

## Constructing Narrative Identities in the Holocaust Memories/Memoirs of Three Women

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**Abstract:** Although only a decade in age separates each one from the next, the women whose life stories are discussed here represent three distinct Holocaust generations of Hungarian-speaking women. I aim to examine the recently published memories/memoirs of these three women whose narratives are all centered in the Holocaust when the deportations began in Hungary in 1944. Their personal stories are placed within a larger socio-historical context, but treat matters which come within the personal knowledge of the writer and therefore offer precisely the kind of alternative micro-history often provided by women's narratives. All three authors also have in common that they left their homeland as young adults and hence their stories arguably belong more broadly to the most important subgenre of life writing today, which can be grouped under the rubric of transnational life writing, including im-/emigrant, refugee, exile, as well as second-generation ethnic life writing, all experiences intertwined with potential trauma. While such writing is produced by both genders, writing by females predominates. My aim is, in part, to examine in the texts under discussion the three autobiographers as self-historians in their retrospective and crafted stories told (and retold) in different contexts, so that their life stories are not merely a recapitulation of past events but rather their creation of personal narrative identities.

**Keywords:** *Holocaust memoirs, transnational life writing, transgenerational life writing, parahistorical life writing, alimentary life writing, second-generation salvaged life writing, Margit Slachta, Natalia Palágyi, Raoul Wallenberg, narrative identity, small stories, recipe memoirs, Proustian memory*

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### Three Generations of Women and the Holocaust

As I write this, not only old age, but also the coronavirus is rapidly snuffing out the lives of some of the last Holocaust survivors. Soon their personal stories will become artifacts rather than living accounts. The women whose life stories are discussed here represent three distinct Holocaust generations of Hungarian-speaking women, although only a decade in age separates each one from the next: Marianne Bach (Vaney) was a young adult of twenty-two in 1944, Marika Somogyi was a ten-year-old child and Eva Moreimi, the daughter of survivors, was herself born soon after the war, but writes primarily about her mother, Ilona (Ica) Kellner, who was thirty-one years old when the deportations began in Hungary in 1944.

I aim to examine the recently published memories/memoirs of these three women as the expression of personal memory in their parahistorical life stories, which can be defined as the construction/s of the self by ordinary people within a larger socio-historical context, especially concerning matters which come within the personal knowledge of the writer, precisely the kind of alternative micro-history often provided by women's narratives (see further Rosen 2004, 2009). Given the fundamental tension between the reconstruction of self as historical subject and balancing contemporary concerns of how they reconstruct their role, such life stories present special challenges for the narrating subject wishing to create a coherent story out of their complex and plural identities and the traumatic historical context.

The three life stories discussed here are all centered in the Hungarian Holocaust in 1944. All three authors also have in common that they left their homeland as young adults and hence their stories arguably also belong more broadly to the most important subgenre of life writing today, which can be grouped under the rubric of transnational life writing, including expatriate, im-/emigrant, refugee, migrant, exile, as well as of second-generation ethnic life writing, all experiences intertwined with potential trauma. While such writing is produced by both genders, writing by females predominates. Transnational subjects have had to integrate traumatically a culture of memory with the new culture to which they have migrated; see, for example, Madelaine Hron's *Translating Pain: Immigrant Suffering in Literature and Culture* (2010) on counter-narratives of immigration that challenge myths of successful immigration and instead present the pain of dislocation and relocation of immigrants affected by past traumas. Among other examples that are specifically related to Hungarian, see Dagmar Drewniak (2015) on the politics of identity in the memoirs of two Hungarian-Canadian women.

While early texts of Holocaust survivors are testimonies, later memoirs use a form that might more closely resemble an anthology of related stories in which the authorial narrative voice telling a special kind of story of "how I came to be the person I am" is what holds together the intertwined small stories. With the largest number of survivors telling their stories half a century and more after their ordeal, how their Holocaust experiences have marked their subsequent life as survivors is equally relevant. My aim is, in part, to examine the texts under discussion how—as self-historians—the three autobiographers told (and retold) their retrospective and crafted stories in different contexts, so that their life stories are not merely a recapitulation of past events, but rather their creation of personal narrative identities. (On narrative identities see further, Bamberg 2008, 2010, Brockmeier and Carbaugh 2001, McAdams et al. 2006, De Fina and Perrino 2011, de Fina 2015).

As I stated, the three women examined here belong to three different Holocaust generations. Still alive at the time of this writing at age ninety-eight, Marianne Bach is among the rapidly disappearing remaining adult survivors. Already most of the last living witnesses of the Holocaust are child survivors, as represented here by Marika Somogyi. The shared experience of this group coined the term of the 1.5 generation, first introduced by Susan Suleiman (2002). This identity term refers to the premature bewilderment and helplessness experienced by child survivors, often accompanied by premature aging, the result of having to act as an adult while still a child and experiencing trauma before the formation of one's stable identity. The third author, Eva Moreimi, is a member of the second generation, which slowly began to emerge as a distinct group in the late 1970s with the publication of Helene Epstein's 1988 account of her experience, interwoven with interviews of other second-generation children of survivors. However, the second-generation's relationship with the Holocaust was initially defined by Marianne Hirsch's (1992) very influential definition of "postmemory" (referred to by some other scholars as "absent memory," "secondary witnessing," "witness by adoption," and even "non-witness," and "memory work;" for an overview of these terms see Jilovsky 2011: 155, and for the last and newest expansion of the concept, see Fischer 2015). Emphasizing her own position as a child of Holocaust survivors, Hirsch distinguishes postmemory from memory by generational distance from history and by deep personal-familial connection; the second generation is affected by the transgenerational transmission of their parents' experiences which they themselves did not live through, but nevertheless "remember" by means of family stories, images, tangible objects and behaviors among which they grew up. Such postmemory can override their own life experiences so deeply and affectively as to seem to constitute memories in their own right. Although second generation memoirs are a form of autobiography, they are "anchored" in events that occurred before the author's birth. Often written around middle age and evoked by the old age and death of the author's parent/s, some of these works emphasize the relationship of the second-generation author with one or both parents. Some second-generation authors discuss few aspects of their own lives and write instead, in what can be termed "relational life writing," the life of a parent or parents that these persons were not able to write themselves.

