 14*, no. 2 (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2008), 113-155.

13. Originally published in an essay from 1949 and translated in Theodor Adorno, "Cultural Criticism and Society," in *Prisms*, trans. Samuel and Shierry Weber (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1967).

14. For a comprehensive review of categories, background, and analysis, see David G. Roskies and Naomi Diamant, *Holocaust Literature: A History and Guide* (Waltham, MA: The Tauber Institute, 2013).

15. For a meticulous and elegantly written history of the archive and its recovery, and a primer for all current and budding humanities scholars about why our work matters, see Samuel D. Kassow, *Who Will Write Our History: Recovering a Hidden Archive from the Warsaw Ghetto* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2009).

16. See Jack Kugelmass and Jonathan Boyarin, *From a Ruined Garden: The Memorial Books of Polish Jewry* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1998) and Mann, *The Object of Jewish Literature*, 114-156.

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