

**Immigrant Memories of Healing: Textual and Pictorial Images in Erika Gottlieb's  
*Becoming My Mother's Daughter***

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<https://doi.org/10.30608/HJEAS/2022/28/2/11>

**ABSTRACT**

Erika Gottlieb's narrative is a transgenerational family memoir, a search for identity, and also the testimony of the protagonist Eva Steinbach, the thinly disguised authorial self, a child survivor of the Holocaust in Hungary, which provides a larger historical perspective for the personal narrative written in Canada. The satisfactory completion of the tasks involved in these three strands of Gottlieb's life writing depends on how successfully memories can be preserved without allowing them to paralyze the remembering subject. Since these three themes are inseparable from each other, they can only result in self-understanding and healing for the author/protagonist if they evolve together. At the same time, Gottlieb's narrative is intricately linked to her artwork, which calls for an intermedial discussion of the book to reveal how the graphic images further enhance the protagonist's struggle to comprehend herself. While the multi-layered text is constructed in a non-linear structure, the sketches and paintings incorporated in it are employed to fulfill various functions. They serve both as illustrations of characters and locations at times, while on other occasions they are made to serve as structural devices. When describing or representing existing artwork, the text also turns into ekphrastic writing at certain points, thus multiplying the interpretative possibilities opened up and the aesthetic impressions created. (MP)

**KEYWORDS:** life writing, intermediality, Holocaust, immigration, memory

The only book-length semi-fictional narrative by Erika Gottlieb (née Simon, Budapest, 1938–Toronto, 2007), *Becoming My Mother's Daughter: A Story of Survival and Renewal* (2008) is an account of the protagonist Eva Steinbach's life, starting in her native Hungary and continuing in Canada, her adopted country, and is the intersubjective story of four generations of her family. It also follows the stages of Eva's escape from ravaged Budapest after the Hungarian Revolution of 1956 against the Soviet domination of her native land is brutally crushed by the invading Soviet forces. The threatening atmosphere created by the fierce street battles make Eva fear for her life; her terror is exacerbated by the haunting memories of the trauma caused by the persecution she and her family were subjected to during the Holocaust hardly more than a decade earlier. After her brief stay as a refugee in Austria, Eva and her elder sister eventually find peace and safety in Montreal in 1957. The recollections of the family's past in Hungary, as well as the chronicle of subsequent events in Eva's life on the North American continent, closely mirror, if not directly unveil, the real life experiences of the author herself, who was among the more than thirty-seven thousand Hungarian refugees to whom Canada granted asylum in the wake of the Revolution, in 1956 and 1957.

Hungarian immigrants had settled down in the rural areas of Canada in three large waves during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries before the arrival of the 56ers (Dreisziger). However, it was this latter group that produced, over the years, a truly flourishing literary and cultural life for their diaspora, and made substantial contributions to the social and scientific achievements of their new country due to the fact that there were some three thousand young intellectuals among them, a number unrivalled either by the earlier or the later waves of Hungarian immigration to Canada. Erika Gottlieb was included in this group of talented youths having started their undergraduate studies in Hungary, then becoming students again at various universities in Canada, subsequently embarking on successful careers.

Gottlieb graduated from the high school for visual arts in Budapest and in 1956 started university, wishing to major in architecture before the Revolution interrupted her education. She, like her pseudonymous protagonist, fled from Hungary together with her elder sister in the winter of the same year to arrive in Montreal a few months later. The young girls' escape was directly motivated by the aggression experienced in the preceding turbulent months, indirectly reminding them of the atrocities they as members of the Jewish community had been exposed to during the Holocaust, especially at the time when they were forced into the ghetto of Budapest in the winter of 1944–45. In Canada, Gottlieb continued her studies, eventually earning a Ph.D. in English Literature from McGill University. Together with her family, she moved to Toronto in 1978 where she lived until her death in 2007. She was an academic with artistic ambitions: a painter, fiction writer, poet, literary critic, the author of numerous scholarly articles and books, as well as a dedicated teacher. Although she wrote some poems in Hungarian, she published most of her works in English, most notably her studies of dystopian literature, including *The Orwell Conundrum* (1992) and *Dystopia East and West: Universe of Terror and Trial* (2001). Today Gottlieb's paintings can be seen at permanent exhibitions at Seneca College, Mount Sinai Hospital, and Baycrest—all locations in Toronto—as well as in several private collections.