### **The Memories of Marianne Bach (Vaney): "Who Am I?"**

Born in 1922, Marianne Bach (Vaney) worked for six months in Raoul Wallenberg's Budapest Mission in 1944 and is his last living colleague today. Paul Marer, the author of the dual language *I Participated in Wallenberg's Rescue Operation. Marianne Bach Remembers / Résztétele a Wallenberg Mentőakcióban, Bach Mariann Visszaemlékezése* (2019), recounts that Bach was already ninety-five when he was introduced to her; since what she could tell him about Wallenberg had already been written elsewhere, his greater interest was in her actions in 1944, of which she retained a vivid memory. It is true that even when evidentiary value for reconstructing the historical record does not add to "the facts," they can speak importantly of how individuals responded to loss and terrors and how they lived their later life as survivors. In this sense, *Résztétele* can be read in part as Bach's [auto]biography. However, in spite of the slim 118-page book's title, less than one third of the content is devoted to Bach's life; the major part is, rather, an overview of the heroic humanitarian rescue mission of Raul Wallenberg and the historical circumstances surrounding it. (The book was in part underwritten by the Raoul

Wallenberg *Egyesület* ['Association'] and the Embassy of Sweden, both in Budapest). Based on interviews with Marer, portions of the story of Bach's life are embedded in the larger narrative of the historical context of the Holocaust. As Marer states, the volume can also be read as a short history of the Hungarian Holocaust. In 2004, at the behest of her priest and of Wallenberg researchers, Bach published an earlier short version of her life on the official Wallenberg memorial website, where it is listed under Testimonies (Vaney 2004). While her retelling of her story in the oral interview with Marer fifteen years later tells the same story, these versions differ both in some details recounted and in those elided.

Bach was born in Debrecen into a well-to-do middle-class family, where already in childhood she was exposed to Catholicism because her nurse took her secretly to church and also read her prayers every night. Later she also attended Catholic girls' schools. She was sent to study English in England in 1938 and could have managed to stay there, but returned to Hungary in 1939 to be with her parents. In 1944, it was her knowledge of English and German that got her a job in the *Zsidó Tanács* ['Jewish Council'], the administrative body created by the Germans on March 21, 1944, which was obligated to communicate the wishes of the Germans and the local collaborating authorities to the Jewish communities. Assessment of the role of the Budapest Jewish Council remains disputed to this day, as to whether they were inadvertently complicit, or even traitors, or if they did what they could to save at least some of their fellows. In her recollections, Bach is very critical of the leadership and concludes that they tried to please the Germans and Hungarian collaborators. She says that when she realized that lists of Jews that were being prepared were for deportation, she did not want to work with them any longer. Her brief testimony is an interesting addition to the recently republished and translated to English, *How It Happened. Documenting the Tragedy of Hungarian Jewry* by Ernő Munkácsi, a member of the *Tanács*, which offers a detailed analysis of the same period from an insider's point of view.

Bach left the *Tanács*; soon after Wallenberg's arrival on July 9, 1944, she became one of the first to work for him in his Special Mission of the Swedish Embassy. She recounts how she only managed to get a job with Wallenberg after first charming the guard, who let her inside the building. Once inside, she had her friend, Iván Székely, recommend her because she would never have passed based on her typing skills. Her main job was preparing *Schutzpasse* ['letters of protection'] documents, which Wallenberg had printed on expensive paper and decorated with the Swedish crown and colors to make them seem official. Bach recounts how she manages to save her aunt and several others from the *téglagyár* ['brick factory'], where they were being collected for deportation in November, 1944, by delivering letters of protection in their names. In her second and more dangerous mission, she had to pretend to be a Christian Red Cross worker and flirt with a guard to divert his attention while some Jewish prisoners were transferred to safe houses. Her flirting was so successful that he asked her for a date, which she rejected with the claim that her fiancé was fighting on the front. Subsequently, she recounts her disastrous wartime affair and marriage with a very irresponsible but very handsome man, during which period she also realizes that she preferred her friend, Iván Székely. Once the war was over, at the end of 1945 she converted to Presbyterianism and made every effort to return to England, a goal she achieved through the help of a much older man she had known there during her earlier stay. Upon arriving in England, she soon realized this man had only helped her because he wanted to marry her. Although she managed to extract herself from this situation, because her visa only

allowed her to work as a domestic or as a hospital orderly she had to work in menial jobs between 1947 and 1949. The following year, at a language club in London she met a distinguished Swiss man from a wealthy Protestant family, married him and moved with him to Switzerland. However, having to hide her Jewish background was still not over because she felt obliged to hide her true identity from his mother and diplomat friends, and perhaps did so until his death in 1994, although that detail is not specified. Few details are given about the seventy years of Bach's subsequent life in Switzerland, although she does refer repeatedly to the pain of not having a true cultural belonging.



*Marianne Bach in 1944 and in 2019*

The episodes of Bach's life are based on oral interviews, information regarding the number, length and format of the interview/s (including whether the stories were elicited by the interviewer, or developed spontaneously, if the interviews were recorded, and perhaps most importantly, on the language of those interviews since the book was written in English and translated to Hungarian) is missing. Since bi- and multilingual identities can be expressed and constructed through variable language use, it would have been important to know if the interviews were conducted in English or in Hungarian, or perhaps even in a mixture of both languages. The role of the interviewer in such oral testimonies is a collaborative process where they become the co-creator/s of the subject's life, in which the entitlement to tell somebody else's story is linked to complex relationships of power (Conway 2013). We cannot know if Bach was not questioned on other aspects of her life, or if she herself preferred to center her story on the few small stories of 1944 and felt that much else remains untellable. If we ask what Bach's role is in understanding her narrative identity over time, the one repeated refrain with regard to her identity category is the question: "Who am I, where do I belong?" By this question she means that she never fit in anywhere; yet she resists positioning herself to use her story to say something about her present self in relation to constructing her past. Indeed, although she repeatedly highlights her gendered self herself in the story, she does so in relation to men, but does not identify herself collectively with or even mention the other women who also worked closely in the same office for Wallenberg.

