

Unintelligible

A Memoir of Unassumable Inheritance

with

**After-Words: Postmemory and Writing Perpetration, an
accompanying exegesis**

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October 2015

Abstract

Unintelligible: A Memoir of Unassumable Inheritance.

After-Words: Postmemory and Writing Perpetration.

An MA thesis in two parts.

Unintelligible: A Memoir of Unassumable Inheritance is a short work that straddles the boundaries of memoir and creative non-fiction. It explores themes of intergenerational guilt and responsibility in the context of the author's discovery of her grandfather's role in the Hungarian Arrow Cross coup of October Fifteenth, 1944, that enabled the deportation, ghettoization and mass murder of the Budapest Jews. The intent of the memoir is not only to confess this legacy, but to meditate on its influence on the rest of the family – Captain Szörényi-Reischl's loving wife, his son born during the war, and his granddaughter, brought up in Australia – and through their experiences to explore more generally the personal and emotional effects of trans-generational responsibility for historical atrocity, a predicament that might be called 'perpetrator postmemory' or 'postguilt'. The work explores how the conflicted, partial and tentative structures of postmemory, expressed in the creative work through techniques of fragmentation, intertextuality and unreliable, multi-voiced narration, can lend themselves to the task of understanding, without condoning, the structures of genocide.

The work has three aims: firstly, to bear witness to the phenomenon of an inter-generational effect of perpetration, and secondly to explore on an intimate, familial scale the structures that enabled and justified such perpetration, and the structures of denial and avoidance that kept it secret, narrowing lives in the process. The third aim is simply to tell the story of what happened; to reconstruct the family history so that it includes what was left out – the consequences of my grandfather's actions – thus breaking the silence and putting responsibility where it belongs.

These aims are echoed in the structure of the work, which begins by exploring the author's intimate relationship with her grandmother, progresses through her efforts to find out more about her grandfather, and ends by outlining, in bare horror, the consequences of the 1944 Nazi/Arrow Cross coup of which he was, as the story has made clear by then, an enthusiastic facilitator. A final chapter meditates, from the

perspective of a visit to Budapest in 2012, on Hungary's failure to take responsibility for the Holocaust. In this way the work moves on a trajectory that begins with a child's limited and personal perspective and moves outwards towards a broader questioning of historical responsibility. Overall, the combined creative work and exegesis explore the possibilities of 'perpetrator postmemory', concluding that it offers a productive method through which to explore the legacies of atrocity, navigate the literary and ethical dilemmas of representing perpetrators, and performatively enact the paradoxes of transgenerational responsibility.

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Acknowledgements

Heartfelt thanks are due to Brian Castro, my supervisor in the Creative Writing Program at the University of Adelaide, for his helpful and honest comments, encouragement and support for the project, and his long patience while I figured out what I was doing. Also to Amanda Nettelbeck, co-supervisor and mentor, for her great enthusiasm, equal patience and insightful feedback.

Many thanks also to my family, especially my father Nick, for tolerating, supporting and even praising my efforts at ruining the family reputation, and my mother Jan, for ever-reliable proof-reading. Also to Olga Kállai for her reminiscences of my grandfather.

Posthumous thanks are due to my grandmother, Vera Szörényi, for living through it all, and for writing it down in her memoir, my primary source of information about her life and about Emil. I am not at all sure that she would have enjoyed reading this work, but I hope she would have understood my aims in writing it. I hope that her many friends and former students will also understand.

Further thanks go to Gyöngyi Farkas and Colonel Attila Bonhardt at the Hungarian Military Archives, for their assistance in generously finding and forwarding me Emil's military files, and also for their detailed and thoughtful responses to my queries. Much appreciation also to Sándor Szakály, László Karsai, György Novák and Mária Novák, who together provided contact with the Archives. Translations of the files, as well as some passages from other Hungarian texts, were provided by Ágnes Szabó and Zsuzsa Rács, who both also offered much support and enthusiasm for the project. Rita Horányi also very kindly provided some brief translations of Nagy's *Végzetes Esztendők*.

I would like to thank colleagues and students in the Department of Gender Studies and Social Analysis, as well as staff, fellow students and former students in the Department of English and Creative Writing, both at the University of Adelaide, for expressing enthusiasm for the project and offering emotional support during the writing process. Margaret Allen, Jill Jones, Amy Matthews and Shannon Burns in particular helped me feel I was doing the right thing. Emma Carmody and Katrina Jaworski gave

valuable feedback and even more valuable encouragement on early drafts and helped me believe I could do this. Katrina, Michelle Jager, Chelsea Avard and Annabel Evitts shared writing days and writing snacks at their homes and mine, and helped make it all happen.

Finally, many thanks to Mark Peel, who told me what to look for in my family story, and to Ron Hoenig, whose extraordinary generosity and astute questions helped me to face it.

Any errors, omissions, or misjudgements remain my own.

Part 1: Creative work

Unintelligible

A Memoir of Unassumable Inheritance.

'There is no escape from yesterday because yesterday has deformed us, or has been deformed by us. ... Yesterday is not a milestone that has been passed, but a daystone on the beaten track of the years, and irremediably part of us, within us, heavy and dangerous.'

(Samuel Beckett, *Proust*)

'The background then is not simply behind the child: it is what the child is asked to aspire toward. The background, given in this way, can orient us toward the future: it is where the child is asked to direct its desire by accepting the family line as its own inheritance. There is pressure to inherit this line, a pressure that can speak the language of love, happiness, and care... We do not know what we could become without these points of pressure which insist that happiness will follow if we do this or we do that. And yet, these places where we are under pressure do not always mean we stay on line; at certain points, we can refuse the inheritance, points that are often lived as 'breaking points'. We do not always know what breaks at these points.'

(Sara Ahmed *Queer Phenomenology*, 90).

'To keep the secret is evidently to tell it as a nonsecret, inasmuch as it is not tellable.'

(Maurice Blanchot *The Writing of the Disaster*, 133)

'Is that the truth? – No, I cannot swear to it, for I have it only on hearsay. Nothing but a rumor.'

(Géza Ottlik *Buda: A Novel*).

Prologue

What does it mean to be haunted? My grandmother Vera had nightmares for fifty years or more, dreams that would wake her every night, cramping her stomach, until the most often-repeated question between her and her son, my father, became, ‘Did you sleep well?’ Once I asked her what her dream had been about. ‘There were trains,’ she said.

What does it mean to be haunted? Is it to live a life where you keep seeing impending disasters – the economy collapsing, a traffic accident, a child being lost, and even when the disasters don’t eventuate, knowing that somewhere they are true, have been true, will be true again?

What does it mean to be haunted? Is it living a life where you continually find things to be guilty about? Where you try not to take up too much space, not to draw attention to yourself, not to succeed, because deep down you know that you are not entitled, that your life is occupying the space that might have belonged, should have belonged, to another?

What is it to be haunted? Is it to know, without ever quite having been told, that there is something wrong about you, that when things go wrong it is your fault, that when things go wrong it is because of the secret punishment that has been marked out for you since before you were born, marked out for you and for your family?

Is haunting a good way to describe living as a custodian of the past, keeping heirlooms as though the antique objects you polish and display had belonged to ancestors who were more important, more real, than you yourself and your own life could be or should be? Is this a kind of haunting?

When a person is prone to periods of absence, to suddenly growing still and staring off as if into distant, silent worlds that have no narrative, no voice and no end, as though called by something *elsewhere* into a place without time, might you say that was a kind of haunting?

Of course ghosts are not real. People do not get possessed, and the sons are not punished for the sins of the fathers. All too often the sons live off the proceeds instead, and grow fat and complacent.

But if these things are hauntings, then at least three generations of my family are haunted.

Chapter One: Ghosts

In August of 2001, at the age of thirty-four and after that many years of looking nervously over my shoulder, I saw my first ghost. It was my grandfather, and I was already older than him.

The grave where he hovered was unutterably sad. The sadness was in the gravel of the paths and in the bare bricks of the wall, from which some other, older headstone had been previously removed. The paint peeled from the crooked wooden cross on which a hand-written metal plaque told all that was told about him: Emil Szörényi-Reischl, 1912 to 1944. There were two other lines on the plaque, but they were unintelligible, obscured by the cracks in the paint, which seemed to overwrite them with some other, harsher memorial, written in a language of fissures.

I couldn't see him in detail. Only a glow, obscuring the clarity of the scene behind it. I told myself to remind myself, later, when I doubted, that I really could see *something*. He seemed vulnerable and confused, and like someone I might love. My grandmother, after all, had loved him, for six years while he was alive and fifty-six afterwards. I knew that he was waiting for her; that it must have been his desire that had kept him here. I stood there, wrong body, right family, and we encountered one another: disembodied death and incarnate survival face to face, with the sun shining on the impenetrable cypress trees and the view spread out below, too bright for the camera. I stayed until I felt the ghost dissipate.



Then my father and I walked around, took photographs, bought flowers and some small cypress trees to plant, trying to make the grave look cared for, although we knew that we might never return, that the weeds would remain, that without water under the summer sun the trees would surely die. We left the superintendent at the gate with the equivalent of four hundred dollars in Hungarian Forint, and a request in very broken German for a plain marble headstone to replace the leaning wooden cross. My grandmother's ethereal approval hovered about us, and we felt virtuous, honouring the family legacy, making her happy.

Looking back on this day I can't imagine what we were thinking. The old wooden cross was so much better as a memorial. Were we trying to erase history, pretend there was no war, make a grave that was not sad? We knew nothing about him, and now that I do, I hope the superintendent absconded with the money, counting on another fifty years before anyone from our family came to check on his handiwork. A wooden cross would eventually dissolve into carbon, become illegible, be forgotten. Marble will engrave the truth, making memory permanent. And there is no right place on a gravestone to write 'Nazi collaborator.'

*

When we visited the country town of Sopron where my grandmother had grown up before the war, before all the violence, my father was happy, fantasised about buying

a little mediaeval apartment and retiring, spending his evenings in the cafes at the edge of Fő Square, watching the local children jump up and down the steps of the Benedictine church. But the night before we departed for Budapest, in our room in the white-walled guesthouse that now occupies the palace at Nagycenk where my grandmother's uncle once bred his horses and smoked in the blue velvet chairs that stand empty and disciplined behind ropes in the upstairs museum, my father had been reading the guide book and its stories of transit police stealing tourists' train tickets. As we drove along the Sopron road to Győr, took Route One and then Eleven with the Danube and Slovakia on our left, our rate of progress slowed. At Visegrád we came to a halt. The hotel lawn looked across summer flowerbeds to the forested mountains. There was a spa and a swimming pool. We looked at the view and at one another. 'Shall we stay an extra day?' we said together. My father rested in the hotel room, while I tried the spa, then climbed the stairs to the fourteenth-century castle, gazed over its parapets at the river, examined the replica of the Crown of St Stephen and the hunting dioramas. At the end of the day my father wanted to stay another. I visited the tourist market that lined the street, took him to see the dioramas, bought a pewter knight on a horse for my nephew, and walked in the chestnut forests, hoping for deer that did not appear. On the morning of the third day, with no excuses left, he locked himself in the bathroom. When I queried our schedule he snapped at me to leave him alone.

Eventually he had to admit that there was no choice but to get into the car. We took our time at the outdoor museum at Szentendre, where old women in embroidered traditional costume sold us real pretzels from the fake village bakery. But the road remained, leading incontrovertibly to Budapest. My father reassured himself by insisting we stay in the largest, most secure hotel we could find.

After the first night, he spent the morning working in the hotel room, and in the afternoon slept with a ferocious look on his face that warned me from waking him. The day wearing away, I left him in frustration and went on a tour of the Opera House, feet encased in felt slippers to protect the parquet, imagining my grandmother, firstly in the stalls as a student, and later wearing her red, fur-trimmed opera coat on the arm of Laci, the Finance Minister's son.

On the second day my father was nervous at the prospect of catching the tram across the Elizabeth Bridge over the Danube. I explained to him that the route could be found on the map, held him by the hand and took him to the tram stop. On the Buda side we disembarked at the Városmajor stop, and in the park accidentally found the

church at which he had been christened. In the Buda hills we looked for the family homes, finding only the apartment on Derék Street. In Adelaide a watercolour painting of her house on Diós árok had hung on my grandmother's wall. But here in Hungary the street number no longer existed, only hospital grounds behind a wire fence, weed-fringed. My father's early childhood was gone, erased by history and violence. Only his fear was left, wandering the streets of Budapest, and on his return it had come rushing to meet him, but he did not recognise it, turned away from it in the street and wanted to leave.

It was not until I arrived home in Australia that September and unpacked my bags, that I found a folded slip of paper in a side pocket. My father had written down the details of his bank accounts and life-insurance policy, as though he had not expected to survive the trip. Later, he apologised for being distracted. 'I think I was too preoccupied with work,' he explained.

Chapter Two: Myths

When I sat down to write the family story I found I remembered nothing. The stories I had turned out not to be memory, but a way of replacing it. Everything I imagined came out trite and unbelievable, in the tones of a virtuous child repeating something learned by rote. I was disoriented and discouraged. Only slowly I realised that it was inevitable. My writing sounded fake because the stories were fake, because we were told myths, because the meaning and the feelings were always somewhere else. My Hungarian family history is the story everyone told to distract themselves from reality, our way of making ourselves special, our consolation. When things are hard, we yearn for Old Europe, for a life of property, tradition and inheritance, where our identities are established, where we are landed and legitimate, where we spend our evenings promenading arm in arm on the *Graben* in elegant attire after dining on roast venison with silver cutlery. I know that this is what we yearn for, because this is what my father arranges, treating us for holidays and Christmas. My sister and I, the third generation, repeat it because we have learned that the trappings of Europe, fine crystal and Christmas trees decorated in red and silver, mean that all is well with the world, our father loves us, and we are about to receive gifts.

The family story was given to us on holidays at my grandmother's house. Dressed in our best behaviour, we would be made to sit around her antique table, with its lace tablecloth over a brocade tablecloth over a velvet tablecloth, and across the

porcelain teacups and apricot biscuits, we were educated. We were shown the silver cigarette cases, the old photographs, the family coat of arms with its griffins that my grandmother had hung with ribbons in two shades of blue on all the church pews when my parents were married. Sitting under the Adelaide sunshine in a tiny yellow brick retirement flat, we learned that our name was a title, and that our grandparents were Counts and Countesses, which made us little Countesses too. By the time we were grown, the mythology was firmly in place, and we never thought to ask about the facts.

So my sister and I are very hazy about dates, about names and relations. Every now and then we compare notes. For instance we discuss the antique photograph album that my sister now keeps in her best cupboard. Inside it the photographs, trimmed with elaborate edges, are glued to black paper and separated by flimsy, translucent film. They show, as if through little sepia windows, a very small girl dressed from head to toe in white lace, like an antique doll. With her are two very tall, forbidding ladies, one dressed in white, the other in black. Their dresses reach the ground and are fortified with corsets and bustles, making them seem, even in two dimensions, dense, immovable, and terrifying. The elaborate calligraphy on the cover says 'Vera at Klein Wartenstein'. Vera, the little girl in the white dress, is our grandmother, and Klein Wartenstein was the home of a friend of my grandmother's family whom we know only as Tante Masche. We guess that Tante Masche would be the one in black, her grey hair launched formidably in a wave over her forehead and then securely pinned back. The story we were told is that Tante Masche had been a Lady at the Russian Court. At a time my child-memory failed to absorb, she had been given the task of carrying secret documents across the border into Europe. According to the story, Tante Masche had not hidden the documents, but simply placed them among her carpet bags and trunks, for surely no-one would search the bags of such a great Lady as herself. But she had fallen behind the times in her expectation that aristocracy would trump bureaucratic order. The bags were searched, the documents found, and Tante Masche henceforth exiled forever from Russia, to live under house arrest at Castle Wartenstein in Austria. She occupied the small house, Klein Wartenstein, and there she sometimes entertained my great-grandfather, Count Mano.

Mano himself had been at the Court due to a well-placed marriage. According to my grandmother, out of kindness he had taken a young Russian Countess who was 'not quite right in the head' out for a row on the lake, and the next day her brothers had insisted that they marry. Mano's mother, who was ambitious, pushed him to go ahead

for the propriety and the connections. But he did not enjoy the Court, or the wife. Soon she was consigned to an asylum, and instead he brought to Klein Wartenstein his new mistress Isabella, along with her ‘adopted’ daughter Vera, my baby grandmother. In reality little Vera was not adopted at all, but Mano’s accidental, illegitimate and only daughter. On her deathbed, my grandmother dictated to me a list of her important things, and one of them is a small, dented, round dish of fluted silver, which had once held a crystal salt-cellar. That, she said, was from Klein Wartenstein, but the crystal was broken long ago.

When I repeated this story to my sister, she knew a further one. She said that one afternoon when my sister’s own children were small and watching Disney’s *Anastasia*, our grandmother told her that Tante Masche in her time at the Russian Court had been little Anastasia Romanov’s nurse. Perhaps, my grandmother speculated, she had even helped the child escape to unknown quarters, and this was the reason for her arrest. I had never heard this story, but our grandmother was not an exhibitionist. She told stories of her past only rarely, reticently, and when something, a child’s video, a film, made her think that we might be interested. Then she simply dropped names into the conversation. Thus when I mentioned seeing the film of *The English Patient*, she said, ‘Oh yes, I knew him.’ Knew who? I had to ask. Ralph Fiennes? Michael Ondaatje? ‘No, Count Almásy – the English Patient.’ She paused and added, ‘I met him at a party. He seemed very nice.’ Then she was silent. How would she have conveyed the scene? It was too foreign. She couldn’t really speak to us, her adored and alien grandchildren, who due to circumstances beyond her control had grown up unrepentantly Australian, hence vulgar and ignorant of all true civilisation, including the knowledge that Count Almásy had been a real person.

So whatever stories we tell of her must be unreliable. Any of our memories of her might be mixed up with our private fantasies, with literature, with TV documentaries. How are children to know the difference between fairy-tale countesses and real ones, between the real Anastasia and the Disney? I cringe to think what her real friends would say about what I have written. It’s not possible, I suppose, to tell the truth to children and have them understand it.

And yet, there is the memoir she wrote for us, two hundred pages, in which as a child she was driven in a horse-drawn sleigh down the bare linden-tree promenade so that the huddled peasants lining the road could wave at the little Countess; in which the Finance Minister’s son took her on dates to the Budapest Opera because of the attention

she attracted in her long red coat trimmed with white fur; in which she survived the end of the War by growing potatoes in the bureau drawers of her bombed-out house; in which in a moment of despair she looked a Russian soldier in the eye and said ‘go ahead, just shoot.’ And in which she met a handsome young soldier who admired the Germans and loved her until he died.

