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*Present Past* by child survivor Ava Kadishson Schieber evokes “the brief time left to share grief” (103). Schieber’s second published work, *Present Past*, defies conventional categorization. Like her first book, *The Soundless Roar* (2002), whose title evokes the presence of the victims of the Nazi genocide – the “ghosts” that haunt her still – *Present Past* is neither a novel nor a collection of short stories. Instead, the richly figured design of this book creates a blending of genres: short prose narratives, autobiographical sketches, vignettes, poetry, and art. The multi-generic structure speaks to the way in which memory works: fragmented, haphazard, chaotic, at times indistinct, spectral, and at other moments, exact, the heightened evocation of traumatic recall, events circling back in time. In interweaving narratives that move back and forth in time – prose pieces interspersed with poems and images – Schieber represents the different shapes of memory and the extension and transmission of memory over the course of a lifetime.

Ava Kadishson Schieber, born in 1926 in the small town of Novi Sad, Serbia, moved with her family to the city of Belgrade in 1939. When the bombing began in 1941, Schieber, at the age of fifteen, spent four years in hiding on an outlying farm. Disguised as “a peasant girl with no education at all…a deaf mute girl, hired to work at the beginning of the war,” the young Schieber, was forced to change her identity if she were to increase her chances of survival, relying on the precarious protection of strangers who gave her shelter, all the while, as she insists, never

forgetting who I was or the different world I came from. During that time, my mind was rarely focused to allow me to comprehend events, to order them cohesively or even with clarity. I just knew it was important not to view myself as a powerless farmhand, washing a stranger’s soiled clothing. This was what I did in hiding to stay alive, secluded from a world where death reigned. (23, 42)
Reflecting on her younger self, Schieber admits that, at the time of her hiding, she “did not understand that [she] was living in an era of dehumanization and mass murder.” (180) Nonetheless, her memories of the Nazi bombing of Belgrade, “waves of bombs…exploding…remained vivid in my mind through the years, the many decades, my lifetime.” (14) Thus, as the title of her book redolently suggests, “my past retains an immediate present in my recollections” (14).

Indeed, Present Past reveals the way in which time, in the face of trauma, collapses. Schieber begins with her childhood in Novi Sad and the bombing of Belgrade – a childhood ruptured by war and fear and concealment – and takes us through the end of war, her move to Israel and later the United States, through marriage, children, grandchildren, widowhood, up to the present day. Yet her memories do not unfold sequentially. Rather, her reminiscences move back and forth in time, eschewing the expectations of temporality and the recognizable customs and comforts of conventional storytelling. “Present past” suggests the way in which trauma works: past events grafted upon the present, shaping the future. As Schieber explains, “My present was irrevocably changed and so was my future; that is, if I were to have one.” (129) The future, for the young Schieber in hiding was provisional, as she acutely recognizes in retrospect. So, it is a life reconsidered that she assesses in the pages of this book. As she concedes, “I view my entire life in retrospect.” (160)

The blurring of past, present, and future is a characteristic conceit in Holocaust writing. Time becomes a trope in this literature for the impermeability of the past, for the way in which time is pulled back and arrested, the effects of trauma creating the cessation of ordinary rhythms of temporal movement. As the survivor Ida Fink puts it, time, in its reconstruction, is “not measured in months and years,” but, rather, is “buried…under a layer of years,” contained in “the ruins of memory.”i Elie Wiesel, in capturing the fractured experiences of a young boy in hiding, in the novel The Gates of the Forest, writes that under the weight of trauma, “The past became present, everything became confused with everything else: beings lost their identity, objects their proper weight.”ii So too, in Schieber’s layered account, past and present coalesce, suspending time even as the narrative and poetic speaker move the reader into the future. As she puts it, “perceptions of time shrink…every detail becomes pertinent.” (69) Thus the narrative
time of her unfolding chronicle, as seen through her poems, images, and prose pieces, returns to the trauma of her experience, her “fear that had started in my childhood, leaving me with neither illusions nor conclusions.” (15) Yet, as she recognizes all too well, “Life had trained me in how to start anew.” (181) And it is only a life seen in retrospect that illuminates its fragility and tenuousness. As she concedes, set against the backdrop of the “perilous chaos of war,” improbably “[m]ore than half a century has passed and here I am.” (52, 30)

To be sure, Schieber describes in great depth her fear and her loss, but also her fortuitous survival, her reinvented life, and her continuing hopefulness. In one of the many utterly candid moments in the book, Schieber tells us,

I regarded myself as a person who had good luck in my life, and painful losses to the same degree. What I always accepted was life in its versatile nature and my adjusting to the predictable and to the unforeseen. (119)

Thus, the narratives in Present Past, complemented by poetry and artistic renditions, create, as one poem describes it, the “tightrope” on which she balances the past and present: “loss and hope on opposite ends.” (16) In doing so, Schieber meditates on what it means to survive and how to live in a post-Holocaust world, a world for her in which the “strands of the Holocaust ash swirl and float around our planet…a reminder of the unimaginable…circulating in our atmosphere. It is in the air I breathe.” (38)