Given that the story Bach told in 2019 is a retelling of her earlier published life story, (then presumably told for the record for the first time), it becomes possible to consider what her norms for telling and retelling are; that is, how she orients to what is an appropriate story in a specific environment (Georgakopoulou 2007: 151, Bamberg 2008, Greenspan 2014). In her

earlier narration Bach provides a few more details about her childhood, speaks more about the various episodes in her life that lead to her strong attraction to Catholicism and later in 1945 to her problematic conversion to Protestantism. She tells how proud she was to receive her identify card certifying that she worked for the Special Mission because then she no longer had to wear the hated, humiliating Yellow Star. Particularly interesting is how she narrates what becomes one of the key stories in the latter version: how she managed to get into the Mission. In the earlier narration, there is no hint of her attraction to Iván Székely but rather details about how she went to knock on their door because the Wallenberg Mission did not call her for an interview. She writes that there was a long queue before the building and a guard but he was fortunately not a policeman. Thanks to her father's business friend, she had a letter from the Hungarian Red Cross and insisted on seeing Dr. Székely. After some argument, the guard let her in, but in this earlier telling she does not claim to have gained entry by having charmed him. Nor does she emphasize her seduction skills with the soldier at the train station. She also excises from her story the older British man who made it possible for her to return to England. While she does mention a Hungarian fiancé, she does not discuss her brief marriage to him, nor the other unpleasant details of how he was using her to save his mother. She does, however, provide a few more details about her husband, perhaps because he had died in 1994, only a decade earlier than her recorded narrative. As Elliot G. Mischler (2004) states in the concept of "restoring lives," even when the story or plot line recounted by a subject is common in two versions it may be tellable for different reasons. Bach's two narrations are examples of "multiple selves" that lurk in narrative data taken in multiple versions, selves we may miss with only one story. Bach ends the earlier version of her story by defining her double identity as a Hungarian Jew and a Swiss Christian. Her attitude to the first of her identities is also on record in an interview she preferred giving in English to a Hungarian newspaper, at which time she was asked if she is proud to be Hungarian. She skirted a direct answer, but replied that she had returned to Hungary for the first time only the previous year, that is, after some seventy-four years (Csernyánszky 2020).

As we are at a temporal juncture in which direct work with survivors in most cases belongs to the past, Paul Marer is to be commended for having provided us with one of the last living voices, that of a woman who in addition to being a survivor also had a role as a Jewish rescuer in Budapest in 1944. Wallenberg actually had some four hundred people working for him and a number of women were on his staff. Interestingly, Bach does not mention any of them, although at least four other women have been identified as office clerks at the Secretariat (Forgács 2004, Carlberg 2012): the twenty-two-year old Countess Erzsébet Nakó, the older Frau Falk, Hedda Kátai, and Lilla Boros, a nineteen-year old graphic artist. Among them, the Viennese-born, young, elegant and gentile countess Nakó, who was officially Wallenberg's "social" secretary, was even rumored to have been infatuated with him. Very recently, Gábor Doffek (2020) wrote about his grandmother, who was nine years older than Bach, had lived for two years before the war in Sweden and spoke Swedish, also worked for Wallenberg and made out at least 4,500 *Schutzpass* documents, but I am unable to add her name to this list because Doffek refers to her only as *nagymama* ['grandma'].

As a coda, I must add that Bach was not the oldest, living witness whose life was documented in 2019. That distinction goes to Lena Goldstein, born in Lublin in 1919, who participated in the Warsaw ghetto uprising and whose memoir, partly based on the diary she kept while in hiding and partly on interviews with Barbara Miller, a Christian pastor and author, was

also published last year (Miller 2019). Goldstein's description of living underground for six months, crammed together with eight others verges on legend. She describes coming out of the bunker after six months with the same clothes she went in with, covered with lice, never having bathed, or changed clothes. On May 15, 2019, two days after lighting a candle at a Holocaust commemoration, she passed away in her sleep.



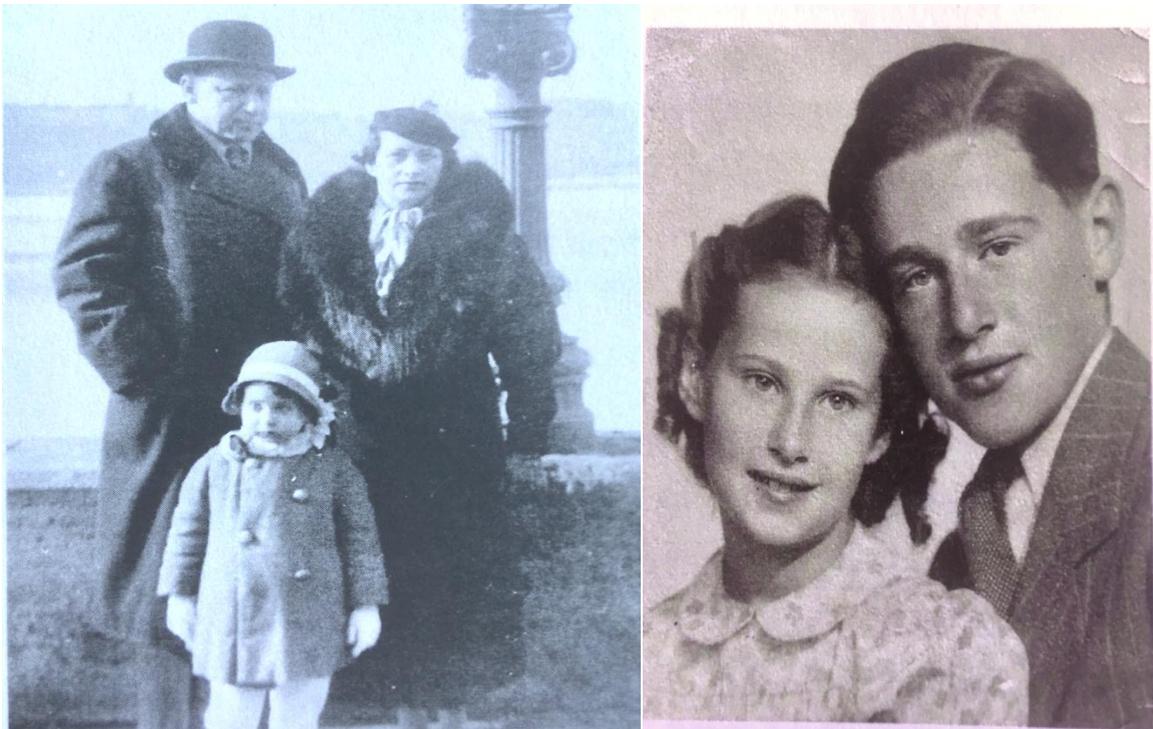
*Lena Goldstein on her hundredth birthday*