Due to the work of numerous literary figures like her, the Hungarian-Canadian literature of the period after 1956 is “characterized by the diversification of themes, styles, and aspirations, and a greater range of quality,” claims George Biztray, critic and late chair of Hungarian Studies at the University of Toronto, also remarking that this was the beginning of first-rate Hungarian literature in Canada (24). Writing in 1987, Biztray also notes, however, that “it is unfortunate that so few Hungarian-Canadian writers have cultivated [the sub-genre of the memoir] with any artistic success” as he believes that it “can be a particularly useful tool from Canada's point of view in the understanding of the roots and background of New

Canadians” (62). As it happens, the 1990s saw a “memoir boom” (Rak 240) in North America with a significant overall growth in the life genres and important theoretical work being carried out in the field, too. What is also of relevance here is that the representation of minority positions in Canadian life writing was on the rise, too, in the last quarter of the twentieth century (Egan and Helms 216), to which Hungarian-Canadian authors added their share as well. The annotated list of Hungarian-Canadian life narratives, ranging from short stories to book-length publications either in English or in Hungarian, compiled by John Miska in 2012, includes more than thirty such works (147), the majority of which were published in the period after 1990, coinciding with the overall boom of the memoir. That not all of them have received as much publicity as they may deserve could be due to the fact that about a third of them were self-published in limited copies. It was around this time that Gottlieb completed the manuscript of *Becoming My Mother's Daughter*, which was only published posthumously in 2008.

The reasons for the general increase in life writing and its theorization in the last quarter of the twentieth century are obviously multifarious, but two of them seem to be more compelling than the others. On the one hand, the proliferation of postmodern, poststructuralist, postcolonial, and feminist discourses contributed significantly to the growth of this genre with their foregrounding of identity-related questions. Such questions are always fundamental in any life narrative because what constitutes a life narrative is “a set of ever-shifting self-referential practices that engage the past in order to reflect on identity in the present” (Smith and Watson 3). In other words, the self-reflection involved in the contemplation of the life of the observing subject is crucial for the subject to create an understanding of their own identity.

On the other hand, the political-intellectual climate of Canada in the 1980s–1990s definitely played a role in the increase of minority writing in particular, including ethnic life narratives. As Canada was officially declared multicultural by Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau in 1971 after being multicultural in practice for decades, the policy of multiculturalism gave

impetus to publications coming from various diasporic communities. However, there remained obstacles for ethnic writers to overcome in order to create longer narratives. When discussing the novel as a genre, Bisztray aptly observes that it “requires more time, determination, and existential security to write than poetry; it costs more to produce; has less chance of publication; and, finally, is definitely a risky market item” (55). By extension, the same is true of life writing, another genre in prose similar to the novel in its length and complexity. Bisztray also admits, though, that all the listed factors hindering the writing and publication of longer prose works could only partly explain why writing narratives of any kind appeared to be less common in the Hungarian-Canadian literary community till the 1980s. As far as the Hungarian-Canadians who arrived in Canada in the aftermath of the 1956 Revolution were concerned, by the 1990s they had all the prerequisites, enumerated by Bisztray, for their artistic endeavors. Due to having been settled in Canada for more than three decades, many of them enjoyed some degree of economic wellbeing and had adapted to the socio-cultural world of their adopted home. Consequently, not only did they have the requisite financial means and the psychological conditions, but they could also find the opportunity to spend time on and put their creative energies into producing lengthier works, such as life narratives; the political institutions and the cultural milieu of the country at large also provided them with an appreciative environment.