This was the fate of my grandmother: that her truths, once spoken aloud, either made fiction real, or turned her into a character from a story. So perhaps it wasn’t intentional, perhaps it was just an inevitable result of history, of dislocation. Perhaps she and my father didn’t actually mean to teach us what we learned, which was that we lived in a fairy tale, or if we didn’t, we really should, that this was our inheritance and our entitlement.

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It must have been this propensity for fairy tales that kept us in ignorance for so long: an elaborately constructed naivety that meant my grandmother did not have to keep secrets. Over the photographs spread over the lunch table when I was sixteen, she could say quite simply of an image of my grandfather, ‘Do you see that armband on his sleeve? That meant that he was a Fascist. He was in the army and at that time the Hungarian army were Fascists.’ Although I vaguely knew that Fascism was not on *our* side, at sixteen, and educated in an Australia that did not teach history, I had not put together my pictures of the Nazis with Hungarian history, had not even connected the dates, had no idea which side the Hungarians had fought on, did not connect Fascism to the concentration camps. The ruptures of time and space, the Australian propensity for never asking questions, especially about the past, kept the secret for her. And perhaps it is not a real memory at all. My father does not remember her ever saying such a thing, although he does remember her saying that it had perhaps been good that my grandfather never made it to Australia, that he would not have fitted in, being ‘too conservative.’

The memory of the photograph with the armband returned to mind on the day I visited a historian to discuss my plan to write the family story. I told him about the memoir, about the documents, how my grandmother had kept everything. He thought it was feasible, worth a postdoctoral application, although he couldn’t, of course, guarantee success. And by the way, he mentioned as I prepared to leave his office, I

might want to look into the politics of the family. Some of the people in that milieu were fairly right-wing.

So I looked it up. And it is true that the Hungarian Fascists, the feared Arrow Cross Party, the ones who rounded up Jews and shot them on the banks of Danube in October 1944, wore a black armband showing a cross with arrows on its arms. I asked my father to send me a photograph of my grandfather in uniform. He sent an identity card; a small photograph attached to a card backed with frayed navy-blue cloth. The signature and date hand-written below are almost faded into the browned paper, but it says 1942; this was probably the card he carried to the Russian Front. The image shows the head only, in sharp profile, immaculate and ruthless-looking. If there is an armband, it can't be seen in this photograph.

But this is not the one I remember. No, I said to my father, I think he was on a horse. My father didn't recall such a photograph, but when I visited him some months later there it was in his office, framed in white enamel with gilt edging, just as I remembered. The horse is large, immaculately groomed, and very fine, and my grandfather holds it carefully, sympathetically, as he checks its restlessness. A faint smile of indulgence shows on his face, and my memory plays back my grandmother's voice, telling me, 'He loved horses and children. He would have loved you.'

And there is no armband. I made my father show me where he keeps all the old photographs, and I sorted through them all, the black and white photographs from the first holidays in Australia, my father in shorts holding Cesar the border collie, my grandmother and her friends dressed as new immigrants in shapeless black dresses and headscarves; the postcards that my lonely grandmother sent to my father when he was a child in boarding school; the colour pictures of me and my sister with our pets; and the grainy monochrome enlargements of my mother at the beach, topless. There are no more photographs of my grandfather, with or without armband. Perhaps I made it up.

For several years after this I pursued a strange doubled inquiry, in which I put the circumstantial evidence together, but always held open the possibility that I was wrong, that he'd been on the other side, that he had been different from his colleagues, that a different narrative could be constructed from the dates in my grandmother's memoir. I might have been mistaken. I might have jumped to conclusions, when really the movements my grandmother gives in her memoir don't prove anything at all. That my grandfather was in fear of his life in October 1944 could mean anything, so much was going on that all sides must have been in danger, persecuting each other. He

probably had to be a Fascist, it went with the job, but that didn't mean he was a believer. Perhaps he was afraid for his life because he was not a Nazi supporter. Perhaps he was killed shortly after the German takeover because he was on the other side. Perhaps he was a good guy after all and I am just cynical, just looking for a dramatic story, just trying to find a reason to blame my family for something. I am sometimes filled with guilt for my nasty story-telling, my tendency to jump to conclusions: ugly, ignorant conclusions that show how my grandmother failed to inculcate the elegance she'd hoped for in her eldest granddaughter, inheritor of the family legacy.

But now I had the identity card in my possession, and I felt responsible for it. I carefully bought a plastic frame that would hold the worn blue cloth backing without damaging it, protecting this historical document, already sixty years old. I placed it on my bookshelf along with the photograph of my grandmother in her twenties, with her waved hair and modern, off-the-rack dress with plastic buttons. Together they made a good-looking young couple, their gaze seeming fixed on the future: his determined, hers slightly sad, but both exemplary in their careful composure, their respectability, their perfect skin. My bookshelf was in the bedroom and they were the first thing I saw in the morning and the last thing at night. And somehow, for all that I claimed not to know, I found myself hating him, hating the picture. I couldn't make peace with it and I couldn't throw it out. To send it back to my father seemed an act of cowardice.

In the end I took my whiteboard marker, and drew a large, dark blue cross over the plastic covering his face. He stayed on the bookshelf next to my grandmother like a loyal husband, but my protest was marked. The cross held him off, like a fence, like a barrier, and I felt better. As though I could keep him under erasure, hold him at a distance, and avoid implication.

I resisted for at least 2 weeks before I nervously checked whether the marker was permanent, feeling my responsibility for the family things.

It took me at least a month to notice the violent shape of the cross.

And it was when I wrote this that I noticed my fear of contamination, and my desire, if only enacted symbolically, to violently erase the one who carries it.

Chapter Three: Vera and Me

I fell in love with her early. My first memories have her in them. She is a part of the furniture, along with my child's eye view of the seagrass matting that floored our house in Brisbane, the layout of the house that I remember so clearly although we left when I was four years old, and the rhythms of the language that was spoken in middle-class Australia in the 1960s, the language my parents and my grandmother spoke together, a language that I cannot exactly remember, but which is coded somewhere in my skin – a language of sounds, of tan-coloured clothing, of Danish furniture, and of small sighs made behind corners when no-one was listening – no-one but me.

My memories cohere around photographs. There is one which shows me at about two years old, small, seen from above. My pale blue dress has been chosen to match my eyes, as it would be for the next decade, particularly when we were dressed up for our grandmother's visits. She loved my blue eyes and fair hair, making much of how I looked like a little Anglo-Saxon. Perhaps in an earlier age she would have called me Aryan. In this photograph, my eyes cannot be seen because I am looking down, my fingers in my mouth, already a pensive child. I am standing by a wire fence, and trailing from my hand so that his legs drag on the ground is a large, lanky stuffed bear. He is not a cute bear, but an elegant, Victorian style bear, with a long nose and limbs and short, brittle fur that is worn away in patches. This bear, I was told in the time before memory, was once my father's. He came with my father from Hungary, and now he had

been given to me. Since this image is a poor portrait, my face not even visible, it seems clear that the bear was, indeed, the reason for the photograph. It is all the more valuable because sometime soon afterwards, the family dog tore the bear to pieces. So the photograph itself is a memorial, perhaps to my father's lost childhood. At the same time it is a promise – look, here is the new child, holding what her father once held, at once a reproduction of the past child and a message for the future: Life continues, the family continues. I was firstborn child, and they made me heir. Heir of a worn out bear, and of a duty to re-embodiment that which they wanted to remember, but which was best remembered in the symbols of childhood innocence, by someone too young to understand what she carried. Look, innocence has been reborn, look, there is a childhood again, look, the world can be encoded, summarised, as a child with a bear, a bear with a secret that the child is too young to understand. Welcome, they said, by giving me that bear. Welcome to the family story, which we love to give you precisely because you cannot understand it, and cannot resist it. You make us believe in ourselves again.

*

For the first part of my life my grandmother was love. She was the one who was always happy to see me in the morning, the one who sat in the evening at the end of the bed and sang lullabies in foreign languages, her soft voice cracking on the high notes. She was the one who played the piano for my aspiring ballerina dances, and the one who sewed dresses for my dolls and teddy bears, sitting for hours in the living room with her needle and thread, calling with the greatest solemnity for Molly the Dolly to present herself for a fitting. When family life became too much for me and unshed tears clogged my lungs into pneumonia, she was the one who sat on my bed for days, telling me stories. She loved to tell a story of the time when I began to recognise her. When I was very small she would give me my bath and then carry me about wrapped in my towel, saying, 'Who wants a bag of potatoes'? One day I met her at the door saying, 'bagapotata'. *Bagapotata* she reminded me for years afterwards, her voice rasping in delighted imitation of my baby enthusiasm.

When I was seven my father, loyal son, moved us all into a house with an extra flat downstairs, so that his mother could come and live with us. She never did move permanently, but she would come for extended visits. These times were like festivals

for me and my sister, a kind of Christmas full of new outfits, presents and sweets. In the mornings, almost holy in our intent to be good, we would wait for one another to wake, and then wait further long, whispering hours so that our parents would not tell us off for bothering Grandma too early. Then when we had done this penance we would agree that now, surely, it was really morning, and climb out of bed in our bare feet and the nighties she had made us, tiptoe down the stairs in the early frosted light, and hover at the foot of her bed, breathless with the effort to be quiet. She was always awake, and would extend her arms and tell us to climb in. Once in she would formally address the half-dozen stuffed animals we had brought with us, and then give them, and us, lessons in manners. This was a task she took seriously. On the wall above her bed were three framed ink and wash prints, showing women in various costumes – one sat hunched on a three legged stool with a wooden bucket between her legs, another was matronly and stern, dressed in dark blue, and a third was young and slim, standing under a tree with bright blue ribbons flying from her straw boater hat. My grandmother explained something to us about peasant, middle and upper class, which we did not understand. But we agreed that the fair-skinned, blue-ribboned girl was the prettiest and therefore the happiest and best.

During the day on these visits she kept us near and sent us on errands to find her reading glasses, her gold Glomesh cigarette case, her matching white Oroton handbag with the Revlon powder compact inside. While she powdered her face and painted her nails in peach pink that matched her lipstick, we were allowed to play with the gold and silver paper from the cigarette boxes. When the nails were dry we would play a game, each person putting their hand on top of the other's hand, faster and faster, until everyone collapsed in giggles. As she hugged us ecstatically she said, '*Buzsi buzsi buzsi buzsi*', a word which to us meant the same thing as the hug.

When the family went out shopping she would buy our love. We took advantage of her mercilessly. Look Grandma, come into this shop. Look at that little wooden cow with the flowers on its horns. Isn't it nice? And it would be ours. Two of them would be ours, one for me and one for my sister. My parents rolled their eyes at our transparency.

*

Around the time of these visits, my father put up a bookshelf in our bedroom. On the shelves he placed hardcover copies of the European children's novels kept from

his own childhood: *Bambi*, *Bambi's Children*, *Ferdinand the Bull*, and the Hungarian classic *The Good Master*. On the top shelf he placed a series of small vases in different colours and styles – things that must have been pretty enough to keep but not good enough to display with my grandmother's collection of valuable *Limoges* and *Herendi* porcelain. But the true treasure was that as a great privilege, we were allowed to be within reach of two small wooden cherubs carved from Hungarian oak, each in the shape of a small girl with waved hair, a fluted nightgown that covered her feet, scalloped wings, and a crown of roses. One held a harp, the other an open prayer-book. The one with the prayer book was larger, but had a kinder, prettier face, and my sister and I loved her the best.

I have a still earlier memory of standing in a dark room, naked, wet and wrapped in a huge towel. My grandmother has taken me out of my bath and sent me to find my parents, and in her unfamiliar house I have taken a wrong turn, and found myself alone in the living room. The dresser looms huge before me but high up beyond my reach I know the angels are there, looking down at me, and in the moment before the adults come to find me I am silently communing.

Another, even fainter memory is simply a voice: Grandma holding me and telling me that the angel lives in heaven, and that if I am very good I can go to heaven too, and the kind face of the angel in her long wooden dress smiles upon me, and I know that I want to be good. It is the only time anyone has ever spoken to me of religion, and Grandma somehow *is* goodness, is the one who tells me how to be good.

*

As adults, we shared a love of Rilke. She loved the poem that said,

*Whoever has no house now, will never have one.
Whoever is alone will stay alone*

I loved the Tenth Elegy, where the faded grey Lament, a woman dressed in veils and pearls, comforts the young and shows them her chunks of petrified grief.

*

She ate only white foods. Dry biscuits, a boiled egg, a bit of steamed chicken, half a boiled potato. When she visited us the family switched from brown bread to white bread. Every now and then she would take a piece of chocolate, and then another, and guiltily tell us how she would suffer later when her digestion punished her.

Only long after my grandmother's death from bowel cancer did I find where she had written in her memoir about her first year of high school:

I had a very poor appetite and aunt Fanny used to call me 'Succi' after an Italian who was often written up in the newspapers as a marathon faster. I used to spend weeks in bed, starting with a blazing temperature and hallucinations... the nightmare theme was that between my bed and the opposite wall there was a stretch of water and I had to swim across it without making the slightest ripple.

At the age of 14, she went on to say, she had to have her appendix out. The family doctor said that she was 'her father's daughter; he would not give twopence for her bowels, he had had to embroider them, stitch them, mend them and now hoped they would last.'

In the wake of the operation a letter from her father's solicitor to her mother arrived:

Dear Madam,

I am truly delighted that Vera's operation was a success. May the good Lord grant her lasting health from now on.

I have written to Ivan¹ to have the outstanding 966.000 crowns transferred. According to instructions received I have to mention again that her natural father reserves the right to take this sum into account, should the occasion arise. Whether it will ever come to that is a secret of the future.

Please give my best regards and best wishes to Vera as well. I remain, yours sincerely.'

She wrote in her memoir that perhaps the 'taking into account' clause was 'proof of father's depressive fear of having to die of starvation.' I don't find it hard to see why she felt she was not allowed to use resources, take up space, make ripples.

She went on to write that a few years later at her first summer job, typist at the French Embassy, the Ambassador's wife commented, 'Elle a la figure d'un ange mais un corps comme un balai.' She wrote that she did not care much for 'the face of an

¹ Ivan was the name of Vera's father's estate, near Sopron on the Western border of Hungary.

angel,' but did not mind 'a body like a broom'. Kálmán, her first love, away in America on a Fulbright scholarship, did not like fat women.

*

In my adolescent years, following long-ingrained habits of loyalty and taking advantage of free accommodation, I visited my grandmother interstate once or twice a year, sleeping on the floor in her tiny retirement flat. On one visit the radio, usually tuned to classical music, diverged for a moment into U2 singing gospel: A crowd of women's voices falling over one another, climbing higher and higher, cascading and bubbling – 'I STILL haven't fo-ound... what I'm looking for!'

'I think we can do without this,' said my grandmother firmly.

I was surprised, given that she was the religious one. 'Actually, I was quite enjoying it,' I said. But I changed the station.

Five minutes later she announced out of silence: 'You know, I've never done that.'

I was mystified. 'Done what?'

'Let go like that', she said. 'I've never just let myself go and "expressed" myself, never just been lost in the moment. I've always been self-conscious, always kept a watch on myself.' She sounded both proud and wistful, and the quotation marks around the word 'expressed' were audible.

Then after a moment she added brightly, 'But since I've never done it, I don't know what I'm missing, do I? So that's alright.'

*

During these adolescent visits, in order to distract my grandmother from her anxiety about how much I had eaten, whether I had slept, when I was going to find a suitable boyfriend, why I wouldn't dress more respectably, and when I was going to visit her next, I learned to ask her about the past. We looked through the shoe boxes of photographs she kept in her hall cupboard, and she would run once more through the family heirlooms: where each porcelain figurine had come from, which of the silver forks were from Hungary and which she had reclaimed from the St Vincent de Paul thrift shop where she volunteered five days a week. Over afternoon tea she told me the

story of her wedding day, a comedy of errors that she had never put into her memoir, and I asked her to write it down for me. She confessed to me that she religiously ironed the sheets and the underwear because un-ironed clothes made her feel that she was back in the war. She made me her confidant, telling me about my grandfather's elder brother. He was dissolute, gambling and drinking his life away. He used to come asking for money to pay off his debts. Then he committed suicide.

'Don't tell your father about this,' she begged. 'I'm so worried about him. If he knew he might get ideas.'

I thought this was silly. I had grown up lying to her – 'Yes, grandma, I love this scratchy, shapeless, knee-length skirt you have sent me, yes I will certainly wear it, thank you'. So I didn't think twice about promising to say nothing, without the slightest intent of honouring the pact.

But I had misjudged her power over my unconscious mind. Whenever I saw my father, I forgot to mention this piece of interesting gossip. Years passed and the secret remained a secret.

When I finally thought of it, some months after her death, my father was only partly surprised. He had suspected something, only in the absence of information, he had guessed that it was his own father who had suicided. Possibly, he had thought in his more cynical moments, in order to get away from Vera.

*

By the time I knew her, her anxiety had become a parody of itself. She would greet us at the doorstep wailing, 'This is the last time you'll ever see me.' She began this about a decade too early, echoing her own father's depressive fears. No amount of reminding her that her premonitions usually turned out to be wrong ever seemed to assuage her certainty that she was capable of predicting her own downfall, and that of the rest of the family too. Nonetheless we went through the rituals of reassurance. Only my father, my grandfather, and I, my grandmother told me once, had the magical tone in our voices that could calm her and make her feel safe. Judging from my own and my father's habits, the magical tone of voice was a combination of controlled patience and contempt. 'Oh Mum, don't be silly,' was my father's endless refrain. Often he laughed at her or simply dismissed her. Perhaps this laughter in the face of imminent disaster was what made her feel that it was not so disastrous after all.

I think we all understood that the panics were due to trauma. Although almost never mentioned, the War lurked in the background of my grandmother's Norwood flat. Another ritual was that she and my father would ask everyone, every morning, with a tone of utter solicitude, 'Did you sleep well?' To me the concern that accompanied the question was felt misplaced, as I have always been a contented sleeper, and never had anything to say in response other than 'yes'. But as well as her bowels, which would often 'give her a bad night', my grandmother had nightmares. Once I asked her what she dreamed about, and she said 'There were trains.' It had apparently been on a train in Linz after the war, when they were out of danger in the refugee camp and she was working in the town, that her nerves had given way. She found that she could not stop shaking with the feeling that the train was about to crash.