### **Marika Somogyi's Inspirational "Charmed Life"**

Consisting of nineteen brief chapters and two Appendices, Marika Somogyi's memoir, *A Charmed Life* (2019), is divided almost evenly between a first half that details her life in Hungary until 1956 and a second half delineating her escape with her husband to Vienna followed by her later life in the United States. Like many survivors writing for the first time in old age, Somogyi recounts that she started these stories for a grandchild, in her case as a letter for her eight-year old granddaughter who had become almost as old as she had been when she had had to go into hiding alone, so that Somogyi began to compare herself with her and no longer with her own mother at each age she had reached. Somogyi actually started writing down some episodes of her story much earlier; in 1996, in a Holocaust video testimony prepared through the auspices of the U.S. Holocaust Museum <https://collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/irn518369>, she tells the interviewers that her family has a special Holocaust Passover Haggadah for the children because they want to know more about her past. Part of her performance of her testimony there includes the tearful reading of the scene of how she parted from her father in 1944, just before she went into hiding. In a later moment in the interview, when answering a question by the interviewer regarding how her parents managed to stay alive, she offers to read another portion from her Hagaddah, but is instead asked to recount the event. This audio-visual interview is a useful "prequel" to Somogyi's memoir inasmuch as Somogyi provides certain highlights to her story that are absent from the memoir. As happens in so many such interviews of the time, it is simultaneously marred by the directives and often naïve questions of the interviewers, as well as by the obvious rehearsed nature of the interview and the list of core

questions utilized in USHM interviews, which makes such testimonies far from "raw" accounts (on which see Shenker 2015: xii).

In her memoir, Somogyi describes a privileged middle-class upbringing, a housekeeper, a German nanny, a private English school and even little details like owning a then much-coveted Deanna Durbin hat—a small soft felt hat with a turned-up brim—named after the teenage film idol (Kuhn 2002: 115-116). While the hat may seem like an insignificant detail to recount, it actually tells a lot about the personal and collective memories of girls who grew up in the 1930s whose parents could afford such a hat custom made for them in Hungary and what the loss of this hat meant for a girl who had to go into hiding. This passage was of extra significance to this reader because of having already read about such a hat in another Holocaust girl's story, where her hat caused much jealousy in the neighborhood and was later appropriated by a gentile girl. The good life began to end for the Somogyi family in 1941, when her father was fired for being a Jew. She does not discuss what he had done for a living beyond that he was a company executive. Her own ninth birthday was the last with her family, when she asked her father to write in her new memory book and he wrote a poem that was beautiful, yet full of foreboding. In 1944, her seventeen-year-old brother declared he would not wait until they dragged him off and disappeared to join Zionist partisans. She recounts that when the family had to leave their apartment for an assigned "Jewish House," nobody from their building waved goodbye or had a good word for them, just as the trusted secretary to whom her father gave all their gold jewelry never returned any of it.



*Marika with her parents on the Danube esplanade; Marika, age nine, with her brother, in 1943  
(Somogyi family archive)*

Somogyi herself never actually had to live in the Jewish house because her parents were able to arrange to have her hidden with the help of the righteous rescuer, Margit Slachta and her heroic Roman Catholic *Szociális Testvérek Társasága* ['Sisters of the Social Service']. In the video, she recounts that her mother cut off the star from her coat. When bidding her goodbye, her father reminded her that "you are not a Jew anymore." Somogyi rode the streetcar for the first time by herself when her parents had to send her off alone with no yellow star and a false birth certificate. She looked out the streetcar window and saw the scene of well-dressed Jews moving with wheelbarrows to the ghetto, some carrying old people and heard around her on the streetcar the comments and the laughter. Although she was not yet even ten years old, she realized then that she had only herself to count on and writes, "The trip on the streetcar was where my childhood ended" (Somogyi 26). She was moved by the nuns to a number of hiding places, as they had to flee repeatedly because of denunciations. She hid for over eight months as an orphan under a false name in various nunneries in Budapest, Pécs, Balatonboglár. She spent part of the time in the open in a remote village in the war-torn countryside, where she posed as an illegitimate peasant while living in the household of one Reverend Béla Körmendy, a Nazi sympathizer. Somogyi unconditionally credits Slachta, who was recognized in 1985 by Yad Vashem as Righteous Among the Nations, with saving her life. She also adds in the video that not all orders of nuns were so kind and that the Mother Superior of the *Irgalmas Nővérek* ['Sisters of Mercy'] rejected hiding her; when the sister from Slachta's order tried to convince her with the argument that Marika was trying to become a Catholic, she countered that "little Jews stay little Jews," and ended the interview.

It is worthwhile to pause briefly to provide some additional details about both Sister Margit Slachta (1884-1974) and another righteous nun from her order whom Somogyi mentions by name, Sister Natalia Palágyi (1909-2001). Slachta was the founder and leader of the Sisters of Social Service in Hungary, who were not cloistered but worked in social work, nursing and as midwives. They were one of the most impressive examples of assistance to Jews proffered by believing Christians during the Holocaust. Among their many activities, they supplied Jews with baptismal certificates as a way to save them, not to convert them (Sheetz-Nguyen 2001). A member of the Sisters of Social Service for seventy-four years, Sister Palágyi was a young nun in Hungary who helped Jews and later served as the order's superior general. After religious orders were suppressed by the Communists in 1948, both Sisters left Hungary and joined their order in Buffalo, where it had been active since the 1920s. While Slachta was never to return to Hungary, Palágyi returned to Europe in 1975 to work for the Hungarian Mission in Germany. Both Sisters died and were buried in the U.S. Although Somogyi was undoubtedly helped at some point by Palágyi, the "very old woman" she describes in the video as coming to her home and bringing the false baptismal papers and telling her all about the new life she would have to lead as well as learn all the Catholic prayers etc., could not have been Palágyi, who would only have been thirty-five years old at the time.