Yet another factor Egan and Helms point out, which in fact necessitated the kind of life writing that Gottlieb’s belongs to, is related to her Jewish descent. Among the unique reasons why she embarked on her life writing project in the 1980s was the passing away of her mother, a Holocaust survivor, in 1982. It was a time when Holocaust survivors, people able to tell their own stories, started to reach old age in increasing numbers, which meant that the preservation of personal witness accounts of the Holocaust became more urgent (Egan and Helms 227). According to Marlene Kadar, the publication of such testimonies in autobiographies or the related genres of life writing and family memoir is a generational phenomenon in this case.

Writing in the early 2000s, she notes that “the autobiographers who were born before 1945 are dying” and “[s]urvivors in the diaspora . . . have realized late in life that the time has come to tell or recall their experiences” (“Wounding Events” 84). Whether Kadar’s observations were inspired by Jan Assmann’s highly influential book *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis* of 1992, published in English translation as *Cultural Memory* in 2011, Assmann’s more general theoretical observations concerning the urgency, prompted by the fear of memories fading, is worth quoting at some length:

Over the past ten (now twenty-five) years, the generation that experienced the traumatic horrors of Hitler’s persecution and annihilation of the Jews has been confronted with this situation. That which continues to be living memory today, may be only transmitted via media tomorrow. This transition was also evident during the 1980s when there was a spate of written testimonies by survivors and an intensified accumulation of archive material. (36)

That Erika Gottlieb’s book was only published posthumously in the 2000s in spite of having been completed more than two decades earlier—precisely at the time identified by Assmann as the period seeing the “spate of written testimonies by survivors”—is due to the peculiar workings of the publishing industry (J. Gottlieb, Personal Correspondence). The fact that she did not give up on publishing her book can be explained partly by her being a child survivor of the Holocaust wanting to present her own testimony: she had suffered the trauma of living, at a young age, under the threat of being deported to a death camp or executed on the bank of the river Danube at any moment in the darkest days of the Second World War when Hungary became a puppet state of Nazi Germany controlled by the anti-Semitic Arrow Cross Party and its leader Ferenc Szálasi from October 1944 to the end of the war. Apart from this

political aspect of her life writing, Gottlieb, a mother of two, must have had a personal reason for persisting, too, feeling “the urgent need to educate future generations [including her own children] in the history of this period and in the dangers of hatred and discrimination” (Egan and Helms 227). One cannot help assuming that in her final years, when struggling with her fatal disease, Gottlieb must have wanted to ensure that her eyewitness account of persecution together with various memories passed on to her by generations of her family did not disappear with her.

As Gottlieb’s daughter Julie Gottlieb, Professor of Modern History at the University of Sheffield, points out in an article on her mother’s work, “Erika never denied her Jewishness, nor did she hide her past [in Hungary], but she did not want to dwell on either of these identities” (“Memory, Mourning” 23). This does not mean, however, that the question of personal identity and belonging was of no concern to Erika Gottlieb, as it is amply demonstrated by her book *Becoming My Mother’s Daughter*. The protagonist, Eva Steinbach, the first-person narrator of the last few self-reflexive pages as well as the middle section of the book, the longest chapter detailing her heart-rending trials and tribulations during the winter of 1944–45 in Budapest, is also the author’s thinly disguised self, who, now living in Canada, struggles to recollect and preserve familial memories against the backdrop of her native country’s traumatic history, a history spanning decades from the 1910s to the 1950s. The task is made imperative by the distance separating her and her children from their ancestral past in Europe, initially the result of the immigrants’ geographical dislocation. Yet, spatial distance becomes temporal, too, as the full timespan of the volume covers the years between the 1910s and the 1980s. Worries concerning the loss of connection with the ancestral past and the likely concomitant shifts in identity over the generations are exacerbated by the passing away of family members, most importantly that of the protagonist’s aging mother, Eliza. This is how the resulting narrative becomes a transgenerational family memoir on one level, chronicling the transmission of

memories, mostly traumatic but some also heart-warming, through four generations of the protagonist's family, a search for identity on another, while on a third plane, it is also the testimony of Eva, a child survivor of the Holocaust, which provides a larger historical perspective for the personal narrative.

