

# SECOND CHANCE

My Life in Things



RUTH ROSENGARTEN



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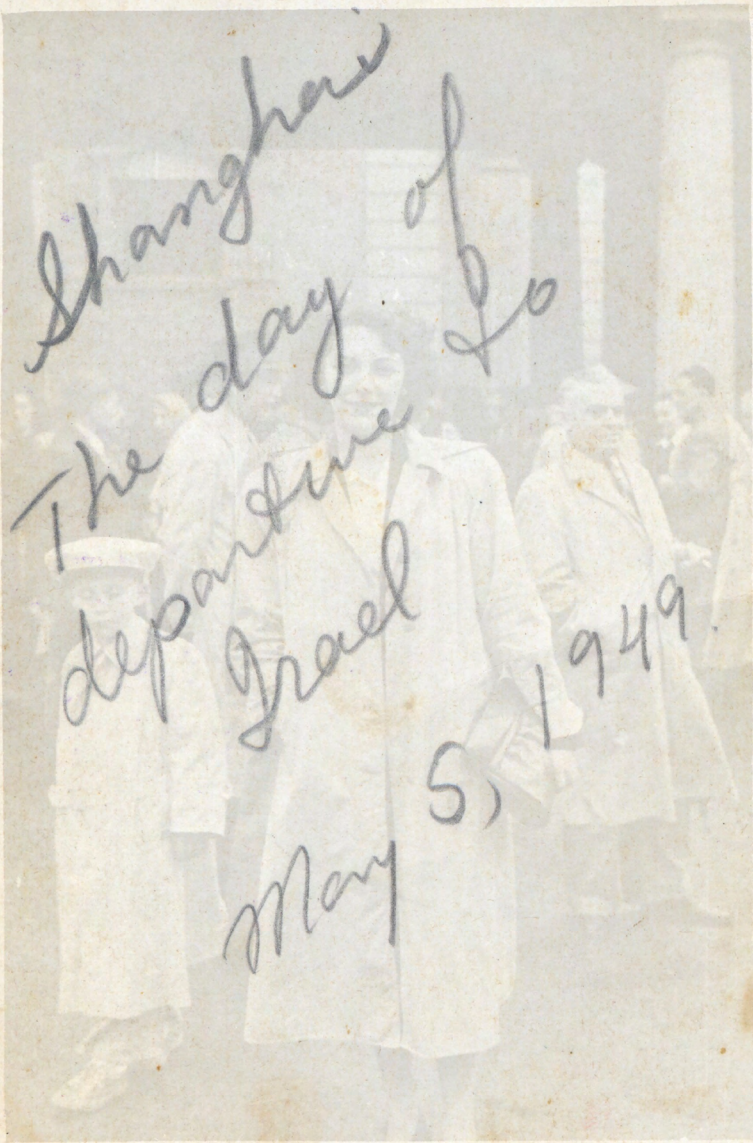
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Shanghai  
The day of  
departure to  
Israel  
May 5, 1949.



# Photograph

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Like many of the Russian Jews living in China at that time, my mother Fusia left in 1949. She flew west over several days to make her home in the newly established state of Israel. She was twenty-one.

Both of my parents were of a generation of Jews that experienced the establishment of Israel with optimism and relief. By the time she arrived there, Fusia was already Fay, later regretting not having added what she considered a film-starry *e* to the end of that name. She would claim that the move to Israel was part of Operation Magic Carpet, but a quick scroll through a Wikipedia entry clarifies that this term was used only for an operation, contemporary with my mother's arrival in Israel, also known by the more ideologically charged moniker *Operation On Wings of Eagles*, bringing 49,000 Jews from Yemen and Aden to Israel.

When I think of the stories I heard as a child—a limited repertoire of set pieces—snapshots come to mind; mental images that replicate the photographs that Fay kept in the big box at the foot of her bed. The photographs in the box seem like degraded versions of some loftier imagined originals, a little like the deliberately photocopied effect of the photographic illustrations in the books of W. G. Sebald. It is as though some mental image preceded the photograph, a Platonic ur-photograph, an image born, no doubt, of my mother's words.

I cannot imagine my mother's Chinese childhood in colour.