*Margaret Slachta, Founder and Leader of the Szociális Testvérek Társasága*

Towards the end of the war, Körmendy fled westward with his household, taking Somogyi with him. After enduring further miserable circumstances, she finally ended up in Bószénfalu, a small village of Swabian Hungarians that was also the home village of one Sister Piroska Kisantal. When, in March 1945, a nun came looking for her, she did not even know the war was over. Soon after, when she saw her emaciated parents again, she did not recognize them. Unfortunately, how her parents survived is left untold, perhaps because Somogyi could not bear to retell the harrowing story she recounts in her oral testimony of their narrow escape, first from being shot into the Danube and later from being killed in the notorious *Nyilas Ház* ['Nazi House'], where her father was tortured to get him to divulge the identity of the group who were hiding his daughter.



*Marika (in the checked dress) living with false birth certificate in Csököly*

The twenty-some pages of the memoir that describe the incredible suffering and very unique experiences of Somogyi alone are the emotional center of the memoir and deserve a place in an anthology of child survivor stories. Of those who managed to survive, some, like Somogyi, survived in hiding, often away from family members. With their connection to parent/s repeatedly disrupted or lost, they were frequently forced to change their identity, sometimes taken in by acquaintances, strangers, nuns, or other times utterly alone and unable to reveal their identity. Although during the war children had equally horrific and yet different experiences from adults and suffered as much, after the war it was often wrongly believed that they would simply forget. Hidden children like Somogyi are survivors, and—in the case of those whose parent[s] returned—are at the same time children of survivors: they are aptly named the 1.5 generation, as they inhabit two distinct positions as both first- and second-generation survivors who were traumatized by both their own horrific histories and those of their parents. For hidden children, the postwar period could mean a painful process of actively reconstructing fractured personal and collective identity after extreme disruption. Somogyi was unusual in having her nuclear family survive intact and she apparently had very supportive parents. However, part of the vestige of her wartime experience was that she attended mass daily for a while after returning to Budapest, but her understanding father never tried to stop her. She eventually decided that she wanted to be Jewish again and went for advice to the chief rabbi of Buda, who assured her that she *was* Jewish and there was nothing she had to do to reinstate this identity, even though she had actually been baptized during her stay with the nuns.

In Somogyi's memoir, a further twenty pages describe the family's postwar life, which was once again soon very privileged, including a car and chauffeur. Somogyi again does not discuss what her father did beyond having "an important good job" that allowed her to be "selected" for the Communist youth camp, or as she puts it in her video testimony: "He got a very nice high position in the new government...but got a lot of enemies." By 1949, he was imprisoned in a purge and condemned to three years' hard labor. At fifteen Somogyi met her future husband, László, then eighteen, and two years later he married her, telling her he could protect her and prevent both Somogyi and her mother from being thrown out of their apartment because his family was not in as bad of a situation with the government. She does not detail his family's situation, but in the video interview says that they were able to save their apartment by changing ownership to her new husband's name. After her father's release from prison, she again reports cryptically that he found "a position as an economist in his field." In 1956, she and László fled through Austria to the U.S. The following chapters describe their early years in Ithaca and Davis and the challenges of restarting their lives, specifically from a female gendered perspective, as her husband received his Ph.D. while her own studies and work in art took second place. She also discusses the birth of their two sons with some emotional detail, as well as her parents' visits from Hungary. Her beloved brother, who left the family in 1944, survived and, immediately after the war, emigrated to Palestine where he became successful. Yet she recounts little more than that they met once after twenty-seven years, leading the reader to suspect a rift that is, like some family details, left unexplained.



*The just-married Marika and László Somogyi in 1951*

As is not unusual in Holocaust memoirs, precisely the second half of the author's life, the part that presumably gave her memoir the title, *A Charmed Life*, is lacking in sustained narrative interest. It provides a catalogue of the author's success as an artist, a jewelry-maker, sculptor and especially her success in the unusual art of medalist, where she was commissioned to make commemorative medallion portraits of among others, Leonard Bernstein, Benny Goodman, Arthur Miller and Oscar Schindler. She also indicates a change in the couple's social status by cataloguing the acquisition of properties and travels with her husband; little is provided about

relationships or emotions and she tells more about her beloved dog than about her family. The grandchildren appear in several photos in the Appendix and a family trip to Budapest is pictured, but the two, presumably ex-daughters-in-law who appear in some group photos are namelessly excised out of the story. Many survivors have chosen to testify about their wartime experiences, but only the bravest have dared to write about their postwar lives in a way that pushes beyond their comfort zone. As Ilana Rosen (2008: 18) has shown, when compared to the short Holocaust period, survivor's later, longest part of their lives can read like dry reports made up of names and dates. Somogyi, too, seems unwilling to step outside the "canonical scripts" of the dominant cultural narratives of most self-published Holocaust memoirs: the script of an inspirational memoir that details a redemptive story of human triumph through adversity.

In her earlier video testimony, Somogyi recounts how her father, even as the situation was getting progressively worse in Hungary and as first Polish, then (after the *Anschluss*) Austrian Jewish refugees were flooding in, he still couldn't believe that the Hungarians would hurt him, a fellow Hungarian and a veteran of World War I whose brother had died defending Hungary in World War I. In spite all he had gone through in Hungary both under Nazism and Communism, he once again never wanted to go to live either with his son in Israel or with his daughter in the U.S. At the very end of her testimony, Somogyi contrasts herself with her beloved father, all the time refusing to consider her life as one of exile or displacement and vehemently insisting that, "I never had one second of nostalgia." Her willed distancing from everything Hungarian is further reinforced in her oral testimony in a tell-tale language cue that illustrates the intense relationship between language, culture, and identity and personal life: this cue occurs when she recounts that in telling stories about her father to her children, she refers to him as "Eugene," because they wouldn't recognize his actual name, Jenő.