Both text and image create reflections of memory, a process through which Schieber gives voice to her own experiences as well as to the experience of others. Both the prose and poetry sections are characterized by metaphors of memory, tropes of memory’s elusive permanence. In attempting to describe memory’s composition, Schieber creates the conditions for the felt experience of the ongoing presence of memory: “the drying riverbed of memory” (epigraph); “vignettes from distant childhood like raw precious stones;” (12) memories “surfacing like humble bubbles;” (93) memories revealed in “damaged trees;” (125) memories that, unbidden, will “reappear, often not triggered by anything significant, not always predictable, like a strange change of weather patterns catching us off-guard when we are not wearing the appropriate attire;” (130) those “dim shafts of…memories;” (151) like “an ancient mosaic with missing stones;” (160) “swarms of memories;” (171) “the baggage of memories.” (176) Such metaphors reflect the weight and choreography of memory, the attempt of the
writer/artist to recreate the process of articulating and recovering loss. Here Schieber speaks to the inadequacy of language to represent trauma, as in the untitled poem that concludes with the haunting lines, “if there is a word for hurt/ it is in a language/ rarely heard. (107)

The abstract line drawings that accompany the prose pieces are also attempts to elucidate how memory works, how to recreate and reenact the process of memory, and the transmission of memory. Memory, like her visual art, is portrayed as fragmented, “overflowing images/engraved in [one’s] mind,” (103) Like her art, memory is a matter of “connecting images,” even those that are seemingly erratic, shifting, and unpredictable. (102) Through the intersection of text and images, Schieber, bridges the chasm between remembering and forgetting, piecing together the fragments, hoping for clarity, producing a “vocabulary to describe the shameful events of dehumanization.” (68) Of art and its relation to memory, Schieber writes:

I knew how to illuminate my fragmented images, make them enter the spotlight and show the clarity of a particular detail, while the less significant elements of the same event could remain further in the distance like a backdrop curtain. (161)

Her characteristically abstract, sketchy, and disjointed images reflect both memory and loss, creating a self-portrait and commenting on the means of self-representation. In linking these two forms of expression, Schieber poses that

[r]econstructing events from my memories can conjure enigmatic images. Details that for decades were concealed...began to emerge into a pattern...a coherent image of many seemingly unrelated events. As a child, I liked to look through the end of our binoculars that would distance what I viewed... I could see more and everything looked small due to the distance but clear. Maybe memory is recorded in a similar way. Events far from the present, in hindsight, flow like rivulets connecting into a wider streaming past. (129)

Art, like memory, is, for Schieber, a matter of perspective, of creating the right angles from which to view the past, but also the present. There are moments in the book when Schieber offers meditations on art, on the artist, and on the artistic enterprise. Such reflections routinely return to art as an act of memory, her painting, “the perpetuating motion of my never-vanished ghosts.” (150) As she writes in one of the many unnamed poems that appear throughout the pages of the book, the articulation of memory and bearing witness are part of the ongoing artistic endeavor, “tireless messengers” of history. (88)
Present Past

*Present Past* is an important contribution to the genre of Holocaust memoir and representation. Schieber creates an expression of lamentation and loss in the felt obligation to bear witness, her intention to

write again and again the names of my friends no one is looking for. I am writing their names because their existence remains very much alive within my memory. They are and always will be part of my youth before they had left on their homebound route, the journey I did not join. (30)

In keeping alive the memory of those lost to the barbarity of history, Schieber’s project speaks to both individual and collective loss, and argues for an ongoing accountability, her “obligation to testify” a result of her survival:

I survived that gargantuan mass murder because the Nazi force didn’t catch me. Ever since, I have felt the obligation to testify what I know about that murderous hunt. (68)

And she places herself in the collective category of other children survivors, of hidden children and the Shoah:

I am a member of the Hidden Children of the Holocaust, a group of child survivors from around the world who…. Most of us who survived the Nazi onslaught were in hiding during the Second World War. A few were temporarily hidden within the underground resistance. There were the exceptional children who survived some of the camps. A peculiar bond of understanding exists between us who lived through the war as children. .... Although born in different countries, being different ages, accumulating memories, growing up within diverse social or religious backgrounds, we identify with one another because we were imprinted with a similar lifelong mark. (159)

Thus Schieber gives voice to both the individual and collective experience of loss, dislocation, reinvention, and survival. In the tradition of Holocaust survivor narratives, Schieber, following the silence in the direct aftermath of war, will reclaim her voice: “It took me years to regain my voice” so that she might testify to unrecoverable loss but also to survival. (111) Recognizing the limitations of articulating such loss and the enormity of the Nazi genocide, the poetic voice will assert its place in a tradition of both midrash and lamentation:

I’ll voice my minute part/maybe lacking the correct key/sing my tune in a wrong beat/and miss a perfect pitch/but let my feelings ring/unraveling the thread/until the end of the string. (121)

In the act of bearing witness, Schieber meaningfully locates herself in the long history of Jewish survival, ancient and proximate: “Jews escaping frequent persecutions, wandering from one temporary place to another across millennia…. The nomadic trace in my DNA is evident.” (190)
Notes