This paper argues that a satisfactory completion of the tasks involved in these three strands of Gottlieb's life writing depends on how successfully memories can be preserved without allowing them to paralyze the remembering subject. Since the three themes are inseparable from each other, they can only result in any degree of self-understanding and healing for the author/protagonist if they evolve together. Gottlieb's narrative is also intricately linked to her artwork, which calls for an intermedial discussion of the book to demonstrate how the graphic images further enhance the protagonist's struggle to understand herself. While the multi-layered text is consciously constructed in a non-linear structure, the sketches and paintings added to it are employed to fulfill various functions. They appear as illustrations of characters and locations at times, while on other occasions they are made to serve as structural devices. When it describes or presents existing artwork, the text also turns into ekphrastic writing at certain points, multiplying the interpretative possibilities through aesthetic impressions.

The book represents a unique kind of life writing inasmuch as it does not only reflect on the plight of an immigrant minority in Canada, but it also takes a gendered view with its focus on women's experiences, which tend to be personal and subjective (J. Gottlieb, "Memory, Mourning" 20). These experiences are fully integrated in the question of personal identity. The poetic style and vivid imagery of the book are in perfect harmony with its intimate context of family life, which is further extended by the author's sketches and paintings reproduced in the volume. They recreate the images in the photographs that the protagonist discovers in her recently deceased mother's home, out of which she pieces together a family album and an



intersubjective history of generations of her family tightly linked to large-scale historical traumas in the homeland left behind.

Unsurprisingly, being the inventions of a visual artist and a one-time student of architecture that Gottlieb was, the titles of the chapters already reveal a peculiar emphasis on visuality in the book. All the titles, except for the last one, denote structures of architecture: a bridge, a maze, and various tunnels. Characteristically, they also acquire symbolic or allegorical meanings. The first chapter is called “The Bridge” and the first sketch in the volume is also entitled *The Bridge* (Figure 1).



Fig. 1 *The Bridge*.

It depicts the Chain Bridge in Budapest, anchoring the story in a specific place. Although the opening of the narrative is set in Toronto in the early 1980s, the most powerful memory evoked by the protagonist’s mother Eliza is of her own mother Ethel, and is related to this bridge. Eliza recalls how it all happened when she “was still a boarder in the convent, when [she] was six.

This was right after the Great War, in 1919, during the occupation of the city by the Romanians” (6). Her mother Ethel has to cross the Chain Bridge “[c]rawling on her stomach, crawling along that long bridge under fire” to reach her hungry daughter and offer her some rare nourishment (6). The episode does not only introduce the theme of survival included in the subtitle of Gottlieb’s volume, but also that of the problematic relationship between mothers and daughters when Eliza comments, “I . . . remember feeling overwhelmingly grateful to that grim young woman who risked her life to bring me [food]. I was overwhelmed by gratitude, but I also felt guilty. Guilty for still not being able to love her” (7). The inability to fully embrace the love of her mother originated in the fact that Eliza was born out of wedlock. Although her parents, Ethel and Stephen, loved each other dearly, Stephen’s family opposed their marriage due to class differences. As a result, Eliza was sent away to the countryside to be looked after there in her early years, while her mother tried to earn a living in Budapest. Her parents eventually got married and offered the teenage Eliza great care and comfort, yet she found it difficult to relate to Ethel throughout her whole life. Although the repetition of the initial letter in each of the three names of the mothers may be a coincidence, as the fictional names are based on real ones, it also functions as a highly meaningful literary device: the names of Ethel, Eliza, and Eva stress the unbreakable bond between these women and the generations they belong to. This bond, however, is both a source of strength and support and a distressing opportunity to transmit trauma from one person to the other, from one generation to the next, creating a conflict for Eva to resolve.