*

When my grandmother was nearing the end of her life, she lost her face. There were only bones. Her eyes sparkled in the holes in her visible skull, her delicately hung skin just softening the edges. She would lean over to kiss me, and I would think of death, feeling guilty for thinking of death when what she wanted was love. This combination of guilt, horror, and love is an apt image for what my grandmother felt like to me as I grew older. I loved her, but I was afraid of the fear and horror that seemed to threaten to engulf me along with her love, as if her nightmares, her anxiety, her despair, might be catching, might flow to me through our connection. As if death might stalk me through her.

Part of this is youth's usual fear of old age. But I have to admit that there always seemed to be more to my grandmother. She loomed large in people's lives, people worshipped her, but there was often an edge of terror in their admiration, as at her funeral when so many of her good friends and former students spoke of the merciless way she corrected their efforts at speaking French. There was something awe-inspiringly epic about her. When, sometime after her death, I saw a performance of *Dido and Aeneas* in Melbourne, I thought to myself that the actress knew nothing of how to play a wronged and tragic queen. She suffered obviously, familiarly, like a sister or a mother. She did not know how to suffer like a goddess, holding herself straight, tilting her chin away from her audience, using suffering to make herself more distant, more powerful and more virtuous. She did not know how to suffer as a ruler, as a

symbol, as if her fate were important to an entire people, and at the same time as if she were set apart from the people, despised them, and was all the more nobly pained because they didn't understand her. Anyone in my family could have performed it better, having my grandmother as a model.

*

I never thought about it at the time, but in hindsight I seem to have been my grandmother's favourite. Perhaps my memory is selective, but as I write, I keep finding instances where she praised me in contrast to my sister. I had blue eyes, pale skin and fair hair, while my sister had deep brown eyes, olive skin, and improbably copper-coloured hair, from beneath which she fluttered endless eyelashes. To the rest of the world my sister was the beauty, and I was constantly subjected to belated apologies along the lines of 'oh... and your hair is beautiful too.' But my grandmother found my own hair, plain mouse brown, better behaved when she combed it. So, apparently, was my bone structure. My grandmother believed in phrenology, a perfectly legitimate science in the time of her education. She often commented authoritatively about the facial structure of criminals shown on the television news, noting that their eyes were too close together. I, on the other hand, had a high forehead, and she celebrated this as a sign of intelligence. My grandfather, she told me proudly, had had a high forehead.

*

One of my last visits to my grandmother was when I was in my early thirties. Now that I no longer wore my hair half-shaved, and would venture sometimes to wear a skirt with sandals, rather than the work boots she said looked like a peasant's, she found me a suitable asset to show off to her friends. My visits to her would be punctuated by the requisite morning tea, at which the loyal granddaughter could be not only paraded, but also educated, in the mores of the Adelaide society of matrons in which my grandmother moved. This particular visit's society duty was a visit from Piri, a Hungarian doctor and a very old friend of my grandmother's. I quite liked Piri. She said what she thought and I found her a refreshing antidote to my grandmother's ostentatious politeness. The two of them together were intimate enough to be often grumpy with each other, two irascible old women. I think I was dimly aware of Piri

being Jewish, which could only have been because my grandmother had mentioned it, since I was not in the habit of identifying Jewishness in people.

On the morning before Piri arrived, I had played my grandmother some Hungarian folk music that I had bought at the Womadelaide festival. Marta Sebestyén sang with her piercing, jarring, authentic tones and my grandmother was tugged back to memories she hadn't foreseen. 'Oh yes,' she said, as if reaching into a dim, hazy intuition, 'that's how the peasant girls used to sing, back in Hungary.' I was rapt, because this was always where I wanted my grandmother to be: in the past, with exotic stories, not in the present with her demands and her unassuageable pains. These were our only moments of real intimacy. She wanted to listen to more, but Piri was about to arrive. 'I wish now she wasn't coming', said my grandmother.

Perhaps that was why, when Piri did arrive, my grandmother spent the morning telling Jewish jokes. Here is the joke: There was a man who declared:

'My biggest problem is that my wife is a Jew'.

'But', said his friends, 'aren't you a Jew'?

'Yes', said the man, 'that is my second biggest problem!'

I recognise the humour – dry, understated, cynical, and full of the unspoken 'knowledge' of those who belong to high society about the habits of those who don't. The humour of sophisticated, aristocratic Hungary before the war. But at the time I did not recognise my grandmother's reasons for telling *this* joke *then*, in that particular context. Piri, prone to saying what she thought, said nothing. She certainly did not laugh.

For a long time the best explanation I could come up with for this episode is that my grandmother, in the company of a respectable Hungarian, was doing what was done for entertainment in respectable Hungarian society: being witty. That the joke happened to be a Jewish joke? Well, perhaps most of them were. The Jewish people present were perhaps assumed to be used to it. Perhaps my grandmother was even demonstrating to me that I needn't worry about Piri's Jewishness, by proving that she was domesticated and not sensitive about it. Perhaps this was even my grandmother's way of demonstrating sympathy for Piri and her unmentionable 'problem'.

Only now, having put Fascism into the picture, do I wonder about the combination of Hungarian folk music and Jewish jokes. Nationalism, naivety and anti-Semitism, for my grandmother, came as a package. And for a moment, lost in her Hungarian memories, it must have seemed that I belonged in the package.

Naive as I was, I can't be sure she was wrong.

All of this I am telling you so that you know that my grandmother was a snob, an anti-Semite, and a manipulator. And so that you understand that I loved and admired her; that everyone loved and admired her. This says something about her, and something about us.

*

As I grew into adolescence I became fascinated by punk and goth. I did not know what it was about, I only knew that when I saw people wearing army boots, rags and fatigues, people looking emaciated and deathly, I felt called by destiny. It can't have been a coincidence, this sudden fashion for war imagery, two generations after World War II. Many of us must have grown up feeling that the reality of life had somehow been kept from us; must have sensed that under the surface there was another, more urgent, more real life: one that we didn't quite know how to enact but that we knew had something to do with army boots, shaved haircuts, and industrial music from Germany. We weren't sure if we were the emaciated skeletons dressed in rags, or the marching, booted thugs – the skinheads and the punks went to the same gigs anyway, arguing over the history of Ska while they brawled outside pubs – but we knew for sure that this was the imagery that the world needed. All adolescents want to upset their parents, but the symbolism we chose to do it with had, at least for me and it must have been so for others, a meaning that we sensed was close to home, even if we didn't know why. It was as if the adults around us had fallen into a dream and forgotten reality, and we were trying to wake them up, to make them face what they were denying, so that they could give up their stupor and their addictions, come back to earth, and be with us – or if that was not possible, at least we could try to join them in the nightmares they had inherited from their own parents.

Chapter Four: Love

On the floor of my living room is a small heirloom Persian rug. It is by far the most valuable thing in the house. Age has worn it thin and it is becoming threadbare, the jute backing showing between the rows of threads. Although I remember the same rug in my childhood as being red, it now shows an intricate beige and black pattern against an earthy, faded red-brown. The rug is thin enough to pick up and wrap around your feet on a cold night, and the man in the Persian carpet shop tells me they call this a ‘paper rug’; that the older they are, the thinner they become. Really, he tells me, at this stage of its life it should be hung on the wall or put in a corner where no one will walk on it.

This rug, which rests under my feet at night as I sit in front of the television; which is regularly crumpled by stretching feet, scattered with crumbs from late night snacks, and brusquely scoured by the vacuum cleaner, came to me as a gift from my father, rolled up in his suitcase when he caught a plane from Tasmania. In the dozen years before this, he had it in Townsville, in Melbourne, and in Adelaide. In earlier decades it lay among a patchwork of further rugs, in front of the antique lion-footed desk in my grandmother’s retirement flat in Norwood. It must have also been in her house in Glenelg, and among her things when she was a new-immigrant maid in the Adelaide hills, traumatised by rats, ironing, and misunderstandings over the word ‘tea’,

which she thought meant elegant tea services with cakes, while her employers expected dinner. Before this, the rug was rolled up and packed into a large black metal trunk, padlocked in two places, with 'AUSTRALIE' painted on the side in white letters. The trunk, which stood in my bedroom when I was a child, came to Australia with my grandmother and father on the *General Langfitt* in 1951, filled with the possessions she had decided, on their last night in Budapest, were the things that she wanted to bring with her to her unknown future.

My father often comments on the fact that she chose to keep this rug, even as it became faded and worn. It had been given to her as a wedding present by her previous love, Kálmán, whom she had met at a glamorous party in 1928 when she was sixteen. She found herself telling him of her uncertainty over her violin studies at the Conservatorium. He misquoted Descartes to her: *Dubito ergo sum*. As things turned out, it could have been his motto, but that was not yet apparent. Aside from a few years in the United States on a Fulbright Fellowship, he was Vera's constant companion until she was twenty-six, calling her his 'Solveig to whom he would always return.' This too, it turned out, was prophetic. They lived an intellectual lifestyle, spending their evenings in her mother's Budapest apartment, he writing papers on Hungary's economic situation, while she, having given up the violin for languages, translated PG Wodehouse plays into Hungarian for the radio. They planned to marry once he had achieved a better position than his current job in a bank.

After ten years, Kálmán introduced her to a dark-eyed, dark-haired, Jewish woman called Sarah. Sarah was, Vera wrote in her memoir, 'everything that I was not: sophisticated, sensual, worldly and elegant... I began to understand why my relationship with Kálmán had always been so platonic.' Sarah began to appear at every social outing. When she came to Sunday lunch at Vera's, her mother said 'If that was his mistress, it was very bad taste to bring her here.'

Kálmán's father began to send apologetic but vague letters about the 'wretched ways of his son', but the final straw came when Vera and Kálmán sat together on a summer night on the shores of Lake Balaton, the moon painting lace on the rippling water. He drew breath, and she thought, 'now, if ever, he will surely say something...' And he did: 'I think the reason for the imbalance of power in the Danube basin is...'

Vera decided to let Kálmán go. She announced that she would not hold him back if he wanted to marry. When he next returned from a trip to London, he said that

he had a surprise for her, and showed her a picture of a black-eyed English beauty, to whom he had just become engaged.

The beauty did not treat him well, but by the time his mother came to visit Vera to tell her about the divorce and beg her to take care of him, Vera was already engaged to Emil. She gave the mother a lecture about how every marriage had its difficulties, and how she looked forward to being a good wife to Emil, and hoped that he would be happy with her.

Five years later Emil was newly dead and buried under snow and earth in the cemetery in Sopron, and in the nearby village of Fertőrákos where he had sent his family away from the bombs and the conspiracies, with German soldiers occupying the village and shouting at the children over chocolate bars, while the Allied bombers flew overhead on their way to destroying Budapest and the Russians advanced inexorably from the East, Kálmán invited Vera to go away with him to the resort at Lake Balaton where he had once opined about the balance of power in the Danube Basin. Again, she chose the moral high ground, preferring to stay with her cousin's family. 'Whether that was a wise decision,' she wrote afterwards, 'nobody will ever be able to tell'.

Shortly afterwards the family was forced to flee from the approaching Russians with a few possessions piled in a wooden cart. The first night on the road and in the cold of oncoming winter, they had no blankets. Vera and baby Miklós huddled for warmth under the object she had packed instead: Kálmán's Persian rug.

Things outlast people. A few months later as the war and the winter began to end, Kálmán's body was discovered in the thaw in Budapest, lying where it had fallen after a German soldier during the siege, seeing a signed, personally dedicated photograph of Roosevelt that Kálmán kept on his desk, had pushed him out of his front door, executed him on the doorstep, and left the snow to cover him.

The story has the shape of a piece of fiction. But as I write this, the rug lies crisp and incontrovertible under my feet.

*

Between Kálmán's marriage and Kálmán's death, my grandmother met Emil, and so my grandfather was not an economist, an Anglophile and a Fulbright scholar who fraternised with American diplomats and had excellent taste in carpets. Instead he

was a man who is mentioned in histories of Hungary's downfall. But I didn't know this until after I began this book.

They met in 1938, when Hungary, in the first flush of joining the Axis powers, was awarded territory in Slovakia that had earlier been taken away in Hungary's great national trauma, the treaty of Trianon. My twenty-seven year old grandmother had been recommended for a three-month position establishing the Hungarian radio station in the occupied city of Kosice, now to be known in Hungarian as Kassa. It was a few months after Kálmán had left her to marry his dark English beauty. She drowned her sorrows in work, and one exhausted evening was dining alone at a table in the hotel in Kassa. In the centre of the room a large group of occupying Hungarian soldiers were carousing.

My grandmother was a story-teller. She wrote afterwards in her memoir, 'I thought to myself I shall never marry, but if I did, it would be to a man like that officer at the table over there.' He later mirrored the story, saying that he had been at the table thinking, 'I will never marry, but if I did, it would be to a woman like the one dining alone over there.' 'Who says,' my grandmother concludes, 'that marriages were not made in heaven?'

The next day the good-looking young soldier visited her in her hotel room, to pass on instructions about the correct propaganda to be given to the newly 'freed' 'Hungarians' of Kassa. They talked. He told her, on their very first meeting, that he admired the Germans' military prowess and political reform, but was wary of their expansionism and their anti-Semitism. He had, my grandmother was careful to mention in the same paragraph, several Jewish friends who were planning to emigrate. He also, she wrote in this first description of him, had some trouble with the 'red tape' of the military, and had been disciplined more than once for being too friendly with his subordinates. Before their meeting was over, he had invited her for lunch the next day, and when at lunch she inquired how long he was staying in Kassa, he replied that he was soon leaving, but would return on weekends.

This is almost all that she writes about him in her memoir. So I have to believe that these are the things she wanted us to know about him: That he admired the Germans, that he got on with Jews, that he was a nice man.

It was an unspoken, deep love. Every so often, one would touch the other's hand
– ‘Still?’

‘Still.’



*

What was it that drew them to one another? It is impossible that my grandmother would have looked at anyone who lacked class. He must have been dignified, reserved, intelligent and deeply moral. And they would have shared their dislocated, fragmented, lonely childhoods; she struggling for legitimacy among the nobility, he marginalised by the deaths of his parents and the indifference of his stepmother. But he was not, she writes, an easy man to get along with. Her mother found him thoroughly rude; when visitors came for lunch he would retire to the other end of the house, and when he and Vera went to high society balls held by her friends in the nobility he always came to her after ten minutes and brusquely announced that he was leaving; she could stay or go as she wished. ‘Of course’, she wrote, she always went with him. In the taxi on the way home he would demand to know how she could associate with such trivial, shallow people. She tried to learn from his strong values, his

religious attitude, and his dedication to a higher purpose. ‘He taught me a great deal,’ she wrote.

*

There are things I believe I know about my grandparents, because I have lived them myself. Experiences that are familiar to me, which I’ve been repeating my whole life. So I know, for instance, that after he died, he stayed with her. In the late afternoon glow of Adelaide summer he would have been there, hovering in the corners of her flat, a thickening of the air, a warmth, keeping her company, giving her life meaning. I know that this hallucination would have felt more real than the cumbersome, disjointed pattern of her actual life, in which she never quite seemed to fit, was always bumping against corners: other people’s expectations, her own impossible desires. His presence would have felt continuous, kind, comfortable, and like the thing she had wanted all along. Feeling him in the air would have been like recognising herself, and she would have gone about her small domestic tasks, cooking a boiled egg for dinner, ironing pillowcases, making crocheted and starched Christmas snowflake decorations to sell for charity, feeling that this was her life, and that it knew her, and that it was meaningful, because he was there, present, witnessing. She needed a witness, because otherwise things made no sense; there had been nothing in her life narrative, in the possibilities that had seemed to lie before her when she was a girl in Budapest, that led to a tiny cream brick flat in Norwood and days spent drinking uncounted cups of Liptons’ while folding endless piles of unwanted clothes in the back of the Brotherhood store. No sense of adventure, no active biography-making, had brought her to a colonial backwater without good coffee, fashion, or European languages. She had not been seeking adventure or wanting to discover a mythical land. When as a teenager in Budapest she had gone to listen to jazz at her young Jewish friend Matyi’s enormous apartment on Parliament Square, she had gazed at the coat of arms on the door that announced the Australian Consulate, and wondered where this exotic country was. It had not been part of her imagined future.

I know, because she told me once, that she had found that you do not ever feel old; even when your skin is wrinkled and you are toiling down the street with a hooked bamboo cane and plasters on your varicose veins, inside you feel like the same girl of nineteen, with the same hopes and desires. Age is only on the outside. You look in the

mirror and wonder where she went, the young woman that you thought was yourself. So she needed something to keep her pinned to that girl's life, to make the two persons, the two stories, into one, and that something that filled the void already shaped like his own absence, could have been no one else but my grandfather. Being disembodied, he was the perfect companion, could accompany her everywhere, see everything. Sometimes, she said to me once, she would hear him say her name in the middle of the night, and I recognise the feeling, the way that voice comes not from within a dream but from outside it, breaking in, waking you up into a space that seems to echo with urgency – someone has called you, as if in warning, and you struggle to answer, but the darkness slowly turns into that of night time in your bedroom, and the only sounds beyond the drumming of your own heart are the familiar ones. You have missed the encounter, been left behind, but the feeling of another world, one more open to the darkness, remains.

Chapter Five: A Good Man

I have in my hand a polished silver cigarette case. It is of a broad, flat, elegant design with a hidden catch in the side, a shape that would slide easily into a shirt pocket. Its surface is slightly dented, burnished with scratches and worn from many years of my grandmother's silver polish; I can see in my mind's eye her wrinkled, large-knuckled hands rubbing the surface over and over: hands that had taken on this work as a part of their identity, although it must once have been the maid's job. The weight and the smoothness of the case, the way it is just too large for my hand, are very familiar to me: for my entire childhood it was displayed on a shelf in our living room, from where my father would bring it down and explain to his seven- or eight-year-old daughters what it meant.

The front of the case is engraved with a strange diagram of shaded circles and broken lines: this, I was told, is the map of where my grandfather's regiment fought 'in the war', and indeed its format is that of a military campaign map. The reverse side is covered with about twenty signatures, all in flowing cursive etched into the silver and blackened by the skimming polish. These, my father said, were the signatures of my grandfather's 'regiment', although surely a regiment contains more than twenty people, and perhaps what he meant was platoon. If I squint and turn it around, I can just guess which of the signatures is my grandfather's, although really they all look the same to

me with their flying Hungarian accents. Apart from some photographs, this is the only object of Emil's that we have.