Many of the photographs I brought home after my mother died were already familiar to me. My brother, sister and I had often looked through that photograph box she kept. But returning home with my mother so recently buried, I examine these photographs anew and in doing this, I am meticulous as an archaeologist. They are time capsules holding long-vanished moments in my own prehistory. They also hint tangentially at broad historical upheavals: the world my mother inhabited as a child was buffeted and reshaped by revolution, war and mass migration.



I comb them for clues, for physical similarities, for differences, and—even now, despite having examined them many times—for surprises. I search for accounts of life before me; but also, for accounts of my parents and my siblings, my grandparents and family friends, buoyed in narratives that flow outwards and inwards, away from and towards myself. My past selves (the small girl, the young or middle-aged woman), the persons my parents were before I was born and before they knew each other, become characters, introducing themselves unapologetically, addressing me from prehistories of loss and bereavement.

In the winter of 2010, shortly after Ian died, I felt the need to make works using family photographs. Ian's death was not tangential to this, since my project began with a wish to find—to grasp and articulate—a relationship between the first and last ever photographs of him: as a baby held by his petite mother, and the final image of his inert, imperial profile, his eyes tightly seamed, the knownness of him already in retreat and with it, my status as beloved receding.

That last time I pointed my camera at him in Addenbrookes' Hospital in Cambridge as he was dipping in and out of consciousness, pumped up with disavowal, I asked the nurse why he kept falling asleep. *He's not really conscious*, she said, blunt as I would have wanted her to be, yet a harbinger of the unthinkable. To continue to objectify him, I thought that day, would be an intrusion. His lack of consent pressed itself upon me. I do not know how Annie Leibovitz allowed herself to photograph Susan Sontag; nor how Angelo Merendino or Nancy Borowick or the many other photographers and bloggers who have recorded the trajectory of the terminal illness of a loved one, did it. I couldn't.

It was then that I returned to the photographs of my family, photographs that I had earlier explored in a body of work titled *Verso* (2010–2011). In re-examining my family's photographs—the need to re-enter the archive is cyclical, recurrent—I was interested not only in my belief in their evidentiary promise, but also in what they concealed. I noted the conventionality of poses in so many of them. I was intrigued by the mystery of the unidentified people and places in backgrounds, forever arrested within my family's narrative, unknowable to me. If the word *photobomb* was already in circulation, I was not familiar with it, but anyhow, rather than lamenting the unexpected or unintended

appearance of people within the frame of family shots, I welcomed it as a clue, the inadvertent portent of old and buried news.

And then, there were those images that I often returned to, as if to unearth a secret about myself: my mother as a child in China; as a confident, beautiful young woman in Israel. My father with his tender eyes, as a boy in Latvia, a young man in Palestine. The first photographs of them as a couple in Israel in the early 1950s. Honeymoon in Tiberias. Their move to South Africa in 1962. Their story in a nutshell.

All of these photographs are from a time—a *back then*—when it was customary for a single image, or at most, several, to stand for a whole event: an arrival, a picnic, a bar-mitzvah, a wedding, a departure, a funeral. My mother's momentous departure from China, where she had lived up to the age of twenty-one, is marked by one photograph.

In wanting to bring these small family photographs into my work, I thought a great deal about how family narratives are shaped by images and words, distilled and also transformed through photographs and the words used to frame them, in albums but also on the reverse side of the photographs themselves, when these were material objects. I decanted myself into these photographs. I re-photographed and scanned them, front and back, zooming in for clues, for details that—once fuzzy in grain—now shattered into tiny pixels.

Sleuthing for signs, I became aware of a desire that so many people project onto photographs: a hunger for meaning fixating on the photograph's claim to truth. I also became transfixed by the materiality of these photographs as physical artefacts: the flimsier the artefact, the more significant. In an age of digital snapping and sharing, this notion of the photograph's materiality has all but been lost. I came to recognise the fact that the thing we called a 'photograph' consisted not only of an image, but also of its material realisation, a manner of printing that entailed choices, a surface scuffed or faded, a front and a reverse side. As objects, such old photographic prints bear the traces of their own passage: through frames, envelopes, boxes, albums. I began to focus on the distressed surfaces of the verso sides.