In this light it is not so surprising that the tone established on the first few pages is rather gloomy: it is that of mourning since two mothers’ deaths are the focal points here. When Eva is first introduced, she is on a visit to her mother Eliza, treated in a Toronto hospital. It is during this meeting that Eliza recalls memories of her troubled past with her mother Ethel, after whose death she keeps “wrestling with the same questions. Had she ever had a real home with her

mother? Was she ever loved by her? Had she ever loved her in return?" (9) By the end of the opening chapter Eliza herself is gone, leaving Eva wondering whether

the mother's life . . . has become part of the daughter's, to be handed down, in due course, to the daughter's daughter. Floating bridges between generation and generation. Bridges over endless dark seas. Where are you leading? Bridges between mothers and daughters? Through mothers and daughters? (11)

The notion of familial relations spanning great expanses of time to connect successive generations so prominent in the chapter makes its title "The Bridge" poignantly meaningful. Beyond metaphorically expressing the ties between the women in the family as well as the ties between the past and the present, the image and the chapter-title also draw attention to the mother-daughter plot as central to the whole narrative.

This metaphorical meaning of the physical structure verbally formulated in the first part of the volume is visually reinforced when, not quite unexpectedly, it appears again in the very last sketch also bearing the title *The Bridge* (Figure 2) on the penultimate page (165).



Fig. 2 *The Bridge*

Both the opening and the closing scenes of the book are set in the Toronto of the early 1980s, framing the family memoir of the past. The bridge, however, is more than just a framing device with its new pictorial image at the end of the book made up of family members, echoing Eva's verbal image: "My arms cradling the baby are joining the arms of others; my arms, my body, my baby all become part of the bridge" (164). Graphic image and verbal image, the latter being one of the numerous ekphrastic passages of the book, reinforce and expand each other's meaning. The verbal depictions of the two scenes involving bridges in the text with the sketches added, are two instances of overt intermediality, which Wolfgang Hallet, based on Werner Wolf's terminology, identifies as "the sensual and empirical (unmediated) presence of at least one other medium as an integral part of a work of literature or art" (501). However, these instances of overt intermediality in Gottlieb's book are not the same in their effect: while the

first sketch in the opening pages can be regarded as an illustration, the second one broadens the semantic field of the narrator's verbal meditation.

Similar techniques of overt intermediality are employed in the presentation of members of the extended family now living in Toronto in the numerous portraits accompanying the text about family reunions. Both the reunions and the portraits provide Eva with the opportunity to probe her relationships with her close relatives, the web they form around her, which is also the maze in the title of the second chapter. The maze symbolizes her controversial relationship to her family, her mother in particular, from whom she has to separate herself in order to construct her own identity while incorporating her mother's identity in it.

Inevitably, memories of the past come to the surface at the gatherings of the family, especially after the death of Eva's mother Eliza. Different people adopt different attitudes to the act of remembering ranging from the husband Ron's firm denial to Eva's unending struggle with it. Eva keeps returning to her memories compulsively, especially to

[t]he scenes . . . of hunger and cold and terror, of Budapest in the fall and winter of 1944. The taste and smell of iron, blood, and cold on Tatra Street, the horrible laughter and the indifferent shrugs of the gentile strangers around the Jewish women and children made to stand in line in the snow . . . Is that line going to be driven to the ghetto or to the Danube today? (15)

Mourning her mother conjures up memories of earlier instances of mourning for Eva: she suffers from the loss of her mother the same way Eliza suffered from the loss of so many members of the family and of the Jewish community during the Holocaust. As a child, Eva also feared losing her mother at the time of their persecution and captivity in the ghetto. Yet, she knows that mourning has to stop, she is repeatedly reminded of that; this is what Eliza also said

to her sister and to herself in 1945. But the end of mourning seems to entail forgetting; that is why Eva has to solve the paradox of how to stop mourning and reminiscing in a way that she can still remember the past and preserve the memories of the dead. It appears that Eva is not only entrapped by the “maze of family lives” (31) with each relative claiming a part of her, but also by her memories of the historical past intertwined with the family past. To come to terms with the questions of forgetting and remembering, she has to squeeze through the tunnels of the past in the next three chapters of the book (18). No matter whether Eva faces the maze of the family or the tunnels of past memories, there is a common thread running through them, which is the experience of mourning: mourning Eliza and all the other deaths in the traumatic past. In an effort to stop it, Eva needs to make “her way through the tunnels, those underground passageways of the psyche that must be traversed above ground” (Kadar, Foreword viii).