*Marika Somogyi in her 1996 video testimony*

Somogyi's memoir is very interestingly complemented by the earlier, 2013 more extensive memoir of her husband, László Somogyi (which can be read in its entirety online). In part because in 1944 she was ten opposed to his age of thirteen, he remembers differently. Yet he also has a more detailed story to tell about his father, the chief horticulturalist of the royal

gardens under Horthy, who visited the greenhouse almost every day, so that László himself saw Horthy regularly. When his father was dismissed only in 1944, Horthy shook hands with him and told him he was sorry that he had to let him go. When his father returned from deportation, he was even reinstated for a time to his old position, then in the ruins of the Royal Garden. In a sense, a reading of László Somogyi's memoir is necessary to fill in some of the gaps left in his wife's story. While, like his wife, he also writes the mothers of their grandchildren out of the story, he does recount that when they had escaped to Vienna and contacted her brother in Israel, his brother-in-law did not offer immediate help and also demanded that they move to Israel, an event that probably explains why Somogyi herself avoided discussing her brother.

### **Eva Moreimi's Second-Generation, Salvaged Recipe Memoir**

Like Somogyi's memoir, Eva Moreimi's memoir, *Hidden Recipes: A Holocaust Memoir* (2019), is made up of many short chapters, each of which averages two to four pages. The text is divided into the first and longest section comprising her mother's life. The second part describes the family's postwar life followed by a brief history of her father's mostly wartime life, which reads like a separate document that has not been integrated into the book. Then come the usual family photographs and a list of seven recipes selected out of the six hundred her mother collected in a concentration camp. This is then followed by several pages of photos of a few of the original recipes written on a variety of scraps of paper found in the camp. Moreimi writes that her mother was the better storyteller—and even told her story in synagogues and churches—while her father found it much more difficult to tell the story of the loss of his first wife and young daughter. She recounts that she was fortunate in that both her parents shared memories and that later she even did interviews with them. Unfortunately, she provides no details of the scope and nature of those interviews, although she presumably relied upon them in writing this book.

Although Moreimi briefly writes about her own life, particularly at the end of her memoir, the most details surround her mother's life. The title of the work is therefore misleading since it is not a Holocaust memoir, which would have to be written by a survivor. Rather, it is what has come to be called transgenerational or intersubjective life writing, a hybrid form of autobiographical narrative containing an embedded narrative of both the mother and daughter, in which the [auto]biographer daughter attempts to recover the mother's subjectivity by writing her story in conjunction with her own (Malin 2000, Cosslett 2000). The transgenerational memoir has also been called double-voiced life writing by Bella Brodzki (2001), who defines it as the intergeneration and intercultural transmission of imperiled narratives, in which the child tells the traumatic story that the parent cannot. To this term might be added that of "[second-generation] salvaged life writing," wherein a parent's oral testimony or unpublished writing is literally salvaged, as in Vasvári's (2009b) discussion of a number of second-generation women writing about their mother's Holocaust traumas. This last term is particularly apt for Moreimi's work; while she wrote down what her mother could only convey orally, at the same time she has also salvaged her mother's written Holocaust recipes that the latter had collected from camp sisters, many of whom perished.

Moreimi grew up in postwar Czechoslovakia, the only child of two Hungarian-speaking Holocaust survivor parents. In 1969, shortly after graduating from university, she escaped the communist regime, immigrated to the U.S. and established a family with another immigrant, and

her parents were able to join her family two years later. Born in 1912, her mother, Ilona Kellner, or Ica, had become a Jewish kindergarten teacher but all of her charges were deported at the end of May in the first transport from the ghetto in Plešivec (Hung. Pelsoc), then a Slovak Hungarian-speaking town re-annexed by Hungary in 1938. When she and her family were soon after forced to pack quickly to move into the ghetto, the Hungarian guard would not let her take her warm sweater although her mother pleaded with him. While recounting other details of the locals' participation in the despoilment and often torture of the Jews, Ica also mentions seeing that sweater on that man's daughter, Erzsi Szabó, after the war. On June 13, 1944, after initial ghettoization, she and her family were also deported to Auschwitz. Her parents were directly sent to the gas, just as some 320,000 other Hungarians of the 426,000 deported there in just eight weeks. (Another 2019 memoir I cannot treat here, but nevertheless bears mention contains the story of a girl also called Kellner in the Plešivec ghetto. Kati Kellner who was Ica's younger sister, Babi, Kellner's age and met her future husband in the ghetto. After each of them survived different camps, they married and emigrated, first to Israel and then to the U.S. [D. Z. Stone 2019].)

Although Ica's parents had urged her to marry she had luckily not done so, a decision that increased her chances of survival upon arrival in Auschwitz since she was neither pregnant nor had children. She was, however, accompanied by her much younger, sixteen-year-old sister, Babi, and it was the two of them together who were to help each other survive. They were among the thousands not tattooed because the registration system had collapsed due to the sudden arrival of enormous numbers of Hungarian Jews (on which see Kádár and Vági 1999). The sisters spent seven weeks in Auschwitz-Birkenau in the reserve labor force for the S.S. On one occasion, they waited by the gas chamber, but were spared when it ran out of Zyklon B. In August, they ended up in a convoy of a thousand Hungarian women sent to Germany to Hessisch Lichtenau, a sub-camp of Buchenwald, where they did very dangerous and poisonous work in an underground munitions factory, filling grenades with toxic explosives. Ica thought that at least on one occasion it was her beautiful German that saved her in the camp, where she was able to become a translator and messenger and could therefore move around the factory. She also had cleaning duties and could steal scraps of paper from wastepaper baskets and found a pencil, which she used to write down the hundreds of recipes she collected from her fellow prisoners. Of the starved, thousand women, two hundred and six were sent back to Auschwitz in late October as too weak, and none survived, while most of those in the factory did. In March 29, 1945, when the Americans were already nearby, the surviving women were evacuated on a death march toward Theresienstadt. They were liberated by the Americans on April 25.