In their mottled painterliness, they have an ethereal beauty resembling gesturalist painterly abstractions or Rorschach tests. Remnants of dried glue or black album paper, unintentional folds and inky text attach specific meaning onto the images: names, dates, places. Those meanings, however, are often ambiguous or contradictory. Sometimes, different coloured inks and varied scripts on the back of photographs attest to multiple and possibly disparate interventions in the verbal framing of an image. Sometimes, the handwriting is my own: 'ca. 1947??' or 'who is this?'

In thinking about this, I read Annette Kuhn's essay 'She'll always be your little girl' (1995), in which, with hair-splitting focus, she analyses her responses to an image of herself as a child. 'On the back of this photograph,' Kuhn says, 'is written in my mother's hand: "Just back from Bournemouth (Convescent) [*sic*]". In my own handwriting, "Bournemouth" has been crossed out and replaced with "Broadstairs", and a note added: "but I suspect the photo is earlier than this."' The photograph, then, is the site of conflicting memories. 'Whose memory is to prevail in the family archive?' This question is also addressed in *On Chapel Sands* (2019), art historian Laura Cumming's circumspect, tender account of her mother's kidnapping, as a toddler, from a beach in Lincolnshire, her reappearance some days later, and the 'acts of communal silence' that shrouded the mystery at the heart of her mother's life. Cumming explores the possibility of a truthful account that was forcibly removed from her mother, an act of violence by silence. Photographs play a seminal role in the daughter's attempt to uncover what happened in the early years of her mother's life, wrapped in the untruths and omissions of its verbal accounts.

The autobiographic explorations of both Kuhn and Cumming rest on an interplay of truth and lies that photographs are recruited to uphold. The fact that they are requested to play such a role rests on the link held to exist between a photograph and reality, a form of empiricism that, even in the digital age, has remained entrenched in the collective imagination. This has been the case even when we know that analogue photographs too can be altered, cut, doctored, reframed, airbrushed. The history of photographic faking is as old as that of photography itself. Dated 1864, for example, a celebrated photograph by L. C. Handy of General Ulysses S. Grant on horseback in front of a group



of Confederate prisoners is, it has been shown, a composite of three earlier photographs. Famously too, Stalinist censorship—the complete expurgation of individuals from photographs—was part of a broader, systematic falsification of history. But its operating principle, its bid for legitimacy, resided in the underlying presupposition that a photograph never lies. It was, of course, proof of the very opposite.

While simulating photography, electronically encoded digital image capture offers a range of technical capabilities that alter the relationship of the photograph with reality. If, historically, a photograph was considered magical for being a luminous trace of the real, digital photography has extracted itself from this evidentiary assumption. The clusters of information that digital imaging contains may—though need not necessarily—be linked to the real. Technically, continuous tone imprint has given way to binary codes, and smooth grain has been replaced by pixel mosaic. The resulting artefact, while resembling a ‘photograph,’ is a simulacrum, since what appears to be a capture through light could just as readily be invention: an image generated by a computer, or transformed by digital painting tools, filters and montage. Strictly speaking, digital images are not photographs at all. Pixels can be combined and synthesised smoothly in ways that blur the old distinction between photography and other forms of representation such as painting and drawing. And in the digital darkroom of Photoshop or other editing software, inventiveness can peel away from truth. Contrasts, filters, excisions, dilations, chromatic distortion, cutting and montage: all these can be pressed in the service of idioms that range from a simulated realism to dream-like surrealism or painterly abstraction, and all can appear seamless, without the bumps, cuts and textural modulations that characterise material collage.

Nevertheless, significant cultural continuities bind the new digital images to old analogue photographs and the habits of viewing they fostered, prompting certain expectations on the part of viewers. Not least of these is that old, prevailing faith in the evidentiary power of photographs. Gym-toned selfies or snaps at parties and other celebrations that bolster prestige through popularity, garner comments on social media, exposing a sustained belief in photographic truth. *Here is a slice of the real, they seem to say. This is how it was. Look at me!*

In photographs considered this way, time appears to be actualised: a portion of the past intrudes into the present, like a ghost. But the capability of the photograph to hold onto lost time comes, as many have recognised, at a cost. In arresting time, the quintessential photograph not only acts as a form of resuscitation; it also serves as a premonition. It says: *because this once existed and has already disappeared, so too will you*. It is in the past existence of things and people that photography reveals their future non-existence.