It is in the chapter titled “Tunnel, 1913–1944” that Erika Gottlieb’s life writing makes extensive use of ekphrasis, descriptive passages depicting details of the family photos that Eliza took with her to Canada in her yellow handbag when crossing the Atlantic, turning the handbag into a container of family history needed to maintain the identity of the members of the family and to provide them with a sense of belonging. At the same time, “that heavy handbag . . . is like a burden, yet also full of gifts, of treasures” (27). As copies of photographs are not inserted in the volume, it is from Eva’s more than twenty descriptions, her own “concrete visual experience” (Hartmann 354) that readers can form an idea of them. These descriptions transform the visual medium, the photos, into a literal verbal text (Hallet 501), and it is through this transformation that covert, in this case ekphrastic, intermediality also makes its appearance in Gottlieb’s book.

On the other hand, what is said to be in the photographs is also visually represented by the author’s sketches almost without exception in this chapter, describing years of which Eva has no memory of her own. What happens here is a transformation of the verbal text into another

form of visual media, but it can also be regarded as an instance of translating one visual medium, the photos, into another visual form, that of sketches, and it is the unmediated presence of these sketches next to Gottlieb's text that results in overt intermediality again. This rare technique of combining overt and covert intermediality in this part of the narrative makes Gottlieb's book a highly exceptional work of art. While the sketches serve as illustrations of the text, as drawings based on the photos they also offer Eva's subjective interpretations of the family history. Since here the author lacks memories because she has no first-hand experiences from this time period, the resulting narrative, based on the photos, is obviously fragmented. Its ekphrastic passages include, first and foremost, sensory details, and are the triggers of Eva's postmemories dating back to the time before her birth. It was Marianne Hirsch who first introduced the concept of postmemory in 1992 ("Family Pictures" 8) clarifying and discussing its meaning more extensively in later years:

"Postmemory" describes the relationship that the "generation after" bears to the personal, collective, and cultural trauma of those who came before—to experiences they "remember" only by means of the stories, images, and behaviors among which they grew up. But these experiences were transmitted to them so deeply and affectively as to seem to constitute memories in their own right. Postmemory's connection to the past is thus actually mediated not by recall but by imaginative investment, projection, and creation. (*The Generation of Postmemory* 5)

Although Hirsch employs the term in order to investigate the intergenerational transmission of memories of the trauma of the Holocaust, in this paper its use is extended to the transgenerational transmission of memories stemming from other, mostly traumatic, familial and historical events.

The first photograph in the family album is that of Ethel, Eva's grandmother, dated 1913. This marks the beginning of the chapter, which is also the beginning of the retrospective chronological narrative of the origins of the family. An indication of how closely the private and the public spheres are intertwined throughout appears here in the protagonist's additional remark that the photo was taken before the Great War. This comment follows immediately after the description of eighteen-year-old Ethel's appearance as can be seen in the photo by Eva, who recreates it in her sketch placed next to the text. The description is supplemented with further information about Ethel's parents, siblings, the social position of the family and Ethel's love for Stephen, her future husband. After this, the following photo/sketch is of Stephen and the text introduces some more details of his family. One of the more prominent intratextual functions (Hallet 506) of such intermediality is the gradual introduction of each character and their relationship to one another while, as a structural device, intermediality also contributes to the temporal development of the plot here. The last photo in the family album is in the fifth chapter called "The Tunnel, 1952–1982": it is from 1972 when Eva's second and also last child was born. The number of sketches decreases as the plot reaches events closer to the narrative present and the ekphrastic passages are also fewer in number.