Amazingly, neither sister had tuberculosis, typhus or dysentery, and they started walking home after a few weeks. When, in late July, they got back to Plešivec, they found their house had been looted and many neighbors were hostile because they feared the sisters would demand the return of their property. They discovered that the family who had occupied their house took everything and fled across the border to Hungary when they heard that the original owners were alive. Ica went there and even saw her family's embroidered towels, but could legally claim nothing. Back in her hometown, when she saw some of her clothes on another woman, not only could she not get them back, but the woman also insulted her, saying she was sorry they had returned. This episode, as well as the earlier one about the sweater, give content to the vague and often vacuous category of the terms "bystanders," "facilitators," and "beneficiaries," marked by

indirect participation or non-participation, by uncovering forms of agency among ordinary inhabitants who could appropriate Jewish property with no repercussions to them, sometimes even after the war.

It was in the Plešovic ghetto that Ica's was briefly the neighbor of a woman with a beautiful little girl, Marika, with whom she became friends. Both perished on arrival in Auschwitz. Back home after the war, Ica by chance met Ernő Kaufmann (later Kallina), who was the widowed husband of this woman and they eventually married in 1947. Ernő's briefer story should have been chronologically placed here, but is later appended out of order, perhaps because it was a separate, earlier manuscript. Ernő was in forced labor service in 1938-40 in Tokaj, but was able to go home for a while, and Marika was born in 1941. He was called up again near Miskolc and spent several years in various forced labor camps. He managed to escape with the help of righteous people and later found out that all the members of the unit from which he had escaped were shot to death by Hungarian soldiers. While he was able to recount his camp experiences, he found it very hard to speak of his first wife and daughter and the rest of his murdered family.



*Ica and Ernő Kaufmann on their honeymoon in 1947*  
(from the Moreimi family archives)

In "Living with Holocaust Survivor Parents" Moreimi claims that her parents were able to be loving, doting, unselfish and devoted parents in spite of their terrible experiences and were never silent about their past, even though their life after the war behind the Iron Curtain was also very difficult. Under communism in 1950 they lost their small business, so her father became a

bookkeeper and her mother managed a florist shop in their own house, hardly making ends meet. Eva left in 1969, and her parents were allowed to follow in 1971, a move that was made possible by another sister of her mother who lived in Cleveland. Although her parents were 59 and 62 years old when they arrived in the U.S. and did not speak English, they both managed to get jobs and work for many years. Her mother died at ninety in 2007 and her father in 2011 (Ica's sister Babi, who stayed in Kosice, also died at 90).

Although Moreimi's parents never went to visit Auschwitz, Moreimi's aunt Babi did in the 1970's and the experience was very painful for her. Moreimi herself had always known that she would go one day, but it took her until 2017 to get up the courage to go, accompanied by her husband and three adult children. Although she recounts the experience briefly she does so with a touching anecdote about the stories her mother had told her about the many women with newly shaved heads who, standing for hours in roll call, had no way to hide from the hot sun and many got sun stroke. Numerous survivor memoirs and second-generation memoirs depict the narrator's family visit to Holocaust sites, with the journey sometimes undertaken with survivor parents. Such trips have come to be called Jewish heritage, memory, or 'roots' tourism, often dismissed by scholars as a scripted reenactment, with the second-generation children wanting to bypass the process of secondary witnessing and wanting to become a primary witness to something they did not actually live through. As Esther Jilovsky (2008: 45) points out, what children of Holocaust survivors on these journeys actually bear witness to is how later generations are affected, which Moreimi's anecdote demonstrates.

### **Traumatic Sense and Taste Memories: "Lilacs in Full Bloom" in Plešov, Concentration-Camp Recipes and Culinary Nostalgia**

Like so many other personal narratives of the Holocaust, all the memoirs discussed here are self-published works that often incessantly repeat horrors already known from other survivor accounts. Nevertheless, survivor's memory plays a unique role in non-canonical storytelling that may at times consist of unassuming and relatively small incidents from every life that were still of significance to the narrator. In her study, "Thinking Big with Small Stories in Narrative and Identity Analysis" (2007: 147), Alexandra Georgakopoulou analyzes the non-canonical storytelling of narrative data that departs from the elicited life story and may tend to be dismissed as non-stories. An example of this can be found above in my highlighting of the Deanna Durbin hat that becomes a symbol of her childhood before it was destroyed for Somogyi. Here I want to add another example from Ica's narration of her story to her daughter, a very simple anecdote of how she recalled the beautiful lilacs in full bloom when she took the last photo in front of the lilac trees by their house. This sentence immediately called to mind one of the very earliest Hungarian testimonies by Hegedüsne, Molnár Anna (1897-1979), who started writing on May 1, 1945, just days after returning to Szatmár from deportation. In her memoir, she recounts bitter details of the Szatmár ghetto, Auschwitz, the Schlesiersee labor camp and the death march where she and her daughter were separated. She starts her writing with the words "I am alive! The lilacs are in bloom again!... If they don't come home, if I wait in vain and I can no longer hope, then there will never be spring again and the lilacs will bloom only over my grave" (Hegedüsne 2014: xv, xix). (I can only quote from the English translation because the original Hungarian, published in Arad in 1946 exists in only four libraries worldwide.) Although Hegedüsne waited in vain for

her husband and daughter, her son did survive and she was eventually able to join him in Canada.

Having begun this study with reference to the pandemic that is killing many of the remaining survivors, I cannot help but also mention in the context of lilacs blooming the May 9, 2020 *New York Times* feature story about one Lajos Stillmann, ninety-eight, the same age as Marianne Bach, and a survivor of Mauthausen. Immediately after the war, he first returned to his childhood home in Kiskunfélegyháza, one of the ninety-seven survivors out of some one-thousand Jewish inhabitants. He soon emigrated to Mexico, where in 1948 he married Buba, an Auschwitz survivor. Today he is writing his memoir while locked in by the virus in Mexico City. He recounts how, when he got home to Kiskunfélegyháza, in a dream he saw his father bury the family heirlooms under a lilac tree in the garden. The next morning he took a shovel to the spot he had dreamed about and found the heirlooms; the dream could not have been a retrieved memory because he himself was not present at the time because he had been deported from Budapest. Although Jews no longer live in Kiskunfélegyháza, the city was recently in the news because in March 2020 the Jewish cemetery was severely vandalized.