Few have formulated this dispossession of the self and vital erasure of others as memorably as Roland Barthes in *Camera Lucida* (1980), published not long after Barthes died in a traffic accident. And no one is more frequently cited as forging that association. Yet that link existed earlier. In *The Guermantes Way* (1920), the narrator, Marcel, returns to Paris unannounced and catches sight of his grandmother without her seeing him. Proust links that feeling—a sense of tiptoeing into a scene as its unobserved spectator—to the objective vision of the camera lens (the term *objective* is richer in French, since it is directly associated with the word for *lens* as well). Marcel describes the vision of his grandmother going about her business as a scene captured in a photograph, as if his eye were disembodied and turned into an impersonal, mechanical device. In this erasure of the association between eye and body and between the lens and the object of vision, photography augurs death as future non-existence. But more than this, it also underlines ‘the nonnecessity of our existence’ as literary scholar Dora Zhang puts it. It offers us, in other words, an opportunity to experience a life in which we do not exist or might not have existed.

How easy it is to identify the link between photography and non-being—or more simply, between photography and death—when we look at old family photographs! Recognition and misrecognition hold hands. I come upon just such a world as Proust evokes, one in which I have no place, into which I have not come into being, remaining unknown and unimagined. From the point of view of that image, I might never come into being. My mother, my father, before me: before the idea of me, before, even, the idea of themselves as a couple.

But these associations between objectivity and photography on the one hand, and between death and photography on the other, are born of the fantasy of a technology competent at providing users

with unmediated access to reality, a capability of direct transcription. Considered as a trace of the real, an analogue photograph might be thought of as having been *taken* rather than made. And yet, that word 'taken' obscures a range of choices that has always been present: point of view, framing, composition, depth of field, focus, visual tension, tone and so on. Long before the digital era with its overt and daring inventiveness, photographer Ansel Adams stated that a photograph is not taken, it is made. Famous for his dramatic landscape photographs that are apparently steeped in reality, Adams nevertheless underlines the constructed nature of all photographic images: the distance between the thing seen and a representation of it.

Such a separation between empirical experience and constructed image is now more manifest with digitisation, with the ways in which you do not need to be a professional photographer to be creative when photographing, or to manipulate an existing archive of photographic images; everything in our image-capture technologies facilitates such manipulation. And various contemporary artists, like their surrealist and dada predecessors, have capitalised on the reality-warping capabilities of photography. In a series titled *Photogenetic Drafts* (1991), German artist Joachim Schmidt created a cluster of photographic prints out of torn or shredded negatives. These were images of strangers that were donated to The Institute for the Reprocessing of Used Photographs, founded in 1990 to dispose of photographic prints ecologically. Each print is a montage of features, an imaginary portrait with no relationship to any actual human being. Swedish artist Eva Stenram uses found photographs in another reality-bending way. The series *Parted* (2010) came about when she had been buying large amounts of old 35mm slides. Choosing images of groups of people, she separated the subjects digitally and displayed each alone in an image. A photograph of three people on a sofa becomes three photographs of isolated individuals on the sofa, as if captured at different times. For Stenram, this form of deconstruction invites closer inspection of each individual body, its gestures, its forms of expression or reserve: communicative gestures now seem parodic or crazy, a person enclosed in solipsistic isolation. Any reading of these works becomes more melancholy in the global context of successive lockdowns.

For both Stenram and Schmidt, ‘photographs’ are instruments of a knowledge that extends beyond the empirically verifiable. Yet while recognising the truth of this, many of us still find ourselves transported (if not downright duped) by the reality effect of photographic images, no matter how they were produced. Because in many crucial ways they resemble ‘real’ photographs, digital ‘photographs’ reach us already embedded in the cultural practices that characterised the production of the old analogue images that they simulate.