The photos and pictures in chapter three function more obviously as prompts of postmemories, while those in chapter five make Eva recall her own memories. The photographs and pictures examined by Eva in both chapters become plot devices, somewhat reminiscent of Proust's madeleines famously triggering memories through gustatory, rather than visual, channels. However, Eva's sketches included in the fifth chapter mainly serve but the purposes of illustration. What divides the family album thus constructed into two is the fourth and longest chapter of the book, "The Tunnel, 1944–1945", about the years of the Second World War with the horrifying events of the Holocaust in it. For obvious reasons, "no pictures had been taken during the war years" (51), notes Eva, whose narrative turns into a testimony including poignant



episodes of losses and trauma that haunt her and her family, and will stay with them for the rest of their lives.

In lieu of photos, Erika Gottlieb's retrospective oil paintings in the Expressionist style (J. Gottlieb, "Memory, Mourning" 23) enhance the effect of the text of this section by intensifying the emotional response of the reader/viewer. It is the reader, however, who has to make the connections between the narrated episodes and the colored reproductions placed in the middle of the volume. The painting *At the Water's Edge: About to be shot into the Danube* (Figure 3) with its disturbing image of a desperate crowd of people helplessly awaiting their tragic fate artistically recreates the memory of the most feared possibility Eva mentions quite early in the book.



Fig. 3 *At the Water's Edge: About to be shot into the Danube*

In this chapter, it is presented in the context of a child survivor's testimony, who recalls the threat of being taken to the Danube to be shot constantly hanging over their heads. As it later turns out, the nightmare did come true when Eva's grandfather was thrown into the river after being beaten to death by Arrow Cross men. The "testimony uses personal experiences as a way

to obtain awareness of an injustice in the public sphere” (Rak 2017): although the Holocaust has been extensively documented and researched, “the fact that there were Jewish victims, that there was a Holocaust that killed a million Hungarians, [was] simply never to be discussed in public” while Eva/Erika lived in Hungary (E. Gottlieb 126). Therefore, it is essential for her to communicate her own experience to the public, but writing her testimony is also an integral part of both her healing after the traumatic past and of her mourning her recently lost mother. The testimony allows Eva to “reassemble an organized, detailed, verbal account, oriented in time and historical context” out of “fragmented components of frozen imagery and sensation” (Herman 177), which is also the object of autobiography as scriptotherapy and psychoanalysis (Henke xviii), all of which can function as healing processes for the victimized.

Inseparably linked to this section of Erika Gottlieb’s book are seven of her paintings inserted into the volume belonging to what she calls the “Recollection” pictures, “the cycle Eva has been working on since she was nineteen” (24). The word recollection signals that they are based on “pictures fixed only in [Eva’s] memory” (51). While the verbal testimony recounts Eva’s horrifying childhood experiences of the Holocaust, the paintings express the remembering subject’s emotional response to the traumatic events and move the viewer with their powerful shapes and colors. The narrative follows the events in a chronological order, presenting them from the child’s limited point of view in a realistic manner; the paintings, however, do not aim at reproducing realistic details, but the mostly dark colors and stylized images reflect the suffering endured by Eva’s family and the Jewish community. There are no words of ekphrasis referring to these paintings except for the first one in the cycle showing “two heads against a red background” (21). This is the only painting explicitly mentioned by its title, *Farewell* (Figure 4).



Fig. 4 *Farewell*

In the book, Eva does not only meditate on her past and present, the life of her family, her sense of community, but, in a self-reflexive manner, she also shares with the reader her dilemmas of how to write her memoir, or how to paint her mother's portrait. Most importantly, however, she discusses the question of how to interpret this particular painting, which is based on her dream in the ghetto, "the dream about separation from those she loved" (21). Who are the people in it? What does the painting mean? There are numerous interpretative possibilities: "Sandy [Eva's sister] and Eva? Father and Mother? The parable of mourning? . . . A parable of immigration? Saying goodbye to those left behind?" (21). In her mother's view, "*This* is the picture of Sandy and you in the first year . . . when you were all alone in Canada. The picture

of homesickness” (21).