When I asked my father's cousin Olga for some reminiscences about the man that no other living person we know can remember, this case is what she thought of. She wrote to me about how he, like my grandmother, had been a chain-smoker; how he had had 'an exquisitely engraved cigarette holder'. The only conversation with him that she could recall was when she had been seven or eight years old. He had lit a cigarette and as he was about to return the case to his pocket, stopped, glanced at it and then bent down to show it to the little girl, and 'started to explain enthusiastically what these engravings meant'. Olga has forgotten exactly what he said — 'some military or historical event' — but she remembers the enthusiasm, and also how tall and handsome he was, especially in uniform.

This must have been just weeks before he was killed, and the cigarette case was lost for a time. My grandmother told me that she had not been given Emil's personal possessions after his death. Only years later — she did not say exactly when but she was already in Australia — she received an anonymous parcel in the mail from America. Inside were the cigarette case, and an unsigned note saying 'I believe this belongs to you.' She seems never to have tried to find out who sent it. Only just the other day, my father said something that I had never known before: it was not by chance that we came to Australia. She had deliberately turned down a chance to go to the US, because she was afraid of being recognised.

I wonder how my father could have known such things, and never wondered about them. I am frightened by his ability to know and not know at the same time. I am frightened about what else he knows and has never thought to tell me. There are times when I think that he has known everything all along, and he is just humouring me in my detective work, pretending it is all new to him, pretending that in seventy years he never wondered about his father. I can only think that like me, he was an alert child, and knew there were questions that he should not ask, questions which would upset the equilibrium, and perhaps bring about the end of the world.

*

I can't call him Grandfather, this man who was never old enough to be a grandfather, who never lived in a country where grandfathers are named in English.

My grandmother, in my memory, called him ‘that man’. There are two memories. Once, looking at his photograph where it stood on the bookshelf beside her bed, she said ‘I do love that man’, as though discovering it again, for the first time, as though naming something too obvious to be named, and yet as though the love had been in question. She spoke in the present tense, nearly 50 years after his death.

In the other memory, she was on her deathbed. More precisely, she was on a hospital chair beside her deathbed. She had wanted to try it, though movement was difficult. To get up and be civilised, for a last time, with the visiting family. To try and eat a little cake, perhaps a grape, and watch the Vienna Chorale on the hospital television. She was in pain, her spine bent over, lungs stuffed with cancer. I remember us trying to make her comfortable, and in the awkwardness of manoeuvring, with everyone bending over her, in each other’s way, wrestling with pillows, she said, ‘Who knows what that man had to see, surrounded by the Russians for seven months?’

My father, long practised in quashing any sign of anxiety on her part, laughed at her. ‘Don’t be silly, that was you, Mum! *You* were surrounded by the Russians for seven months.’ As though it was only morphine talking and she was a silly old woman.

My father’s ignorance, or deliberate obtuseness, continues to astonish me. We all know, we’ve read in the memoirs, that ‘that man’, I will have to call him Emil, that was his name, was in Russia, in the Hungarian army, on the Eastern front. For two months she did not hear from him at all, had no idea where he was; he had been cut off, surrounded.

I wanted to say to her – no, you mean Emil, don’t you Grandma? *Emil* was surrounded by Russians for seven months. What, Grandma, what do you think he had to see?

Somehow the family wall of denial silenced me. And rebuked, she did not raise the issue again. She died without telling that story. And I don’t know why, in the long hours I spent by her bed that summer, I didn’t try to ask her. Probably I was following the family practice of avoiding all conflict, of never asking questions in case you accidentally scare up a secret. It is my greatest regret about her.

*

Emil was at Voronyezh, in January 1943.

And then at Kiev, in April 1943.

That much the memoirs say. She did not write that Voronyezh in January 1943 was the battle of the Don Bend, where the Hungarian Second Army was crushed into non-existence, the guns abandoned at the front because the horses to pull them had been shot or commandeered by the Germans, the men in summer uniforms, the bicycles useless in the snow. Of two hundred thousand soldiers, only forty thousand ever returned to Hungary. One remnant was sent to become an occupying force near Kiev, to keep the locals in order and round up ‘partisans’ to be shot.

She did not write that Kiev is where Babi Yar was: the ravine where 20 000 Jews were lined up and shot in 1941 so that their bodies fell neatly into the gorge whose sides were collapsed to make their graves. Where massacres continued until August and September 1943, when the German army dug up the bodies and tried to burn them, to hide the evidence before the victorious Russians arrived.

She did not have to write those things. For someone who knew, that would be enough. Voronyezh, January 1943. Kiev.

For someone who doesn’t want to know, that would also be enough.

*

A framed photograph of him hung for many years in the front hallway of my grandmother’s little Adelaide flat. Like all the others, it shows him in uniform, precise and immaculate with metal corners on his collars. My mother remembers admiring the picture: ‘He was very good-looking, wasn’t he?’ His nose is clean and straight, parallel with his forehead, his eyes deep set. His skin is clear, pale and unblemished. Everything in the photograph speaks of precision, of uprightness, of hardness, except his mouth, which is soft and relaxed, as though he has not been quite able to maintain the hardness that the image demands. It is my father’s mouth, and mine, too. He looks like he would have been an uncommonly handsome man, by the standards of the time. He also looks, by the standards of my time, like a Nazi, although the uniform is Hungarian, not German, and although I never thought this until I had the knowledge of hindsight.

No photograph shows him face on, intimate with the unforeseeable viewer: not the photograph on his military identity card, nor the casual photograph of him smiling down at his restive horse. In the souvenir record of his graduating class from the Ludovika officers’ training academy, in which individual portraits are arranged in neat lines, most of them in three quarter view, his remains resolutely side-on. He composed

himself always in sharp profile, in the aristocratic mode, like the relief on a coin, and similarly impassive, stately. It could have been vanity. My grandmother remembers her own mother, his mother-in-law, complaining that he spent more time in front of the mirror than she did. For the public record he presented himself in outline, as though asking and expecting for this neat shape to be filled with the yearnings of others. No photograph allows us to look into his eyes.

*

His School reports were exemplary, stating that he was ‘developing his character in a good direction, vivid temperament, happy, peaceful, well-intentioned, trustworthy, self-motivated, outstanding ability, diligent, military bearing, pleasing appearance, polite, has an excellent influence on his classmates, popular, clean and orderly.’ He was disciplined only for leaving his cupboard door open, arriving at gym class ten minutes late without an excuse, leaving his coat hanging untidily over the holidays, failing to check the standard of the dormitory when he was asked, and smoking when he wasn’t allowed. As he reached his late teens the Masters began to take him on tour with them so that, my grandmother writes, he saw ‘practically the whole of Europe in the company of grown up men.’ Such mentoring and mutual admiration among military men, of course, was nothing scandalous.

Only a small note in the School minutes records, under the heading of ‘distinguishing marks’: the phrase ‘mild neurasthenia’. When I look it up I find that in the Austro-Hungarian empire this had been a nervous disease that almost passed as a distinguishing feature, a disease known to attack the middle and upper classes and particularly those who dedicated themselves to hard work and puritan lifestyles; the kind of illness with which one retired to a sanatorium for a rest cure. The dictionaries give the symptoms as an amorphous collection of fatigue, muscular weakness, headaches, indigestion, numbness, nervousness and depression, brought on by the stress of urban life and excessive mental work. Today it would be called chronic fatigue. Emil’s ‘vivid temperament’ combined with all his ‘diligence’ probably fitted the stereotype perfectly. Seeing this, I write to my mother: ‘He sounds like someone from our family.’

*

He was sent to military school at the age of nine, after his mother and then his father had died, and his uncle begged the support of the state to pay his school fees. There, in the Sopron Military Realschool, they systematically removed his personality. At least that is the story that Géza Ottlik, his precise contemporary and possibly his classmate, tells in his much loved Hungarian novel *School at the Frontier*. In a kaleidoscope of traumatic experiences that he takes pains to make clear were not traumatic at all, but merely everyday and boring, Ottlik conveys how the Warrant Officers bullied their charges into a position so powerless that in turn they bullied one another merely in order to exist. In the almost impossibly small margins of the day in which they had tiny moments of being slightly less observed and regimented, they swore at one another between their teeth, kicked each other in the behind, stole each others' food, punched each other, head butted each other, fought duels with mattress beaters laced with brass buttons, and endlessly taunted. Or rather, they did all this to those lower in the hierarchy: the new boys, the fat boys, or those who simply somehow through extreme obtuseness and dissociation managed to hold on to some sense of an existence as a unique person with volition of his own – since volition could only appear as rebellion, and since to be seen associating with a misfit was to be punished. And each act of 'rebellion', such as failing to get dressed and make a bed perfectly in less than one minute, was punished by torture of the whole class in endless repeated exercises – sit, stand at attention, sit, stand at attention, sit, stand at attention, for hours on end. This was the most damaging: that through all this any loyalty, any concern for one another, was burned away. To stand against injustice on behalf of a friend was the worst they could do; one by one each learned that it was impossible. And at the same time their loyalty to one another was enforced; anyone who tried to speak about injustice or to defend themselves when an act of bullying resulted in them appearing less than perfectly disciplined – 'He pushed me out of line,' 'He spread dripping on my desk so that the Master's hand was covered in grease', 'He dropped my tin of cakes and ground them into the floor, turning the dormitory into a whorehouse of disarray,' 'He knocked me to the ground just as the Warden entered the room', 'He held me down and stole my boot so that I had to try to stand to attention with one bare foot' – was punished so extremely by the Wardens that the rest of the class had no choice but to add to the punishment in order to save themselves. They learned, as Ottlik writes, that they were bound together irrevocably by the shared knowledge that each was entirely on his

own and could not be helped. The most rewarded act, the only one that would lift them in the hierarchy, was to become bullies themselves, avenues through which the Wardens' will could be further enacted on the rest of the class. Their personalities were burned away, not by violence on its own, but by isolation, silence, and the discovery of their own cowardice and violence. Civilian life became a distant memory.

In Ottlik's book there is a character who is an orphan. His story is not the same as Emil's, but Ottlik describes the position he was in: having no choice but to condemn his cousin, in order to dissociate himself from a charge trumped up by the Masters in order to justify expelling the cousin from the school after he had dared to make a formal complaint that his mechanical pencil had been stolen and broken. The orphan, who had been his cousin's best friend, had to condemn his cousin in a tribunal, accusing him of drawing obscene pictures and calling the Major a bare-assed baboon, crimes for which the punishment was to be excluded from any school for one year, and of course from the Military School for ever. Had the orphan not participated in his cousin's downfall, he would have lost his government-supported place, would have been unable to afford to attend any school at all. For him and for other orphans, the need to belong to this world was all-encompassing. Ottlik's orphan was a pale and meek boy, much bullied, like all the small boys.

In Ottlik's book there is a character who wears double pips on his collar and two buttons on his lapel for excelling in his schoolwork, perhaps like the 'double medal with the buttons' that Emil's file reports as awarded to him at the end of each year. This character, an upright young man whom Ottlik names Enoch, is not quite in the inner circle of bullies, but very close to them. When necessary, or perhaps just when he feels like it, he beats up boys when they are down, just as everyone else does. He does not play a major role in the novel; his authority and his violence make him too normal, too successful, to be interesting. Only, on one or two occasions when everyone is frozen in tense anticipation of the next impending punishment, it is he who defuses the situation by throwing the first punch, thus deciding who will be made the scapegoat.

Another character in Ottlik's book who gains the double pips after the first year is Tibor Tóth. Tibor is stunningly good looking, with fine blonde hair. He manages to avoid most of the bullying by bursting into conspicuous tears at the first sign of attention. The boys are unable to bear this, and leave him alone, but by fourth year they have named him 'the little virgin'. He is deeply religious, and thoroughly diligent. It is the world 'diligent' that makes me think of my grandfather, also sometimes described

as blonde, also good looking, also, according to his teachers, exceptionally diligent, and according to his wife, 'deeply religious'. But he was not the same as Tibor, because my grandfather was also, according to the school reports, very popular with his classmates, and of exemplary, upright, military bearing.

In the later sections of Ottlik's book, something interesting happens. The boys have been engaged in a life and death struggle to keep hold of themselves, a struggle which every one of them loses except the one new boy who refuses to follow a single order, defends himself with a penknife, and is expelled, battered almost to death, after a week. But after their first Christmas holiday, something seems to happen, even though Ottlik makes it clear that in the School nothing, ever, happens. The boys begin to recreate personalities, they begin to become themselves inside the military school. This one talks too much, this one collects pages cut from books with his penknife, another is always good-natured. Out of the discipline that imposes absolute conformity they begin to differentiate, and more than this they begin to live, to build selves out of this life in which nothing ever happens, to make this life their own. Perhaps this happens because when they finally go home for the holidays, they can no longer find themselves there. It is real, Ottlik writes, and they are delighted that this place which had become mythical in their nights of silent, homesick tears exists and is still really there. But they cannot talk to their parents, they are no longer interested in their toys, and they are embarrassed to invite their classmates to visit, because in this place of love and care they find that they no longer know how to act, that they have to pretend. Their allegiances have shifted, and now they know who their true companions are. It is no longer their mothers who know what they are thinking without asking, but their schoolmates. They have been claimed; they have claimed one another. And from the moment they are back on the train to school, they begin once again to torture each other, now with still greater skill and even higher stakes, because they know each other, and this is all they have. Their brutality becomes their community, and a kind of love. They hurt each other all the more tenderly, and their bonds become ever stronger. Ottlik writes that the strength of this community is like nothing in the civilian world, being based on the fact that each of them knows the shameful secret that the others also know about him: that they are cowards, and when the chips are down, they will betray and abandon one another.



The result was handsome, powerful men. László Eszenyi, one of Ottlik's classmates and a good looking man himself, wrote about Emil that he 'was a beautiful tall man, with bronze-tinged golden hair and girlishly soft skin that blushed, making him appear feminine, so that at Military School they had called him "Cica" – "Kitty"'. In 1944, after their postgraduate training had been cut short because of the war and they had both entered service, the then Lieutenant Eszenyi, had come to report the dire situation at the front: the lack of ammunition, artillery and horses, the low morale, the abuse from the Germans. He hoped that Emil, an officer in the 'Brains trust' of the General Staff, would be able to pass the information on to high command.

Captain Szörényi-Reischl, who had been lurching on a plate of cold meats, finished his mouthful and got up to sit on the desk, towering over the Lieutenant to remind him of their respective positions in the hierarchy.

He then lectured me in such a smooth manner that I forgot to be angry with him. With a slightly mocking smile he informed me that a HQ officer must not form an opinion based on experience at one station of the front; he had to examine the big picture as a whole, objectively. Well he had a big picture of himself, for sure. As he sat in front of me, his brightly polished colt-skin shoes were at eye level, swinging in front of my nose, and I suddenly saw in my mind's eye vitez Gal's lace up boots sunk ankle deep into the mud of the Front, and heard the line from Géza Gyóni's poem: 'Just for one night send them out here...'

But in spite of himself, Eszenyi felt reassured by Szörényi's powerful, smooth confidence. 'He is obviously a HQ officer of the highest military command – I told myself to ease my conscience – so after all he must have a much better picture of the situation than I had.'

After the Hungarian Second Army was crushed a few months later, Eszenyi wrote in the wisdom of hindsight that Emil's confidence had been based on misleading German reports. And that, 'It is a despicable fault of humanity – and I was also guilty of it – that when faced by insoluble problems, we tend to easily and gratefully accept an explanation in lieu of an action.'

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Hungary was full of nationalist associations. They sprang up after the Great War and the dismantling of the Empire, most of them devoted to restoring Hungary's lost territory, advancing the great Magyar destiny as master race, defender of Christianity, and dominating power of the region, and fighting against the international Jewish-Communist-Allied-liberal conspiracy. 'Christianity', of course, meant 'not-Jewish.' The largest society was called MOVE, the Hungarian Association of National Defence, and was led by Captain Gyula Gömbös. In the White Terror of 1919, MOVE and other organisations massacred their Jewish communist enemies with impunity. Gömbös went on to become Minister of Defence and then Prime Minister. Had he not died in 1936, he would have been Hungary's Hitler. He was a sworn enemy of democracy, and used the term National Socialism long before Hitler did.

Hungary was full of secret societies. The military officers had the Kettős Kereszt Vérszövetség – the Blood Society of the Double Cross, a secret arm of MOVE set up by Gömbös. They practised secret initiations based on ancient Hungarian traditions, and required the initiate to swear to absolute and lifelong obedience. Only the select were allowed to join. The kind of young officer who was racially sound and prepared to devote himself to the Hungarian cause. The greatest insult of the time was 'un-Hungarian' – meaning traitorous, grasping, cowardly and un-chivalrous. Jews were by definition un-Hungarian, but other minorities, the Germans, Slovaks, Slavs and Rumanians, could become Hungarian if they changed their name, spoke the language, and dedicated themselves to the nation.

Did Emil belong to such a society? I cannot know; they were secret societies. I only know that in 1936, he applied to have his name changed on his records, to recognise the Hungarian half of his name, Szörényi, as well as the telltale Austrian second half, Reischl. Several of his classmates made similar requests. He was a young man who liked to belong.

Nonetheless Vilmos Nagy, the former Foreign Minister, later accused him, and his co-conspirators, of acting in accordance with their ‘original German names’.

*

Everyone agrees that he was a good man. My grandmother wrote that when he was trapped behind enemy lines in 1943, ‘a military attaché rang me one day to say that he was alive, out of danger, in Kiev. “Your husband is a truly great man,” he added.’ She adds that the messenger, ‘also said that Captain Szörényi was an exceptionally kind, generous man, giving away all his own clothes to those soldiers who had only what they were wearing.’

Chapter Six: Abandoned friends

I think, although I am not sure, that there was more than one Anna in my grandmother's life. I think I had a predecessor. But I can't be sure, because my grandmother does not call her by that name. She calls her Matyi. But that name is confusing: Matyi is usually a boy's name or a surname. She also says that Matyi lived in an apartment at 1 Parliament Square. But that is the address of Budapest's sparkling fairy-towered Parliament building, not of any apartment block. It was not usual for my grandmother to write such errors in her memoir. Perhaps, not knowing whether her childhood friend was still in communist Hungary, she changed the name, so that the mention of servants and French literature, *foie gras* and ballrooms, would not get her friend into trouble. Or perhaps her memory failed her, here, after so much name dropping of Baronesses, politicians, diplomats and journalists, when she had to discuss her Jewish friend. Perhaps her memory began to divert and distract her, so that certain story lines would become harder to follow, certain questions harder to ask.