## Dear Fusia

In *Verso*, I focused on how the family album plays itself out as a kind of enchantment, a haunting. I re-photographed or scanned many of the photographs from my mother’s youth, front and back in equally high resolution. The original photographs are mostly very small. I printed and block hung postcard sized reproductions of the verso side of these photographs, accompanied by the same number of pencil drawings—much larger than the photographic prints—sketching the image on the recto side of each. Photographs and drawing together constituted ‘meta’ versions of the back and front of the original photographs. The style of the drawings is flat and affectless, leaning on the relationship between light and shadow that characterises photographic images. These drawings are a little reminiscent of illustrations in school textbooks from the 1950s and ’60s, when I was a small child.

For *Dear Fusia* (2015–2016), I again mined my mother’s collection of photographs, this time using only ones which bore dedications to—and occasionally from—my mother. These were objects of exchange between her and her mother, her cousins, her friends and boyfriends, and finally her husband-to-be, my father. These inscriptions not only authenticate an experience with the *I was here* stamp of validation, but also spell out an exchange between two people. *Remember me*, they say, attempting to claim their tiny corner of immortality, but in fact showing how quickly people vanish, and how, across only a couple of generations, the memory of them evaporates. *Who’s Harry?* I ask my mother. *Who’s Lily?* *Who’s Singh?*

The photographs track one person’s geographic dislocation, over several decades, from China to Israel to South Africa, and with it, the morphing of her name from the Russian Fusia to the anglicised Fay.







I chose forty photographs and worked with their reverse side, enlarging them digitally and making sure to retain their deckled edges as I floated them on white grounds. To focus attention on the mnemonic haunting of these readymade photographs, I superimposed on the prevailing verso side the faintest ghost of the recto side, thus transforming both. In this conflation, the photographs tell another story, a nomadic narrative of material objects and affective engagements, of which each individual image is a fragmentary, constitutive part. The conflation and flattening of back and front granted both recto and verso sides simultaneous visibility. I had large prints made of these new images on beautiful, heavy, matt watercolour paper.

I am especially attached to one image that remains, to me, emblematic, despite not having made it to the final edit of this body of work, since the text wasn't properly speaking a dedication. My mother is the central axis of a monochrome image. She stands upright and smiles at the photographer. Who is the photographer? I cannot know. Her shoes—probably wedged platforms, going by other photographs of her from that time—are cropped by the frame. She's wearing a pale raincoat and holding a large, dark clutch bag in one hand; her other hand is deep in her pocket. Under the square-shouldered coat, she's dressed in a dark suit and white shirt. Earrings peep from under a framing mass of dark curls.

I am used to not finding anything of myself in my mother, in her physical appearance.

Fusia is surrounded by other people. There had clearly been rain earlier that day, or the threat of rain to come, but it's not actually raining at the time that the photographer captures my mother, who has been framed to stand out of a busy scene. Men wear raincoats and some are hatted; women are attired in head scarves. To my mother's left, a man is smoking, a furled umbrella hooked over his arm. To her right, a small boy in a sailor's cap. He's wearing an oversized, pale trench-coat. His shoes seem anachronistic, almost trainers from our own time. Who is he and whose garment is he wearing? He looks neat. The coat is belted and clean. It's almost as though someone else had dressed him as a miniature adult. We have no narrative moorings, no verbal anchor to identify him, and so, he must fade into the background. But I am aware that he could, conceivably, still be alive. He is stepping forward and his eyes

To darling  
Fursichka  
with love  
forever  
Te

Shanghai 27/x/47

I Dear  
Lusia,  
don't  
forget  
me.

Lusia  
17/11/43  
Tientsin



to "Fatso" from  
"Stinky".

You cherished memory of  
a most wonderful weekend  
Togetherness.  
May we remember and never  
forget!! - X

HAIFA - ISRAEL.  
12. 7. 52.



To dear Julia  
In remembrance  
of our many  
days together  
Love  
John

are downcast for just the fraction of a second that it takes for the shutter to click. I have wondered about this boy, the random intersection of his life with my mother's, not a photobomb exactly, but how he has been serendipitously caught in her story. This is *Shanghai, the day of departure to Israel. 5 May, 1949*. My mother's cursive script in pencil, diagonally across the back of the photograph, is familiar to me. Obviously, this inscription postdates the photographic moment; but tracking changes in my mother's handwriting over the decades of her life, it seems to have been written quite a long time after the event, perhaps ten or fifteen years.