The above three references to lilacs by Holocaust survivors are to the *magyar* or *erdélyi orgona* ['Hungarian/ Romanian lilac'], or *josika orgona*, a *relictum* species, native to the Carpathian Mountains in Hungary, Romania, and Western Ukraine, areas heavily dominated with Jewish population before the war. The sweet scent of the *orgona*, as well as its many emotive associations with May and familial and parental love and springtime rites, could serve as an overwhelming olfactory memory for those deported in spring 1944 of both their Hungarian home and their Jewish fate. Such odor- and taste-evoked autobiographical memories have come to be known as the Proust phenomenon or Proustian memory. Recent experiments have confirmed that such memories tend to be stronger, more emotional and more effective reminders of past experiences and are different from those evoked by verbal or visual information. Scent-cued memories can also form an important component of post-traumatic stress disorder. While these survivors recall the sweet smells before deportation, in contrast, French Charlotte Delbo dealing with the memory of her deportation in her posthumous *La mémoire et les jours* (1985), opposes the *mémoire externe/intellectuelle* with the *mémoire des senses* embodied through smell, touch, sound, through which she recalls the odor of excrement and of burning flesh in Birkenau (see further Vasvári 2016b).

Also related to scent and taste memories from prewar life are recipe talk and recipe writing in the camps, mostly by women. In my previous publications, I studied a broad range of such texts (2016a, 2018, 2019; see also the related article by Ilana Rosen in this issue). Moreimi's memoir is titled *Hidden Recipes* because in the munitions factory her mother secretly collected and wrote down some six hundred recipes, adding when she could the name of the women who had provided the recipe, although often only the first name. Some were professional recipes, purchased by three women from the Böhm family from the famous Gerbeaud pastry shop, when they had originally planned to emigrate to Australia. Ica hid the recipes in a hidden pouch she had cut from the lining of her oversize coat. She once even ran into a burning building that was being bombed by the Allies to rescue them. Then they were with her on the death march, and they traveled with her from Europe to the U.S., where she regularly still baked from them. Moreimi wonders if the women prepared a complete dinner in their imaginations each night and adds that she will never know and is sorry that she did not ask more questions before it

was too late. The answer is that, yes, they often did, and sometimes they even discussed the kinds of table settings they would use and also might make up imaginary dinner parties, discussions of which can be found in many memoirs. Even a surprising number of surviving, handwritten recipes that are similar to Ica's have been preserved, written like hers on scrap paper of all sorts. See, for example, some of the original recipes reproduced in the appendix of this book, such as the recipe marked R. Mine, from a woman named R. Kopp, written on the back of a form for Riegel Mine, a German steel-cased, bar mine used in World War II.



*Stolen Scraps of Paper on which Ica Kellner Wrote Recipes in  
Hessisch Lichtenau Forced Labor Camp*

In an earlier article in this journal, one of the Hungarian recipe writers I wrote about was Hedvig Weiss (1914-2012), who explained how the women would recount family stories while they dictated recipes and that she was the scribe for the cookbook because she had a pencil and paper and could write in a tight script: *Én csak írtam, nagyon apró betűvel, hogy elég legyen a papír. Nem volt szempont, hogy milyen típusu ételeket írunk. Ami éppen eszünkbe jutott* [‘I just wrote, with very small letter, so there would be enough paper. It didn’t matter what kind of food we wrote down. Whatever occurred to us’]. Weiss wrote down 149 recipes; contrary to what she thought, there *was* a specific consideration to what recipes were dictated by the starving women, even if they weren’t aware of it at the time. Among the recipes in the collection, all kinds of foods are recorded but especially rich ones. The recipes all represent East Central European gastro-culture, with an overabundance of desserts and other fatty foods; there is also nothing kosher about the recipes, and there are only a few specifically Jewish dishes. However, I know of no surviving collection recipes as extensive as that of Ica!

Moreimi tells about her mother’s strudels and other baked goods she constantly made for all occasions. It is in the last section of the book that features some of the original recipes that Moreimi contributed in 2017 to the U.S. Holocaust Museum in Washington D.C. All the six recipes that she reproduces in English translation and with American measurements are for desserts, such as jam-filled Linzer cookies and Gerbeaud slices with layers of walnuts and jam and chocolate on top. In addition, twenty-eight partially legible ones that are photographed in their original form are more varied, but still heavy on desserts, which would not be unusual for such collections as most tended to concentrate on rich foods. Still, it would be interesting to know what categories the other recipes included, and if there were among them any strictly Jewish rather than standard Hungarian recipes.



*Eva Moreimi preparing one of her mother's recipes;  
Gerbeaud Squares and Sour Cherry Squares [Moreimi Family Archives]*

Moreimi had access to familial history because of her tight-knit relationship with her parents, whose story she wanted to write down originally just for her family but she decided that in this time of resurgent antisemitism it should be disseminated more broadly. She says that as a member of the second-generation, although she did grow up in the shadows of her parents' experiences, she actually got inspiration from their fortitude in life. *Hidden Recipes* is a loving tribute to her parents, delivered without excess sentimentality. As Moreimi said in an interview (Yoo 2019), she also wanted to write the book so the voices of those camp sisters of her mother who were killed could also be heard.

As Viktor E. Frankel (1959:3) stated in the beginning of his *Man's Search for Meaning*: "This book does not claim to be an account of facts and events but of personal experiences.... This tale is not concerned with the great horrors, which have been described often enough (though less often believed), but with the multitude of small torments." Known for her dark emotional chronicles of Soviet life, Svetlana Alexievich has explained in interviews that what she interests her are the little details about which no one asks question: the deep sense of what her subjects have lived through. I believe that the genre of the popular personal memoirs also need not be reduced to negative appraisal as "inspirational" or "misery literature" and merits academic attention, as they can be revealing in just such social, cultural, historical and emotional terms. I consider this study a contribution to my larger project of a prosopography of Holocaust women, to represent through these women's works a collective study of a "community of memory" of the common characteristics of a historical group whose individual biographies may be largely untraceable.

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