Matyi and Vera met at fencing class, and soon Vera was invited to one of Matyi's parties. Some of Vera's friends were not allowed to mix socially with Jews, but Vera's mother scorned such prejudices: the reason Vera was not allowed to attend was that she was too young. However, they wrote back, they would be delighted if Matyi could visit for afternoon tea. She did so, and soon the invitation was returned. Matyi lived in a vast apartment building overlooking Parliament house and the Danube. When

the maid let her in Vera counted eleven doors along the parquetry-floored hallway before they reached Matyi's room. When she saw the walls lined from floor to ceiling with French and English literature, she felt immediately at home. After they had tea, Matyi suggested listening to some music. It was the first time Vera had heard jazz. 'I could hardly tear myself away to go home,' my grandmother wrote.

The two girls became regular companions, spending their summer days in the outdoor cafes on Margit Island, walking in the sunshine, eating ice-cream and listening to jazz quartets in outdoor cafes. The following year Vera was allowed to attend Matyi's party, where on small tables in the ballroom they dined on foie gras, roast meats and cream puffs. It was at one of Matyi's salons that Vera met Kálmán.

And as the story becomes a love story, Matyi fades out of the memoir. There is only the small remaining anecdote about the plaque on the wall outside Matyi's apartment, showing 'a kangaroo and an ostrich.' She inquired about this exotic image, and Matyi explained that her father, Miksa Fenyő, was the Australian Consul. Writing from her tiny flat in Adelaide, my grandmother ironically remembers wondering where this strange country could be.

Of the apocryphal Matyi's inevitable fate in the years that followed, my grandmother says nothing.

*

Miksa Fenyő is a common name. But one person in particular appears often in the historical record. He was the founder of Hungary's most prestigious literary journal, *Nyugat*. Like Matyi's father, he was a solicitor. He was also secretary of the Hungarian Industrialists, and from 1931 to 1935 he was a Member of Parliament. In 1934 he wrote a passionate warning about Hitler, thus earning himself second place after Raoul Wallenberg on Hitler's personal hit list.

Miksa Fenyő survived the war, spending years hidden in a Budapest apartment during which he wrote his memoir. His children also survived, including a daughter, Anna, known as Panni. Panni would have been just two years older than my grandmother. While Vera was with her cousin in the country, where her husband had sent her to escape the bombs, Panni was confined in an apartment, dreading being reported by the Arrow Cross guard who patrolled the building.

*

Among the flimsy, yellowing typewritten pages of my grandmother's two-hundred page memoir is a folded letter, closely typed and signed with the spreading light-blue ink of a fountain pen. It begins 'Édes Verám' – 'Sweet Vera'.

It is not the only letter included in the pages, and she does not single it out from the other letters from Hungarian friends and relatives that she received over the years in Australia. She herself writes nothing about what was in the letter and gives no response to it. She translates it, and leaves it to speak for itself. This is in keeping with her character. To offer any kind of response would have been to give the matter more attention that its importance warranted. But similarly, to leave it out of her story would have implied that she was disturbed by it. She acted towards it with the utmost ethics and dignity, and perhaps believed that her restraint would contrast favourably with the extravagant, unreserved tones that the letter displayed.

The letter was written shortly after the first full day that my grandmother and my father spent in Australia, in January 1950. They had been accommodated at Bonegilla Migrant Reception Centre in a corrugated iron hut, on the walls of which a previous Austrian resident had painted his name, or so my grandmother thought until someone advised her to clean off the swear word. In the morning a loudspeaker had called Mrs Szörényi to the office to receive a message. It was from a Hungarian acquaintance who had moved to Australia eleven years earlier. Claire had travelled from Sydney and wanted to meet them in nearby Albury. She thought she could help them get oriented in their new country.

Bonegilla was just the latest in a long line of refugee camps. My grandmother knew that the rules and the fences were not to be taken too seriously, could be bent with some upper-class charm, a smile or a reminder of shared respectability. They caught the bus to Albury, and spent 'most of the day' with Claire. What they did, she does not say, and it is hard to imagine what these two European ladies and a seven-year old boy would have done in the sunny Albury of January 1950. Perhaps they took a paddle-steamer on the river, as my father and I did once on a holiday when we passed through the same town.

When they returned to Bonegilla, they were reprimanded for their absence because they had missed the call for medical examinations. My grandmother joked,

‘This camp is almost as bad as the Russians’. The camp officials laughed, and so did she.

A few days later, Vera received the letter from Claire. In translation, it said this:

My dear Vera, I have an unfortunate nature and I cannot show my feelings in personal contact. That is why I have to write to tell you that I think you are an exceptional person. Instead of describing over pages and pages how I feel, I shall say it in one sentence: I understand Emil a hundred per cent why he chose you. The two of you really deserved each other. Believe me, it is not easy for me to feel like this, let alone write all this. But it must have been equally hard for you to tell me how nobly Emil behaved with regards to my memory. I fully appreciate your courage and greatness of heart for telling all this to me and am truly grateful. He had to be an exceptional man to be loved by two women so much, absolutely and for ever...

I am very sorry that being both on the same continent, we do not live in the same city. I know and I believe that we would understand each other and perhaps, given the chance to know me better and not just superficially with all my shortcomings displayed, you would get to like me and could understand the past... We had a long talk and yet I feel there is still a lot to be said, a lot to be asked. Nevertheless, for the first time in eleven years I feel at peace. It will keep me going for a while.

...I am sorry that you got to know the Claire that I am now and not the old Klári. But, as I have already told you, when we left home and I was separated from Emil, I went numb and I changed completely. It was a choice, between this or complete collapse. When I went back to Budapest on a visit and everybody said that I had changed for the better, I used to think and still do that the old Klári, simpering and spoiled as she was, was much more loveable than my present self. However...

I only just noticed that I am writing a lot about myself. There was a time when I suffered because of you as much as you would have suffered because of me. I feel that Emil would be satisfied if we both could see that he did not want to hurt either of us.

In Albury I cried practically throughout the night, which is quite unusual for me, but then it was an extremely unusual situation and all those emotions melted the ice somewhat. I have to admit, I am crying now as I write to you and, strangely enough, it is not connected with Emil but with the two of you. I have got to like you very very much and firmly hope that as time goes by, perhaps through letters, you will get to like me too. If you feel like it, write to me about everything, don't keep things bottled up. You must get it out of your system, as the saying goes here, and I shall always be here for just that purpose....My dear, take care of yourself and Nick and, when you have time, write to me, I am looking forward to your news. Once again, I thank you gratefully for your unselfish kindness and understanding,
Love and kisses, Klári.

If my father's memory is not confused by childhood, they kept in touch with Claire after this, because he remembers that she had a large collection of ornate

porcelain animal figurines. I know that Emil liked to buy these for his women, because my grandmother on her deathbed carefully told me that her Herendi figurine of a white cherub riding a golden-horned rhinoceros beetle had been a gift from him.

If my father's memory is not confused by childhood, Claire was Jewish. She introduced them to their first friends in Adelaide; Jewish Hungarian doctors and fashion designers. Some of these friends Vera kept; one of them was Piri the irascible, who did not laugh at my grandmother's Jewish jokes. The ones of lesser class, she soon discarded.

Australian immigration records show only one person of Claire's name arriving in Australia. She came with her husband and her eight-year-old child, who would have been born when Emil was just eighteen and she twenty-three.

Perhaps they came to Australia because Claire's husband wanted to take her away from Emil. But I have already mentioned that the first thing that my grandmother wrote about Emil in her memoir was this:

As a soldier he seemed to admire the "military spirit" of the German army but had strong reservations about Hitler and his "devious politics". He appreciated that social reforms had been introduced in Germany but was clearly worried about German expansionism. He seemed to have several Jewish friends in Budapest who were all planning to leave the country.

This was in 1938, the year that Emil and Vera met in Hungary's newly occupied territory, the same year the Hungarian government instituted a new 'Jewish law' creating quotas for Jews in the professions. The officially-recorded Claire and her family arrived in Australia that year, among the first wave of Jews fleeing the rise of Anti-Semitism.

For all her honesty, my grandmother did not translate Klári's letter entirely accurately. Even my ignorant eyes can see that in the original letter, where my grandmother has translated 'Emil', what Klári actually typed was 'Bubu'. What could such a nickname signify? It sounds like a term of endearment: My little child, my baby, my little military man. It's a little like 'BB', the protagonist of Ottlik's novel *Buda*. The internet also tells me that it is a Yiddish word that in English has become 'booboo': 'little mistake'.

How did this affair come about? Perhaps he was like Ottlik's character Kornél Hillbert, blonde, athletic, orphaned, a heroic 'Viking' to his admiring classmates, who spent his holidays with family friends and was loved by their daughter, a 'sweet violet

and wild strawberry girl' nine years older than him and already engaged to be married, who cried and berated herself for her silliness while he awkwardly stroked her hair. I have given Emil's lover the name Klári after this character; it is not her real name.

And how did he think of her? Perhaps it was as Gregor Rezzori writes in his *Memoirs of an Anti-Semite*: that the young men of 1930s Central Europe used to say to one another with a wink, 'A Jewess is not a Jew.'

My grandmother once told me that she knew Emil was not a faithful man, but she did not worry, because when she found the letters in his waste paper bin they were unopened.

*

The coincidences keep piling up, making it easy to tell the story; all I have to do is follow the links. But they are not coincidences. They are signs of an underlying pattern. Here is what Hans /Antonio Tedeschi, child of a Nazi war criminal in Daša Drndić's novel *Trieste*, says about coincidences:

I know that coincidences are rare, perhaps there are no coincidences, there is only our stupid and superstitious need to duck behind our own carnival life which prances by us. Our coincidences, which are actually our pasts, we bury under our family trees on which grow berries full of sweet poison.

There are no coincidences. There is just the underlying structure of things. It is not a coincidence that my grandfather had a Jewish mistress, allowing me to put his story next to one of the Holocaust. My grandfather's story is part of the Holocaust. You have to forget a lot in order to identify a coincidence.

*

I'm told that it's risky to introduce new characters so far into a work. I need to make sure they stay with us.

But the point is that they don't.

To make a narrative that followed the plan, that had a shape which smoothly rose and fell, which gave the right signals about when to feel what, I'd have to leave out

Matyi and Klári. Putting them in breaks the narrative, confuses us about who are the protagonists, divides our loyalty. Leaves plot threads hanging.

Which, of course, is exactly what happened. Matyi and Klári were loved. The protagonists of my story held their hands and kissed them. And then they had to be left out, pushed to the margins, made into collateral damage, so that the story could go on. Yes, it's the wrong shape. It's not how stories should work.

I'm stubborn. I'm keeping them in. This is a broken story. Should it not be a broken story? Should I cover over the gaps, pretend there is no loss? My grandmother knew how to cover gaps, how to stick to the narrative, how to keep secrets. But wounds which are covered without draining fester. Eventually history gets through, nonetheless, smelling all the worse.

Chapter Seven: This is Unintelligible

*In such an age I dwelt on earth
when spies were honoured, and the murderer,
the traitor, and the thief were held as heroes*
(Miklós Radnóti, 1909-1944)

The first incontrovertible facts I found were in volume two of C.A. Macartney's *October Fifteenth: A history of modern Hungary, 1929-45*. I almost missed them: I did not at first realise that the work had two volumes. As I wandered past the Hungarian history shelves in the Barr Smith Library at the University of Adelaide searching for teaching texts, I occasionally stopped to look for my grandfather's names in indexes. I saw two faded red copies of *October Fifteenth*, and picked up one to look at it, but the dates were not the ones I was looking for, and there was no index, so I put it back on the shelf. It was months later on another idle library browse that I realised there were not two copies of the same book, but two volumes.

In the index of the second volume, the name 'Szörényi' was listed. With the wrong initial: H, rather than E. Without its Austrian suffix it is a common name, so I assumed this was another soldier. But this book at least covered the right historical period, so I borrowed it.

As I carried its faded, red weight towards the loans desk, I noticed a strange feeling in the air – a kind of familiar, delicate warmth, elusive and soft as the scent of talcum powder. *What is that?* I asked myself. Then I recognised the feeling of my

grandmother, a feeling almost forgotten seven years after her death. 'Hello, Grandma', I said to the disembodied affection that seemed to hover to my right. I thought perhaps she was pleased that I was searching for the truth. *Perhaps she wants me to know* I thought.

In hindsight I can say that it's also possible that my grandmother had touched this book herself, that enough of herself had rubbed off on its bare hardback covers, or become part of the dust of its pages, that I subliminally smelled it. She was an educated woman. She would have known where to look when, after the maelstrom of war, flight, communism, refugee camps, migration and manual labour had settled, she became curious about how history had remembered her husband. She might, amongst the pressures of her new career as a French teacher, have found time to go to the only university library in town and, even if not permitted to borrow, browse the shelves.

And this was the book she would have looked at first, for the simple reason that it was written by her friend. In her memoir she lists the friends that she and Kálmán had during her Anglophone period in the 1930s: Countess Elisabeth Bethlen, Baron John Bornemizsa, and two British journalists: Rupert Gosling, and Carlisle Aylmer Macartney, who during the war became Britain's advisor on Eastern Europe, and subsequently a professor at Oxford and the University of Edinburgh, where he published his classic *October Fifteenth: A history of modern Hungary* in 1957. A copy was bought in that year out of the endowment fund given by the Barr Smith family to the University of Adelaide. It stayed there through the decades: where my future father in the sixties must have walked past it on his way to meet my future mother on the steps of the library's ornate reading room, and into the next century when I walked past it searching for teaching texts for my new university job.

It took me some time to realise that the 'H' was not the initial of a first name, but stood for 'Hungarian'. I looked up the list of General Staff officers I had once copied from a military history. There were no other officers with that surname. It was him.

Macartney mentions Captain Szörényi twice, without saying whether he is aware that this Captain was the husband of his erstwhile friend Vera. I have memorised the page numbers: 415 and 416. The book is so long and tortuously detailed that I had to leaf back to the previous chapter in order to work out the year and the date when these anecdotes took place. It was October fifteenth, 1944.

*

On October fifteenth, 1944, Hungary's Regent Horthy announced over the radio that the war was no longer viable, that Germany had exploited Hungary's resources ruthlessly, and that he had concluded a treaty with the Russians. The war was over.

It was entirely a surprise. In Budapest the people were stunned. In the streets a few people looked over their shoulders first and then dared a cautious cheer. Some of the Jews in the yellow-starred houses excitedly tore the stars from their coats. Most people watched, apprehensively.

Even the very few people Horthy had informed of his plan had been expecting it to happen a few days later. It was all badly prepared. The loyal Hungarian troops were still out of town, the Jewish labour companies had not been armed, and the resistance leaders had not yet mobilised the workers.

At the Military Headquarters on 1 Sinház Street, the General Staff were distraught. They besieged the Chief of Staff General Vörös, demanding to know what was going on. He claimed that he had had no prior knowledge of the truce, and sat at his desk 'crumpled into himself.' László Kuthy, 'crying and in a nervous shock', begged the Germans to arrest him and save him from responsibility. The Department Heads stood before the General and wept, and Deszo László, who wrote this account, wrote that he himself was 'sitting brooding in a lethargic state.' Their world was collapsing.

*

Rudolph Braham writes that 'October 15, 1944, will undoubtedly go down in history as one of Hungary's darkest days' (p. 82).

On this day my grandfather said, according to Macartney on page 415, 'This is unintelligible'.

He said it while he held in his hand a piece of flimsy paper printed with the words 'Carry out my order of 1st October 1920.' Since it was currently the fifteenth of October 1944, this surely did make no sense. Was this what Captain Szörényi could not understand?

I have no idea what Hungarian word Macartney translated as 'unintelligible', nor who his informant was. I don't know which sense of this word Macartney intended. It may have been that Captain Szörényi was saying that this was obviously a code, but

that he, mathematical whiz as he was reputed to be, could not break it: it remained unintelligible.

Or it may have been that Captain Szörényi meant 'incomprehensible', and he was expressing disbelief, because even though the words made no sense, they all knew what was intended. This was clearly the order from the Regent that told the embattled Generals at the front to enact the armistice and make peace with the Russians. Given that 1 October 1920 was the date that the Regent had come to power, the order carried an added warning: I am your leader; remain loyal to me.

Assuming they knew this, what the Captain and his colleagues could not understand was how it had come to this; that they were about to conclude an armistice with their enemy, and turn against their allies, the Germans.

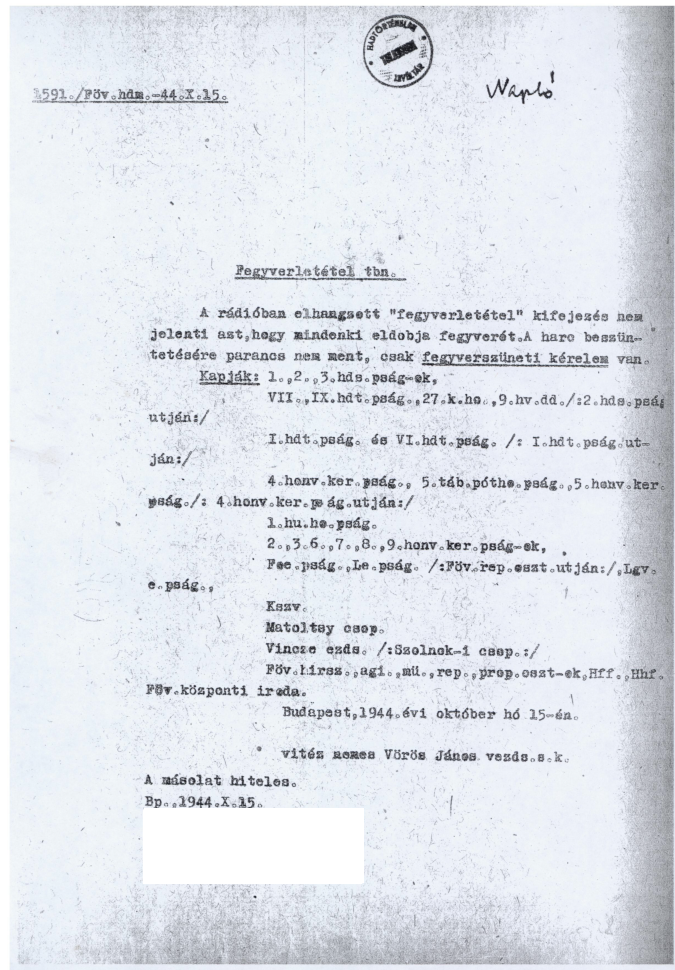
'This is unintelligible', said Captain Emil Szörényi-Reischl, as he gave the paper to his superior, Colonel Nádas, and perhaps he meant unthinkable. Colonel Nádas gave it to his own superior, General Vörös, who made a phonecall, put down the phone, and said 'That is not to go out, it is no longer *aktuel*.' The order was left on Vörös' desk, until someone asked about it, and Vörös said to file it; it was not to be sent.