Shanghai was then home to several Jewish diaspora communities. Perhaps influenced by photographs of scenes of farewell—refugees dating from around World War II leaving for the USA from Shanghai Harbour after 1945—I had always thought of this as a quayside scene, despite knowing that my mother did not travel to Israel by ship. Conflicting pieces of knowledge can so easily cohabit in the mind. I realise now that I also filtered this notion through a fantasised Shanghai played out in the chiaroscuro of Orson Welles.

Fusia lived in Shanghai with her close friend Rosa for her last year in China. In May 1949, the month in which Mao's armies marched into the city, she left China for Israel, which celebrated its first anniversary as a nation state on the month of her arrival, an anniversary that was never discussed in my childhood (either at home or at school) in terms of its effects on the then-inhabitants of Palestine. Five months after she departed, on 1 October 1949, Mao Zedong declared the creation of the People's Republic of China. China was now *for the Chinese*. Fusia's flight took place between two new states, two sets of ideologies. She travelled with her clothes and a suitcase full of sanitary towels. I am fascinated by what mattered to my mother—her reproductive body, her hygiene, her femininity—iterated in the context of a migration to a strange place with unknown amenities, a place viewed in terms of adventure and new beginnings.

In 1949 in China, private ownership of property was abolished and families had to clear heavy taxes before they could leave the country. Historian Irene Eber has documented the lives of families of Russian Jews who, for that reason, were not able to leave until the early 1950s. My mother and her family were among those who, moved by the Revisionist



Shanghai  
The day of  
departure to  
Israel  
May 5, 1949.

Zionism of Russian Jewish writer and orator Ze'ev Jabotinsky, had managed to avoid getting stuck in China. The 'Chinese Jews' who landed up in Israel were essentially Russian Jews from Harbin or Tientsin, the cities in which my mother and her parents had lived. For the rest of her life, in Israel and in South Africa, my grandmother would subscribe to a Russian-language magazine for such Chinese Jews, a virtual émigré community in Israel, the USA or Australia, keeping up with marriage and birth notices and obituaries.

Leaving my large photographic print with its ghostly image, its textual emplacement, and returning now to the small photograph—the original, if you can call a photographic print an original—I draw my face closer to my mother's, but her skin dissolves into grain, her eyes remain dark, inscrutable points. The smile is as it was in my childhood: knowing, sweet, a little cruel. She looks optimistically out of the photograph into her future.

I know that there, in the future, this beautiful, apparently confident young woman will not be a nurturing or reliable parent, but that friends will often comment on her great personality. *Your mother!* they will say. *What energy! What fun!*

I know that her life will have turned out to be lesser—smaller—than she will have hoped, but that she will do very little to broaden its scope.

I know that she will marry two men, the second of these my father; the first marriage an unsuccessful ruse to escape her mother and live in America. Her mistake will dawn on her when she and the hapless Mike move not to New York, but in with my grandparents in their small flat in Tel Aviv. The road always led infuriatingly back to Mama. Fay will quickly ditch both Mike and his memory. Years later, my brother will find her second marriage certificate with its matter-of-fact details (*divorcée*) and confront her with it. Until then, the first marriage remains a closely guarded secret.

I know that Fay will love the second husband, Theo, my father. But still, she will blame him for everything that frustrates and angers her, not least, his death at fifty-five. She will never manage to be permanently or even fully saved by a man, as she had hoped she would be.

I know that one day, my tummy—round and otter-like—will rub against her dark curls as she holds me aloft for my father's camera, and, at six months, I will laugh at this most hilarious and ticklish of all things.

I know that she will consider being cantankerous in old age as both a right and a badge of honour. And that in the misery stakes of competitive viduity, she will beat me, since her husband will die more than a decade younger than mine—than Ian—was when he died. Who else could think of such a criterion for rivalry?

I don't remember if or how my mother comforted me when Ian died. I remember no consolation, only reiterations of the embittered memory of her own bereavement. There are no albums, no photographs capable of holding onto the memory of such affect. Fusia, Fay—my mother—is a hole in my memory all around the time of Ian's death.