After piecing together the photographs, postcards, letters, and diaries in the family album, creating her testimony, and giving visual expression to her painful emotions of suffering, Eva is psychologically able to deal with her survivor’s guilt, to forgive herself, to transcend the paralyzing effect of the past while accepting its everlasting influence on her. She gains agency and at this point she is finally able to cross the Atlantic and reintegrate into the smaller world of her family and the larger world of Canada. Now she is able to say, “I remember—therefore I live. I remember—therefore you go on living” (160). She can remember without being entrapped by the past. Eva’s development follows “the fundamental stages of recovery” from trauma as a tripartite process that involves “establishing safety, reconstructing the trauma story, and restoring the connection between survivors and their community” (Herman 3). After the painful and terrifying march to the Austrian border to flee Hungary during the cold winter at the very end of 1956, Eva and her sister Sandy are compensated for their suffering by an enormous sense of relief and safety that reaching the West provides them with. Upon arrival in Canada a few weeks later, they find Montreal is bitterly cold, the food they can afford is scarce, they have to work at two jobs each to raise enough money in order to bring their parents and younger sister to Canada to reunite the family, but their life is not in danger. However, it is only in the 1980s that Eva starts writing her testimony, for reasons already discussed in detail, and she can simultaneously move beyond the trauma of the past and the trauma caused by the death of her mother.

The fact that Eva regains a sense of community, which, for her, first and foremost, is the family, is demonstrated by her work on her mother’s portrait that she never managed to paint in Eliza’s lifetime. After Eva’s fear of losing her mother in the ghetto, her attempts to cut herself off Eliza as an adolescent and, later, as a young woman, followed by her sorrow of losing her mother to death expressed in her extended mourning, she finally finds comfort and is reconciled

with Eliza and herself:

I've been searching for my mother's picture in my memory for over a year . . . But the more I search for her, the more I realize that it is myself I am searching for. Yet, when I find myself, I find my mother also, I find her in myself. And when I find her, I accept myself, forgive myself (159, ellipsis in the original).

She sketches five panels, whose ekphrastic descriptions capture moments of shared experience with her mother ranging from the joyful to the somber.

The painting particularly relevant to the mother-daughter/past-present relationship and its ramifications for the identity of the remembering subject, is the one called *Revolving Mirrors—Triple Portrait* (Figure 5) mentioned twice in the book: once directly and once indirectly.



Fig. 5 *Revolving Mirrors—Triple Portrait*

First, it is a source of disagreement between Eva and Eliza: Eva considers it to be a self-portrait, “a study of the same face turning around in the mirror” (22), while for Eliza, it is “some kind of a portrait of her three daughters” (21). Eva is resentful of this interpretation: “why is it that whatever I do, in Mother’s eyes it suddenly becomes appropriated by the family, it becomes part of the collective? As if I always have to justify every thought according to the consciousness shared by all” (22). These differing views also capture the dilemma underlying the whole narrative for Eva: what is her relationship to her mother, her family, the past? Are the family the maze in which she is trapped and from which she has to find a way out in order to continue her own independent life in Canada, or can she accept that they will always be a part of her? Is some kind of reconciliation possible? Should she forget or should she remember members of the family? Should she stop mourning?

Years after the conflict mentioned, when a photo of the three sisters, Eva, her elder sister and her younger sister, is found and placed in the album, Eva acknowledges that there *is* a family resemblance, and her painting *Revolving Mirrors* “carries the reflections of the three sisters” (150). Therefore, it is in the process of constructing the family album and remembering the past verbally and visually that she finds her answer to the questions asked earlier: “I know that to keep on living I have to leave [Mother] behind. I know that to keep on living, I cannot leave her behind. I heed both voices. I am my mother’s daughter” (164). This is how she finds her own self and how peace and acceptance come in the end, how renewal is made possible, as expressed by the ingenious combination of the textual and the visual media in Erika Gottlieb’s life narrative.

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### Notes

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