*

The order had become 'no longer *aktuel*' because while it had been lying unthinkable on Vörös' desk, the General Staff had sent their own orders.

Macartney, on page 416, says that Szörényi was in the Telegraph office all afternoon, preventing the Generals at the front from communicating with the Government. The Hungarian National Archives backed this up by sending me an eyewitness account from the day, written by Balázs Csontos, non-commissioned officer in the telegraph office. Csontos said that he overheard Szörényi saying 'This is madness, it is high treason.' He then said to Csontos, 'Do not let any communications through, unless they come from Operations. And you had better do as you're told. There is treachery afoot.' Szörényi then proceeded to write a counter-proclamation and forge General Vörös' signature. The counter-order said:

There is no word about truce and capitulation in the Governor's speech, only about negotiation. It has to be understood that the fight has to be continued. Whoever does not follow this order will be executed. The signatory of the telegram is Gallant Janos Vörös, chief marshal.



Csontos asked why this telegraph had no issue number. Szörényi said to forward it regardless, and to then return it urgently to him. During the afternoon, Szörényi sent several more telegraphs, including one asking for the Generals to declare allegiance to the Arrow Cross Party, Hungary's National Socialists.

When the general of the second army called from the front, said Csontos, Szörényi forbade him from connecting the call and said to say that the lines were down. When the determined general arranged to speak by tele-printer with Pogany, the Regent's representative, Szörényi asked Csontos to record the conversation and report it to him. Csontos pretended that he could not read the tape. Szörényi called him incompetent.

Csontos summarised:

...it was clear for me that the VKF 1. Department was working against the Governor and had changed its allegiance to Szálasi's party... It was obvious

that the VKF 1 was working within its own authority. ...If the Operations department had not supported the program, and Captain Szörényi had not produced the mass of misleading telegraphs, everything would have turned out differently.

*

When the Germans, inevitably, drove their tanks into Budapest that night, the only resistance was a few dawn shots from Palace guards protecting the Regent. By the evening of the fifteenth the Arrow Cross Party had taken over the radio station and broadcast its own counter-proclamations. By the evening of the sixteenth, Horthy, imprisoned and under duress, his son kidnapped by the Germans and one of his associates already having despairingly shot himself in the head in the next room, had signed the government over to the Arrow Cross leader, Ferenc Szálasi.

*

I know that you want me to show you the moment of choice. Can we not see Emil as he makes his fateful decision? No, we can't. Only if I make one up. I could do that. I could have our self-righteous camera of moral hindsight swing past Captain Szörényi as he stands suddenly uncertain and doubting in the corridor of 1 Szinház street with the Regent's coded order in his hands: pausing for a second in his colt-skin shoes and a sudden cold sweat to consider the future of his career, his country, his son, and the Jews whose fates are partly in his hands.

But it would be a lie. We know too much about him already. We know that he was not a man who could afford to make decisions; he had one life and it was being a military officer. An exemplary, shining, superior officer with Aryan hair and an immaculate uniform. A willing collaborator, a childish toy soldier, an idealistic man with responsibilities and high seriousness and great faith and loyalty. A man who *had to belong*.

He knows, and he tells me in my mind's ear, that October Fifteenth is not a day of decision, but of action. A good military man is a man of action, and it's obvious from the way they all know what to do that they have planned their actions well ahead of time: they are the only people in the city who know what to do, the Regent's order

having come so unexpectedly and days before anyone was ready. Emil tells me that for him this is not a day of moral questions. The good and the right have all been defined well beforehand. And Captain Emil Szörényi-Reischl is not a political man: not for him the manoeuvring and manipulation of other people's opinions, the wheedling of favours and counter-favours. He is a straightforward, uncomplicated man, and a soldier. His job is not to think, but to fight the war, and since it looks like the treacherous Regent has lost his nerve and tried to back out of the war, it is his job to make sure this glitch in the war effort is smoothed out so that they can get back to the fighting. He knows that certain politicians have been informed of the military's position on this; he knows that Szálasi's Arrow Cross are lining themselves up for the Germans to install them in government and bring National Socialism to Hungary. He knows that his direct superiors are supporting all this, and they have given him a position of trust, and he will do his best to fulfil it. If the Arrow Cross will support the war effort, he will support them. 'First you secure the territory, then you worry about the political system,' that is what his respected superiors have always said. All this he tells me, so that I will understand, and I almost do. He is convincing, in his glory and his certainty, and I can almost forget the tremor in his stomach, swooning in the face of his charm like Eszenyi, like my translators, one of whom says that he was murdered by his colleagues so that they could blame him for everything, the other who says he must have secretly been a British agent, because he was obviously too nice to be a Nazi.

Naturally, Emil in my mind's ear does not think of Klári. The Jews who were his friends are long gone, and the other two hundred thousand still in Budapest, well everyone knows they are all Communists, as well as being rich Capitalists who have made their wealth on the backs of the true Hungarians and held the country to ransom. Hungary has been almost destroyed by the great Jewish-Bolshevik-Allied-Democratic conspiracy: the Jewish International of Gold and the Jewish International of Moscow, as the great Hungarian National Socialist Julius Gömbös called them. These Jews deserve a bit of suffering.

I make him say this here, so that you will remember who he is. But in fact he does not think of his Jewish friends at all.

It must be only when he is at home that he knows, he must know, he has even told his wife – and soldiers tell their wives nothing – that the war is already lost. He must know that whatever they do now to drag it out is for nothing, unless it is to keep the persecutions going.

*

When I talk to him in my head, he tells me I am just like him. This whole effort, he says, waving his hands airily in the general direction of my writing – this whole effort to tell the truth, to face up to evil, to take responsibility. That’s what drove me, too. You think you’re such a hero. Everyone thinks you’re so brave and virtuous. That’s what they saw in me, too, when they wrote of how I shone in my blonde hair, my blue eyes and my fervent belief. I knew what was happening, and I did not shy away from it. You’ve read about Himmler’s Posen speech on the fortitude of the German soldier, able to face up to exponentially mounting corpses. From where do you think you get your ability to spend hours reading those narratives, writing in detail about the beatings, the marches, the bullets, the corpses piling up in the gutters and stinking to high heaven? You’d have made a good German, you have fine sensibilities but you don’t let that stop you from facing the truth, and you’re brave enough to stand up and take the judgement of history, in the name of a higher purpose. You understand me perfectly.

I only don’t know, he continues, why you have this tendency to identify with the victims. How can you stand it, to wallow in such weakness, to let them contaminate you? All this fraternising with Jews and primitives. No wonder you’re so miserable. They’ll only sicken you.

Stop, I say miserably, stop. How can you say you’re prepared to face the truth of history, when you can’t even face the humanity of the people you’re persecuting? When you divide the world into ‘us’ and ‘them’, and refuse to look into the eyes of those you are bullying and see there what you are doing? You’re not brave, you’re not, you’re a coward, and I’m not like you, I’m not, I don’t want to be.

Some things, he says, make you weaker, and some stronger. It is not right to look weakness in the eye. It contaminates you.

Then stop looking me in the eye, I say. And he says, ‘You’re not weak.’

And he’s long gone before I can think of the right response.

*

My grandmother records that some time in October, she does not say exactly when or why, Emil was ‘in fear of his life’. He went into hiding for a few days at her old lover Kálmán’s house. It could have been the night of the seventh, when Horthy’s supporters tried to round up the right wing elements in the army on evidence they’d been planning a coup. Or it could have been afterwards, because on the twenty-third, Captain Szörényi met with an accident.

Vera and baby Miklós were staying at Fertőrákos in the country at the time, with Vera’s cousin and her doctor husband. Emil had sent Vera and Mikki away to escape the bombs that the Allies were relentlessly dropping on Budapest. He called when possible, sent her telegrams begging her not to worry, and visited on weekends when he could, although he was busy in these last days of the war, with the Russians already across the border and approaching Budapest.

The family story says that on October twenty-third, he was due home for a visit. The whole household was excited. And then the telephone rang in the doctor’s surgery. He should bring Vera to the hospital in Kapuvar right away – her husband had had an accident and was in a critical condition.

No-one had a car, the army had confiscated them all and sent them to the front. But the doctor could call an ambulance. They put Vera in the back as a patient – a pretence to satisfy the checkpoints, but also because she was shaking uncontrollably and the need for a stretcher might be real. The doctor tried to comfort her, wanting her to have hope in her eyes when she and Emil shared their last look, perhaps their last touch of the hand – ‘Still’?

When they got there the chauffeur said that Emil had been driving, not he. Emil had been restless for some reason and insisted on taking over. They had to pass horse-drawn carts on the road, piled high with hay. Apparently the country still had hay, even if there were no cars or bicycles and most of the horses had gone to the front to be abandoned behind enemy lines. Emil tried to overtake the carts, and the car became airborne. It flew high enough that the men at the military watchtower saw them, flashing over the horizon. They went to help, and took them to the hospital. The chauffeur had cuts and bruises, Emil a broken neck.

When he grew up, Vera told her son that she had spent the night keeping vigil beside a still-living but unconscious Emil. In the morning a number of officers and doctors arrived and sent her out of the room. He was to be put into traction. From the other side of the door she heard his strangled scream. Then they told her that he was dead.

When the ambulance returned her to the house at Fertőrákos, Vera found a telegram that he had sent from Budapest, two days after the coup and a week before the accident. It read:

TELEGRAM. CAPTAIN EMIL SZÖRÉNYI-REISCHL, BUDAPEST
TO: VERA SZÖRÉNYI-REISCHL, FERTŐRÁKOS
17 OCTOBER 1944.
“I AM TRYING TO RING EVERY DAY BUT DO NOT SUCCEED I AM
WELL ALL IS WELL I HOPE YOU ARE KEEPING CALM EVERYTHING
GOES ON AS I SAID AND THERE WILL BE NO TROUBLE – EMIL”.

*

I've tried checking the dates. The history books say that the forced labour marches west to the border from Budapest began in November, and although there was only one main road west out of Budapest, at Győr the guards with their whips and bullets turned the marchers north-west to Hegyeshalom, not west through Kapuvár to Sopron. So, although it would make the story neat and rounded if the chauffeur had slowed down as they went past a line of straggling, starving marchers, prompting Emil to complain of his slowness, prompting Emil to take over the driving himself so that they could speed past the scene without having to look into anyone's eyes, that is probably not what happened. It probably was hay carts.

*

After his death, the Germans awarded him the Order of the German Eagle with Swords, Second Class: a medal instituted by Hitler for awarding to non-Germans who were sympathetic to Nazism. The Captain was in good company, even the Regent, Miklós Horthy, had one of these.

Chapter Eight: No Trouble

*In such an age I dwelt on earth
when to the child the mother was accursed
the woman who miscarried would rejoice*
(Miklós Radnóti, 1909-1944)

It all unfolds now. Unfolds from October Fifteenth the way an umbrella opens out, a complete structure, just waiting to be put into action. Vera tries to escape. She does escape, although it doesn't feel like it at the time. She escapes and then has to keep running for the rest of her life. Running from Hungary, from the past, from thinking.

'Everything goes on as I said and there will be no trouble.' That was the beginning of her troubles. Standing on the edge of Emil's grave in the Sopron cemetery, she felt that a part of her was being buried with him while the volleys of the military snare drums punctuated the air like muted machine guns. From now she was a widow and a single mother. And the war was almost lost.

On the afternoon of the funeral Kálmán came to visit at Fertőrákos and made his offer to take her to his house at Lake Balaton. She turned him down. He returned to Budapest to meet the frozen doorstep of his fate. Vera chose to stay with her cousin Olga until the end of the war, although by now it was clear that she was a burden to

Olga's husband, who had enough family to take care of as it was. She tried to stay out of the way. The town filled with refugees from the East, where the Russians were advancing.

In November she had to go and see a gynaecologist in the town. There was nothing to be done; it was a miscarriage. This, she later wrote, was probably a blessing in disguise, although it was Emil's last child.

In early December little Miklós caught pneumonia. Although Olga's husband was a doctor, the only medicine he had was tainted and they decided not to use it. Mikki was wrapped in moist towels and sweated and struggled for breath for nine nights. By Christmas he was weak, but recovered.

The SS had set up a Jewish forced labour camp in the town. The cook regularly came back from her breaks in the village with a gold watch or a ring that a prisoner wanted to exchange for bread. My grandmother writes that the valuables were always sent back along with the bread. In the early hours of one December morning a prisoner came banging on the door asking for a doctor; one of their comrades was ill. The doctor went, and came back reporting that the men slept in drafty hay-sheds on the top of the hill and were given a single bowl of watery soup a day. By the time he got there the man was dead of bronchitis.² Later, they saw the prisoners' rags strewn across a field.

On Christmas Eve two Nazi soldiers stormed into the living room, and seeing tinfoil hung on the Christmas tree, shouted that this was the house of black-marketeers and saboteurs; how else could they have sweets on their tree? Little Olgi and her brother Tibor calmly showed them the tiny slivers of chocolate wafer wrapped inside the tinfoil – two small bars, a gift from one of their father's patients, scattered over a whole tree. The soldiers left, shamefaced.

Late that night the radio announced that the Russians had occupied Pest, the Germans had blown up the Danube bridges, and there was fighting in the streets of the Buda hills. All the telephones, telegrams and postal services were cut. There was no way to find out what had happened to Vera's friends and cousins in Budapest and all their small children. There were only rumours; the Germans killing more and more, the Russians looting, raping and murdering.

² I have here condensed two doctors from Fertőrákos: the report comes from Erno Lazarovitz, who describes an 'old man', but there were apparently two doctors in the town and Olga's husband was not 'old' at the time.

In Fertőrákos the Germans grew more and more arrogant. They requisitioned the house, the kitchen, the larder and the servants for a party. But the party never happened; the Major came to apologise. He was not a Nazi; he hated the Nazis, but by now the Germans had mobilised everyone, even old men like himself.

By April 1945 the war could be heard just over the horizon. The family buried their silverware, fine linen and china in the garden. Emil before he died had considered that the Germans might drag the fighting out as they retreated across the Austrian border, but that they would surely run out of steam by Vienna, and so he had made arrangements for the family to flee there. Vera rang the Ministry of Defence in the hope of finding out the details of his arrangements. The Hungarian officer laughed at her and, echoing Emil's words to Eszenyi, said, 'Do you think, Madam, that just because the Russians have advanced a few kilometres, we are going to give up? Don't be ridiculous...' She put down the telephone, concluding that he must be 'one of those mad fanatics who believed in the German "super-weapon"'.

The Russians advanced, inexorably. The refugees reported that at Győr, just to the east, the bishop had offered refuge to the town's women in his courtyard. The Russians shot him at his gate and raped the women, herded the men into prison camps.

The estate manager at Fertőrákos came to see the family, offering his horses to move them all westwards. The doctor considered staying with his patients, but the women would not let him. Olga and Vera, in a state of dissociation, threw random objects into their suitcases. Miklós' bed was tied to a hay cart and Vera sat there to look after Miklós and the manager's two baby daughters. They set off, refugees, wondering how far they would have to go, wondering whether the fighting would overtake them on the highway, wondering whether they would have homes to come back to.

The roads were full of military vehicles heading east and refugees staggering west with prams full of possessions, baskets full of babies. The farmhouses and villages were all abandoned. On the first night they sheltered at an Austrian inn, occupied only by a raving escaped French prisoner of war who shouted endlessly about Nazis. The bewildered children slept on wooden benches and the men guarded the carts while the women stared into the darkness.

The next day they were in unfamiliar territory. The road became deserted. Soldiers on the few military vehicles going in the opposite direction signalled to them mysteriously. Finally a vehicle stopped them and the soldiers explained that they were

heading towards a munitions dump that was about to be blown up. They managed to turn the horses as the horizon exploded into flames.

The road became steeper, the forests darker, the air colder. After three days they had had no warm food. On the fourth day they arrived in an Austrian village called Hochstrasse and pulled up outside the biggest house. It was a school and one teacher, a war-widow with a baby, had stayed behind. She assured them the fighting had moved on, the Germans had dissipated, and she was now only expecting the Russians. She made warm ersatz coffee.

Minutes later, the Russians arrived. The school filled with waves of soldiers in fur-lined caps and looted Hungarian coats who stormed in shouting incomprehensibly, sat down to play cards, and then stormed out again. They patted Miklós' face and gave him filthy dry biscuits. They promised young Tibor, in broken German with relevant gestures, that they would slit the throats of lots of rich Viennese and bring him new trousers to replace his proudly battered heirloom lederhosen. One soldier, particularly frightening to Vera because of his 'yellow complexion and slit eyes', would not take his eyes from her gold wrist-watch. It made her so nervous that she walked up and offered it to him. The soldier jumped up and left. Another told her in broken German that she should hide the watch.

The doctor decided to look for quieter quarters. Vera and Miklós moved in with the village carpenter and his family, who vacated their only bedroom for her sake. Olga's family moved into the farmhouse next door, divided their blankets, and left Vera with Kálmán's Persian rug for warmth.

A few days passed. The villagers brought secret messages asking the doctor to attend to wounded German soldiers hiding in the woods. He took them morphine but could do little else. A nervous young Hungarian man who had escaped from a German prison camp sought refuge at the carpenter's on his way back to Hungary and was invited to stay till dark. A five-year old girl, daughter of the farmer next door, was accidentally shot and killed by a Russian soldier during his target practice at the hens. Embarrassed, the Russian stormed into the carpenter's kitchen demanding documents, pushed the document-less young Hungarian man outside, shot him in the front yard, and told his commanders he'd found the murdering SS traitor. No one dared move the body for two days, then they gathered their courage and buried him in a box at the side of the road. No-one knew his name.

On the night of the shootings there was a wild, mountain thunderstorm. Vera gazed at the continuous lightning and deafening thunder, delighted that there was still something beyond the Russians' reach.

They decided to return to Hungary. On their last night seven Russian soldiers burst into the room and pointed at Olga, Vera and the carpenter's wife. 'Move!' they yelled. The children clung terrified to their mothers' necks. Miklós remained asleep on his mother's lap, and she did not get up. The doctor and the carpenter tried to argue with the men. The soldiers explained in gestures that cows needed milking. 'Poor Olga', my grandmother wrote. 'Never in her life did she have to milk a cow!'

The seven Russians stayed for a week. There was no chance of the family leaving; the road was full of soldiers again. The resident seven promised not to loot, only stealing a fountain pen and drinking all of Vera and Olga's *Eau de Cologne*. But they returned every night with piles of watches and suitcases of children's clothing. They were mystified by a folding umbrella. After they finally left, the women washed everything to remove the lice, and the carpenter dug up his hidden keg of cider to celebrate.

There were still refugees pouring through the town. They said that the Russians were requisitioning everything on the road that could be called a vehicle. Vera realised that she could not return to Hungary with Olga's family: Miklós was too small to walk and too large to carry.

She had half a kilo of sugar and half a kilo of semolina left to feed the boy. For lunch she made watery soup from wild spinach leaves collected in the fields. For dinner the carpenter's family ate milk mixed with water and a little flour, flavoured with salt. Miklós, now 18 months old, had forgotten his few Hungarian words and spoke only German.

One afternoon a Russian soldier burst into the room with a machine gun and demanded eggs. It was like a dream; no-one had eggs. The carpenter, having joined a village militia to protect the locals from the Russians, pointed out his new armband and authoritatively told the soldier to leave. The soldier punched him in the face, hard. Miklós began to scream. The soldier turned the gun on him and his mother. She looked him in the eye.

'Shoot', she said. 'For Heaven's sake shoot and make sure you don't miss.'

He did not understand the words, but he heard her tone. He lowered his gun and left.

In early June the carpenter brought news that those without Austrian papers were to be deported or sent to refugee camps. Vera packed a suitcase with Miklós' clothes, exchanged a diamond and turquoise ring for a wicker pram, and gave a silver tray to a visiting Viennese woman if she would help her carry Miklós, the case and the pram to the station five miles down the mountain path.

When they got to Vienna it was in ruins, but the trains were still running. There was a train scheduled for that afternoon to Sopron, near Olga's house and inside the Hungarian border. It was a goods train stuffed with Viennese carrying baskets, hoping to be able to buy some fresh vegetables in Hungary. They climbed into a cattle car; standing room only. The train set off, but in the middle of the night Russians requisitioned the engine. The Viennese were unafraid; all that mattered was that the war was over! Another train was brought, this one with third-class passenger carriages.

They arrived at dawn at Sopron inside the Hungarian border. The station was ruined. Between the train and the platform were three other trains that the passengers had to climb through. The agile Viennese with their baskets stormed off the carriage like a wave, leaving Vera, Miklós, a pram, a suitcase, and an elderly refugee couple from Rumania. Vera offered the couple a whole loaf of fresh bread given her by the Viennese woman, if they would look after Miklós while she carried the pram and the suitcase across the three trains. On the platform she put the luggage down among sleeping Russian soldiers and returned for the child. He was alone and breadless in the dark carriage, but not crying.

With the suitcase balanced on the pram she had to get to town. In the middle of the road was an enormous bomb crater, two storeys deep. She stood at the edge and did not know what to do. A passing workman on the other side climbed down into the crater and up again, wordlessly took the suitcase, and climbed down the way he'd come. She followed with the pram. He turned again and went back before she could thank him.

The doctor came from Fertőrákos to collect her. The family's horses had been taken by the Russians and they had walked home, to find that the house had been emptied, mostly by the local villagers. The grand piano, too conspicuous to hide, had been brought back after their return. Miklós' nurse from the village, Annush, came back to look after him, wearing some of Vera's dresses and costume jewellery.

With Annush to carry the suitcases they took the train back to Budapest; so crowded that people sat on the roof. There were no direct lines and all the bridges were

down; the passengers had to be rowed across the rivers to new trains on the other side. The journey took two days and two nights. When they arrived the station in Buda was non-existent. The train crawled over the hastily built railway bridge to Pest, giving them a view of the flattened, ruined city. Then they had to walk back to the river and find a boatman to take them across. Broken trucks and tanks were piled several storeys high in every square, and the sickly-sweet smell of corpses reeked from underneath the piles of rubble that had been buildings.

The house on Diosárok had a crater in front of it and no upper floor. There was a great gap in the middle of the ground floor, leaving only one room at each end that still had a ceiling, walls and empty window frames. Russians had used the house for a hospital and a tailor's workshop. The old gardener and his wife had stayed on and were living in one room. The wife had a chicken with fluffy yellow chicks running about on the broken parquet in the other. She was delighted to see Vera and had saved some of the Herendi porcelain.

Soon Vera tired of hearing all her friends' and relatives' tales of flight, of bombs, of starvation, of giving birth to babies in the pitch-dark cellars of bombed out houses. She wrote that everyone had had one moment when death would have been welcome; hers had been the Russian soldier with the machine gun. But when asked how she survived she would say only, 'the same way as everyone else'.

But everyone else did not survive.

Chapter Nine: Trouble

*In such an age I dwelt on earth
when men had fallen so beneath their nature
that they, unbidden, for their lust would kill*
(Miklós Radnóti, 1909-1944)

Is that the story? It is what Vera told in her memoir, but no, that is not the story. In the story Vera and her cousin's family flee Hungary in the springtime of 1945, but the troubles of Budapest begin while the autumn of 1944 is still turning the trees on Gellert Hill a burnished yellow. On the fifteenth of October, along with martial music, Arrow Cross pronouncements, and the counter-proclamations that were or were not written by Captain Szörényi, the radio begins its diatribes against the 'internal enemy' of the 'Judeo-Bolshevik menace'. By the evening the Arrow Cross militia with their black armbands, mostly teenagers full of stifled dreams of glory and violence, have been armed by the Germans and at last are free to bang on the doors of the houses they have been obsessively watching and demand that the janitors send out the Jews. The janitors oblige. Szálasi's regime has been called the rule of janitors. The Arrow Cross youths are keen to prove themselves men, to prove their loyalty to the new Hungary. They beat the unlucky families who are surrendered up to them. Or they shoot them, women and girls, in the cellars where they are hiding from the air raids. Or they march them out into the streets and to the banks of the river. They are crafty. They tie their prisoners together, make them step out of their shoes, and shoot every third person,

because they want to waste Jews, not bullets and shoes. The living are dragged down into the river with the dead: the river that has not yet frozen in the coming winter. It is a time of corpses; the river can hold a few more. If they are coughed up later, barefoot, swollen and splitting from their clothes, people will walk past and pretend not to see.

On the sixteenth of October, Jews are forbidden to leave the yellow-star houses for ten days in retaliation for the armed resistance of a few labour servicemen. There is no help for childbirth or the sick, no way to get food, and the dead cannot be buried. When confronted by an angry Jewish Council member, Lieutenant Colonel László Ferenczy, the gendarmerie officer responsible for the deportations and ghettos, replies 'The Jews finally got what they were asking for'.

On the seventeenth of October, the day that Emil sends his last telegram, Eichmann arrives in Budapest. He demands that fifty thousand Jews be marched on foot to Germany for labour, all other able-bodied men be drafted for digging trenches outside the city, and the rest of the Jews be ghettoised. He intends, of course, once Germany has received the fifty thousand, to ask for another fifty thousand, and so on until Budapest is empty of Jews. The war is lost and Budapest will be a battleground, but at least it will be a cleansed battleground and the future of Europe will be *Judenrein*.

On the twentieth of October, all Jewish men aged between sixteen and sixty-five are woken before dawn by police and Arrow Cross men, and ordered to line up in the courtyard. Those aged between sixteen and sixty are given an hour to report, carrying tin plates and cutlery, torches, blankets, and food for three days. The women run madly to collect food and blankets. The children watch from behind the curtains as their fathers are marched away, forbidden by the guards from turning and waving. They are walked for days to the outskirts of Budapest, to dig trenches in the mud against the oncoming Russians. Arrow Cross men shoot in the neck those who cannot march fast enough without adequate food, water or toilet stops, and leave them in the gutters. This is shocking; so far many of the Budapest Jews have not been treated like this, still think of themselves as people with rights, with dignity.

On the twenty-second of October, women between eighteen and forty are taken to dig trenches too. The workers are forced to sleep in the cold and to dig in the mud for fourteen hours a day: while they swing pickaxes at the ground, their guards spend the day swinging sticks and fists at them. All possessions are stripped and confiscated. The

guards shoot anyone who tries to hide a valuable, leave the bodies by the trenches.

There is very little food.

Then as the Russians advance the labour companies are hastily retreated back towards the city. They are marched faster and faster, the thin and exhausted stragglers again shot in the ditches. When the companies are back in Budapest and marching over the Horthy Bridge, Arrow Cross men play target practice. So many are massacred that the police have to be mobilised to control the excited shooters; the labourers are still needed for work.

On the twenty-third of October, while Emil is driving to Fertőrákos on the last day of his life, Szálasi agrees to send 25,000 men to 'labour' in Germany. On November second the death marches begin in earnest. The Hungarians see little point in feeding workers for Germany. The Germans see little point in feeding Jews. The marches go from labour camps in Tata and Győr to Mosonmagyaróvár, from there to Hegyeshalom on the border. The shooting continues. Even the SS are sometimes shocked at the way the Arrow Cross men openly ask them for prisoners to use for target practice.

On the eighth of November, while Vera mourns the loss of her second child, further 'loaned' Jews from Budapest begin marching towards Hegyeshalom. They are marshalled at the brickyards at Óbuda. The gendarmes accompanied by their Arrow Cross friends confiscate all their possessions, clothing and blankets. Two thousand are marched out per day to travel two hundred kilometres in eight days, with three or four serves of watery soup in total on the journey. At most. They stagger, leaning on each others' shoulders and trying to hold one another up, through Piliscsaba, Dorog, Süttő, Szőny, Gönyű, Dunaszeg, and Mosonmagyaróvár: now the authorities are trying to keep them off the highways so that the gentiles will not be offended by the sight of starving, ragged men, women and children who have not eaten for days and who dare not leave the road when they need to defecate, because stopping means being shot. A Red Cross worker reporting on the conditions of the prisoners admits that even he has begun to feel revulsion for these people who are hard to recognise as people; who seem to have lost their dignity. Even the SS are sometimes shocked: General Hans Juttner writes that 'These scenes upset me so much that I at once told Becher that immediately after our arrival in Budapest I was going to the Higher SS and Police Leader in order to protest sharply against what I had seen on the road.'

As the Russians continue their inexorable advance across the country, the Arrow Cross and the Germans combine in a last-ditch killing spree. Snipers waiting on the side of the highway shoot down thousands of panicked, fleeing marchers. Those who dodge the bullets are later marched back down the highway under cover of darkness to dig mass graves in the frozen ground and bury the piles of corpses.

The survivors of the marches are handed over to the Germans at the border, and the staggering, bleeding journey continues, to Mauthausen and other concentration camps.

Through all of this the bombs are dropped on Budapest every night. Jews and non-Jews alike drag themselves from shattered sleep, wrap their babies in blankets, and stumble down to their cold cellars to shiver in the darkness for hours, while the city falls around them and the air fills with sirens, smoke, dust and chaos. When they emerge another landmark, another neighbour, another street will have been replaced by a pile of broken bricks, scattered with pulverised furniture, curtains and bodies.

On the tenth of November all Jews in Budapest who have ‘foreign protection’ – those carrying papers from Raoul Wallenberg and fellow benefactors from Switzerland, Sweden, the Vatican, Portugal and Spain – are told to move into yellow star houses in the ‘International Ghetto’ near Szent István Park and Pozsonyi Road. The Jews already living in these houses who do not have the sacred documents must move out; those who can work are to be sent to the Óbuda brickyards to join the slow current towards the border and death; those who can’t work are to be sent to the place that will be the new Ghetto of Budapest. When the anxious fifteen thousand who have to move in and the anxious four thousand who have to move out are allowed on to the streets to make their opposing journeys, weighed down by all they can carry, the teenagers of the Arrow Cross have a field day. Sometimes they plunder, sometimes they murder, and sometimes they take shivering prisoners to the Arrow Cross Party houses on Andrásy Avenue and Szent István Boulevard, to torture them and tear up their protective passes.

Once the protected Jews are moved into every possible cellar and staircase of the International Ghetto, fifty or sixty to a two-roomed apartment, the Arrow Cross raid the houses whenever they feel like it, checking for forged passes or passes they don’t like. They take out families who offend them and march them down the street. At Szent István Boulevard they turn left, to the large Budapest Ghetto, or right, to the river.

On the twenty-ninth of November the Budapest Ghetto is announced. Wooden walls are hastily built, with Jewish labour and funding from the Jewish community. For

the Jews, the four gates are one-way gates: they are to be brought in, but never to leave unless it is for deportation. After the forced marches there are only the very old, the very sick and the very young left. They are crammed in to every crevice; an average of 14 people per room, if every cupboard and staircase counts as a room. The Jewish Council is given the job of handing out the rations; 690 calories per day. There is no soap, medicine or disinfectant, and when the morgue is full the bodies are piled up in the courtyards of the apartment houses.

By the twenty-fourth of December, six thousand children who had been in Red Cross homes are moved into the ghetto, along with a steady trickle of discovered Jews dragged from their hiding places. Some of those who have been hiding voluntarily come to the ghetto in search of a meal and some company in their suffering. Somewhere in the apartment buildings of Budapest that shake under the nightly barrages of bombs, Panni Fenyő, who may or may not have once been Vera's friend Matyi, chooses to keep hiding in a darkened room, terrified of the Arrow Cross janitor who patrols the building and might report her today, tonight, tomorrow. By now Kálmán Buday's body is lying on the doorstep of his apartment building, covered by snow. Probably somewhere in the city or the ghetto or the death marches or the concentration camps is his former lover, the passionate and sophisticated Sarah, if she too is not already dead.

From the evening of the same day, Christmas Eve, as Vera in Fertőrákos sits worried by the radio hearing that the Russians have encircled Budapest, the Arrow Cross gangs go out of control. Teenage boys roam the city, killing fifty or sixty people a night. They attack the Jewish hospital on Bethlen Square, torture the patients, remove twenty-eight who can walk and keep them in a building for two more days before they massacre them. They attack the Swiss protected Glass House, the Maros Street hospital, the Orthodox Church alms house, stealing, massacring and torturing as they go. On January eleventh a dozen men in Arrow Cross, Hungarian and German military uniforms enter the ghetto and raid 27 and 29 Wesselényi St, shooting twenty-six women, fifteen men, and a child in the air raid shelter, and a married couple in their bed on the first floor. On January fourteenth at the Orthodox Hospital in Vörösmajor St, around the corner from Vera's house and the cathedral where baby Miklós was christened seventeen months earlier, fifteen Arrow Cross men storm in looking for Jews. They take the Jewish staff upstairs and shoot them in front of the wood storage shed. Then they do the same to the patients who can walk. Then they patrol the wards,

shooting the patients in their beds. Some of them miraculously survive being shot in the neck, but the next day the same men come back and shoot them again, before looting all the bed linen, kitchen pots, medicine and medical equipment. The local residents, Vera's neighbours, come to join in the fun. On January seventeenth they set the hospital on fire and it burns with its corpses. At other hospitals they make the patients who can still walk dig a mass grave, and after the patients have buried the dead, the grave becomes theirs too.

On January fifteenth, two days before Pest is finally liberated by the Russians after two months of siege, five hundred Arrow Cross men, supported by Germans, gather to invade the Ghetto and finally destroy it, but for some reason, perhaps the approaching Russians, they lose their nerve. Szálasi, leader of the nation, claims credit for stopping the final massacre. At his trial he later declares:

The happiest moment of my life was when I was able to prevent this awful crime. I believe I must state for the historical record that the approximately 120,000 people belonging to the Jewish Community of Budapest can attribute their survival to those who struggled for the life of their fellow men and who did not shrink in the face of mortar fire, constantly placing their own life in jeopardy.

On October fifteenth, the beginning of Szálasi's regime, there had been two hundred and fifty thousand people in the Jewish Community of Budapest.

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In liberated Budapest after the siege ends in April, once things have settled down a bit and she has found work and someone who can source glass and timber on the black market, Vera asks the gardener and his wife, no longer employees but full of the new dignity of Comrades, to move into the house next door so that she can repair the broken windows and ceilings of her own house. The house next door had been the home of Mr Neuman, the Jewish accountant who had once been in the habit of coming to their house to listen with Vera's mother to the forbidden BBC news and share their mutual hatred of Hitler. He went into hiding when the SS banged on his door in March 1944, leaving behind a suitcase of clothes for Vera to look after. She does not seem to feel it necessary to explain why his house is now empty, there for the taking.

*

Where does responsibility catch hold? Reversing the lines of causality, it travels backward in time and space from the remains of the violence, webs reaching out from the centre. A line of it travels from a gutter where the bloodstains of a young poet shot in the neck for his wobbling, starving gait have soaked into the grass and the soil; it passes through the landscape of the nation, picking up as it goes all the threads of the scene; it travels along the back roads out of sight, past the poorly covered mass graves dug in the frozen ground by men shaking with cold, hunger, fatigue, and the knowledge that the grave, once dug, will be theirs. Singing in the wind like taut barbed wire, the line of responsibility travels past fields of empty ragged clothing blowing across the ploughed land, past the barbed wire and the mouldering straw mattresses of labour camps filled with lice and grief, until it reaches Budapest, where it dives into the slow, cold grip of the river Danube, passing by the corpse of a young woman whose lips, trembling, once wore red lipstick in a last desperate claim on life as she stood on the river bank with all her choices ended. It passes the bodies of an old man, and a child, and many more, rolling along the silted bottom below the carp and the eels, and it emerges wet and shining with sureness as it blasts through the ears of gendarmes and off-duty soldiers, standing on the bridge waiting for more victims to come their way. It lashes itself around their throats, driving them to further frenzies, before hovering away like a water-snake, looping down Szent István Terrace and along Andrassy Avenue to the Arrow Cross headquarters, where it seeps into the guts of fat, well-dressed men sitting at their desks planning torture methods, making them suddenly feel a chill that will haunt them for the rest of their lives and which they will blame on gout or indigestion. It wobbles on, shakier now, down through the Oktogon where middle-class mistresses prepare lunch for their Nazi lovers with actual tins of meat, and lands in the ghetto, where weeping it gently caresses the faces of the Jewish community leaders who have the job of distributing food. And from the piles of bodies in the ghetto, freshly dead sandwiched between nearly living, it gathers its strength and its evidence. It begins to cycle through the city, spiralling its way through apartments full of antique mahogany and Persian carpets whose new owners are not asking each other any questions about who lived here before, and as it goes it asks itself if there are any corners of the city that it should not visit.

It visits the military headquarters, that is beyond doubt. It visits the offices of

the General Staff, where they have been sitting on their desks in their coltskin shoes, eating salami, smoking cigars, and lamenting the fate of the nation with their like-minded colleagues, believing themselves heroes, the last bastion of national virtue, turning their minds to greater things than the unfortunate, yes let's call it that to remind ourselves that we are civilised beings; the unfortunate murders in the streets, a necessary evil in these evil times that they cannot, after all, be held responsible for, or so they tell themselves as the lines of responsibility come in the window, many lines, glowing like dust particles in the sun.

The lines of responsibility hover around particular men, giving them a temporary aura, making them shine in the memories of those around them, who will remember when it's time for court cases, accusations and recriminations. It picks its scapegoats.

The aura of responsibility sets off Emil's red-blond hair, making it glow all the brighter. He considers himself one of the brave; a man who will accept responsibility for the sake of his ideals; a man who can watch murder without flinching. He quietly congratulates himself for his fortitude, because after all that is what they have always doubted. He will show them; he is no sickly sensitive type after all. The line of responsibility circles him and he lets it in. Tomorrow on the twenty-third of October the line will make its claim and he will die, but he is not a man to flinch from that, and it's a deal that will save him from any future years of doubt, of guilt.

The line of responsibility, cheated by his early death, feels unsatisfied. There has not been sufficient reckoning here. The line of responsibility wonders about the grieving widow by Emil's bedside, the chubby child held by his nurse back at Fertőrákos. The line of responsibility is not sated, it is fed by the piles of corpses that are mounting in the streets of the ghetto because there is nowhere to bury them, it is growing all the hungrier as the bodies of evidence stiffen and become fixed, their staring eyes demanding – something. A witness, a reckoning, justice.

What would justice look like? The city is almost pounded into powder; holes in its walls, craters in its streets, darkness staring in and out from its empty window frames and the smoke of antique furniture burning against the oncoming winter in the few chimneys that are still standing, blending with the smoke of burning buildings and the smoke of gendarmes' cigarettes and the smoke of... all the smoke blending as it wafts up to the sky and people down below not thinking about that, not thinking, not thinking, not thinking.

Neglected, the line of responsibility becomes bitter and turns in on itself, works its way in convoluted spirals into the very spaces between the bricks of the city, nests like ants or termites or cockroaches in the hidden places, waiting to emerge when least expected and worm its way into the birthday cakes and grand dinners of future decades, startling those who cannot remember why it is there, who can't think why they are being pursued by a strange sound of buzzing in their ears, as if the bombs are still falling, but why should they, why should this city expect violence?

Do the lines of responsibility cross oceans? Yes, they have twined themselves around the stockinged feet of widows, the sandals of little boys, who run from the falling city to save themselves, who fret at the gates of wherever they can go, calling for help, calling for refuge, and who gratefully accept, in exchange for freedom, for more life, the loss of all that they called their lives. They walk down the gangplanks to their new homes, lines of responsibility twined around their feet, ready to trip them, to make them wish for home, to call them back to the misery and the memories that remind them of who they are. They nest in the cities that have their own history, and the buzzing in their ears harmonises, or discords, with the bees of knowledge in these new places.

Shakily, they go on living, in new places, in strange places. Almost, they appreciate the lines of responsibility, for the cinders of memory that have attached to the lines, for the faint smell of home that accompanies them. Almost, they embrace the darkness when it comes, though they don't know what it is that comes, don't know what responsibility looks like, even after all these years, have never known what to do with it.

*

Is it responsibility, that comes? Is that what death is? Or is death the final escape from responsibility? The answer to this would be the answer to whether there is a God.

But I think that Emil escaped. If he had not escaped, if the lines of responsibility had entered his heart and found their rightful home, they would not be here now, fluttering homeless in the wind like spider webs after the spider has died.

Or no, perhaps that's wrong. Perhaps they are here because they are not homeless. Perhaps they are here because this is where they belong, because responsibility is not a line but a web, a web stretched taught around the empty spaces

left by those who are not here any longer, who did not get to have second and third generations of their own.

Perhaps we are on our own, now. Perhaps we need to avoid committing violence, not because there is a God, but because there is not, and the reckoning, the justice, is for us, and has no end; when we leave, we leave it behind, in the world, for our descendants.

Chapter Ten: Return Again

In June of 2012, the streets of Budapest are shining in the sunlight. There is a rightness to everything. These are the Hungarians, going about their daily business. There are tourists on Margit Bridge, and teenagers pretending to conduct the musical fountain that surges up and down in time to Beethoven, Liszt and Bocelli. The trams run back and forth. The ferries ply their tours up and down the Danube, while Parliament's fairy towers sparkle in the hazy air. The metro stations are full and the cheap cosmetic sellers wait behind their racks of lingerie for customers that don't stop. In the milk bar the shop assistant argues with the owners while she climbs up a ladder to get down a bag of crisps. In a park by the Buda Promenade a group of three young men sing to their guitar. In Vörösmarty Square the local Incas are holding a sun festival, dancing brightly among their flutes and drums. In the evenings young people crowd in Szent György Square, buying beer from street vendors and dangling their feet over the pool, while music plays from the public address system. Everything seems peaceful.

This is the difficult thing to incorporate. The House of Terror, the Holocaust Museum, are part of this landscape. The same people walk past the list of names of the tortured displayed outside the Terrorhaz at 80 Andrassy Avenue, as past the gilded Opera House at number 27, with its parquet floors and souvenirs of Mozart. The sun keeps shining. Nothing seems to be wrong, therefore everything must be wrong.

Budapest is at peace, and the Hungarians are relieved. Times are hard, but the sun is shining, and times have been worse.

Of course, I don't understand anything. I am an outsider, even though the name on my boarding pass confuses the staff in the duty-free shops and prompts them to break into apologetic Hungarian, which I pretend to comprehend. What would I know? I come from outside, pretending to know everything.

The first museum on the tour of darker Budapest I have planned for myself is the House of Terror. This is the house that the Arrow Cross party used as headquarters, the house in whose basement Charles Zentai, war criminal hunted down by the Simon Wiesenthal Centre in Australia in 2003, claims not to have noticed the imprisonment and torture of Jews. Arrow Cross or not, perhaps my grandfather visited this house; perhaps he had dealings with the men here; almost certainly he knew the men who had dealings here, knew what they were about, did not entirely disagree.

Later, with their usual pragmatism, the Communists claimed the building as their own torture chamber. Now it is a museum, so that the torture will not be forgotten. A memory embodied by a house, a house to house the memories of torture, so that they will not be homeless. The front of the building bears a row of hundreds of pictures, vignettes stuck to the stone, each with a name below it. They are mostly men, many in uniform. There is no further information, and I am confused. Are these the victims, or the perpetrators? They look hard, bitter, self-satisfied, smug, pleased with themselves, dissociated, determined. Can you read in a face the propensity to torture? Is this what a person looks like when they are going, at some later point in their lives, to be tortured? As though they knew? Or perhaps this is simply how people looked, in their identity cards, their prison photographs, their portraits, all taken in a time of terror.

I pass along the rows of images to the door. I have heard that this museum seeks to recreate the experience of torture, and I am nervous. To enter the building I have to pass through a security gate. I look around expecting to be stopped. Then I buy an audio tour from a woman who has little English, but points out with her fingers that the cord is caught up and hanging on my neck. Then she directs me to the second floor where the exhibition begins.

The first room shows me a history of Hungary. On the wall a video shows an animated map changing as borders are drawn and redrawn. I am surprised: They are framing the story with Trianon. Hungary's eternal excuse and national trauma – the treaty in which it lost over 50% of its territory after the Great War. The Hungarians

have never stopped trying to win it back. The map shows the borders contract, and then expand again as Hungary invades Czechoslovakia, Serbia, Rumania. For Hungary, it has been said, the first and second world wars are not really separate, because they never stopped fighting. This eternal fight to restore lost territory was the reason Hungary sided with the Nazis, who promised territorial restoration after they had conquered Europe and won the war. Hitler offered them what they wanted.

So why use this story to frame an exhibition about Hungarians as torturers? I realise that that is where I have gone wrong. The framing tells me: this is not a museum about Hungarians as torturers. This is a museum about Hungarians as victims. First, the museum complains, the Germans invaded and used this house to torture their prisoners, then the Russians invaded and used this house to torture their prisoners. We shall not forget. That occupied Hungary was the most efficient partner to the Germans ever, that in March and April of 1944 the Hungarian gendarmes and the collaborating peasants enthusiastically made their entire countryside *Judenrein* in a matter of two months, impressing Eichmann with their extraordinary efficiency, is not noted.

The room is divided into two, Russians on one side, Germans on the other. I watch as Hitler parades through roaring German streets over and over, the mechanically-repeating cheering loud enough to be heard outside the room. On the Russian side are images of the Communist tanks invading Budapest. Telephone receivers hanging from the wall speak radio broadcasts, including the proclamation that announced Hungary's armistice with the Allies, and the counter-proclamation that revoked it, announcing the Arrow Cross takeover. One of these may be the counter-proclamation that my grandfather signed. I listen, and cannot tell, of course. The broadcasts are not translated. Summaries of each room are available on photocopied handouts, but the media is in Hungarian. The museum seems designed to teach young Hungarians about their history; the young Hungarians who were not born yet when the Wall fell, the ones who might take for granted their freedom and the presence of a McDonalds on every street corner, who might, if not properly educated, even grow nostalgic about a world in which they would have had a job and affordable housing.

When I reach the room I am most interested in, the Arrow Cross Room, my audio guide crackles into silence. I fiddle with the buttons and walk back and forth past the little headphone logo on the wall, trying to make it play, but to no avail. I try the next room, and it works, breaking into a long analysis of the siege of Budapest and how the Hungarians suffered. I wait for this to finish before returning to the Arrow Cross

room, but still nothing. The live guard by the wall, standing opposite the plastic mannekins wearing *Nilyas* officers' uniforms, starts to look suspiciously at me as I hover in the doorways. In the centre of the room a table is set for a grand dinner. This, presumably, is meant to be a dinner with Ferenc Szálasi, leader of the Party. All looks secure and civilised; there is no visible reference to what the Arrow Cross did in the houses or on the banks of the river. The audio guide is still silent; I can't tell if it knows these stories, and if it does it is not going to tell.

From here the Museum takes me through the communist years, oppression and resistance in authentic Bakelite and wood panelling. And then I am confronted by a museum guard who steps into my path, barring the way. He says it is a six-minute wait for the lift, or I could take the stairs to the basement. Feeling disoriented, I take the stairs, not knowing that I am missing part of the exhibition in the lift, but no doubt the guard could tell that I would not have understood it anyway.

Downstairs are the rooms where the torture took place. They have been reconstructed. A series of small rooms opens from a corridor. A table bears rusted iron implements of various pointed shapes. There are small cells with tiny, dusty windows near the ceiling, a room with a plug in the centre of its floor so that it can be filled with water, a room only two feet high with no windows, a cupboard where it is not possible to do anything but stand. And a padded room. The walls in this room are covered with sacking, that seems to exude a scent of human fear. I walk in and even touch it. Here, even though the sacking is probably a reconstruction, I can imagine a remnant of the people who passed through here; can feel the terror as if it has seeped into the cloth. Otherwise the rooms are still and empty, ominous, but safely silent. The audio guide has fallen silent too; I am left to find my own way, without interpretations.

At the end I find a list of names of the perpetrators, emblazoned on the walls. Real people, the exhibition seems to want to say. These were actual people with names and families, family homes where their mothers proudly displayed their photographs on the mantels. The monsters are named, and were not monsters, but Hungarians after all. I find I am none the wiser about why this happened, about what went through the minds of the torturers, about what they thought they were doing. But perhaps they did not think what they were doing was wrong. Probably masculinity provided the familiar excuse: these were strong men, doing what weaker men would be afraid to do, in order to face up to the reality of life: we have enemies; to stop them we must be prepared to stop at nothing. This is the house of heroes.

It takes a lot to reconfigure a nation, a people. A lot for a revolutionary regime which wants to change everything to be able to stay in power. Perhaps that is why the leaders always become totalitarian, and torturers find work. A torturer is not a kind of person, not a psychology, but a social niche, a space that will be filled by someone, just as the sacking in the reproduction cell, however fake it believes itself to be, ends up reeking of fear.

Was my grandfather this, also? And if so, what does that mean? That the nation needed dedicated soldiers, and that soldiers are not comfortable with making peace? The military was his life, his environment, his family, his source of approval. Perhaps he was simply seeking approval. Perhaps he truly believed that the German way was the best, regardless of what they did with the Jews. I think it likely that he did not set out to persecute Jews. I think I do not have to disbelieve my grandmother when she said that the first thing he said to her was that he admired the Germans although he did not like their treatment of the Jews. It was not that he wanted the Final Solution, but that it made little difference to him, so long as the Hungarians became strong, like the Germans. The Jews to him were not the main thing; they were collateral damage. Does the fact that he supported murders in passing, rather than with his full attention, make him better? Perhaps it makes him worse.

I am not qualified to judge. Perhaps it is for the victims to judge. But I am required to live, and for this I would like to know what I think. And what I think is this: That intentions matter little to the dead, who remain dead. No-one admits to being a racist – everyone has an excuse: ‘I don’t hate, it is just that there are things I want to keep for myself. It is just that there are people I don't want in my vicinity.’ As if murder is acceptable, and only hate is the crime.

My grandfather did not have to hate in order for people to die. He just had to pursue his own goals, his own career, his own fears and loves. All racism happens like this. It is not a matter of opinions, but of effects. Some people get to be those whose needs justify the sacrifice of others.

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When I show him the list, the man in the secondhand bookshop off Szent Istvan Terrace blanches. Am I sure these are the books that I want? Yes, I am sure, I nod. He is about my age. He has very little English, and I have no Hungarian. He tries

nonetheless to direct me. This one, this book on the Holocaust is a better one, he indicates through gestures. I shake my head regretfully. I find one of the books I am looking for. Then at the last minute I also see a copy of Vilmos Nagy's *Fatal Years*. I have already had the relevant passage of this book translated, but it would be good to own a copy. I add it to my purchase. The bookseller is relieved. This one is a better book, he manages to convey. He looks distinctly worried about me. I wish I had the language to explain, but I am shy, and there are other customers in the shop; I don't want to take up his time.

Only later I think that I could have explained without speaking. I could have flicked through *Fatal Years* until I found the page where Nagy names the traitorous elements in the Military, the page that is quoted all over the internet. I could have pointed to the list of soldiers with Germanic names, who 'acted in accordance with their sympathies.' Then I could have taken out my credit card, and placed it below my grandfather's name, so that the repetition leapt out: past and present momentarily coinciding in the same configuration of letters. I could have pointed to myself, carrier of the name. He would have understood. In my imagining of this scene, our eyes would have met. History would have walked into the room and held us suspended for a moment while the shadows fell into place and the shop, the streets, the city, filled with unremembered ghostly bodies. Before I left the shop, he could have reached out and touched my hand, briefly. 'Good luck,' he would have meant. In my wishes he hugs me, and the hug makes everything all right.

Which is all wrong. It's not Hungarians whose forgiveness I need.

*

The apartment building we are staying in at 9 Visegrádi Road, in the Eighth district just north of Szent István Terrace, was once a Yellow Star house, crammed full of Jews awaiting either the end of the war or their fate, whichever was let in first by the janitor who watched the heavy carved wooden door that now sits below a sign that says 'Evergreen B&B'. At the time we don't know that it was once a Yellow Star house; only by accident have we come to stay in the district where in 1944 the International Ghettos were concentrated. My mother wanted to stay in the five star hotel with its grand marble foyer and international restaurant, because only in Budapest can she afford to stay somewhere so luxurious. But I was attracted by the polished wood and

handmade striped-satin upholstery of the Evergreen, and its homemade little shower rooms. ‘Experience apartment living just like the locals’, says the website. I want the atmosphere of Budapest. We carry our suitcases up the stairs without thinking about how the locals of 1944 trod in their heavy boots at 6am while they screamed at the residents to gather in the foyer, men between 15 and 60 years old, women between 15 and 45, with blankets, a tin cup, a plate, thirty Pengő, boots for marching and food for two days, in ten minutes flat, get moving, or we’ll shoot. We sleep in a room with parquet floor and a window looking into the central courtyard, where a hot breeze blows grit in through the window and we don’t imagine the fifteen or more people who must have sat cooped up for nine days in November while the new Arrow Cross party forbade all movement by Jews because of a rumour of resistance. Are there ghosts? I sense ghosts all over Europe but here they say nothing. Perhaps I am not a person they would speak to.

We eat our breakfast cereal, cold cuts and toast with plum jam from plastic packets, in a room with wood panelling that has no doubt been remodelled since people sat with shadowed faces and cheekbones like knives, eking out a loaf of bread over two weeks while they strained to hear the sound of approaching Arrow Cross boots behind the screeching of bombs. We walk across the invisible tracks they left, wander down the Sunday streets and browse the bookshops in side streets where the Arrow Cross once marched rows of children and women holding hands to Szent István Boulevard, to turn left to the ghetto, or right to the river. We turn right to the river, to buy a takeaway falafel or catch the tram to Margit Island for lunch. We lie on our beds in rooms left empty by others, watching television and charging our mobile phones. We layer our lives across the volcanic strata of history, and don’t ask who owns this house or how they came by it.

We live like the locals.

*

The Synagogue, the Jewish Museum, and the Jewish Memorial are listed in the Budapest tourist brochures. But the Holocaust Museum is not. For that I have to catch the tram a few stops further. In the museum is a picture of Ferenc Szálasi handing out medals to the military staff who assisted in the coup. My mother thinks that only one person could be Emil – the one on the left with the aquiline nose. I think the only one

that could be him is the one on the right, slightly turned away. But neither of us really believe he is in the picture. Perhaps he was already dead when the medals were awarded.

He is dead still, and so are the Jews in the Memorial Garden at the Synagogue, which is peaceful after the Museum. Tourists gaze sadly as they are hustled past by the guide, who is keen to leave them with their cameras by the Memory Tree and the Raoul Wallenberg memorial, before the next Synagogue tour begins in ten minutes. There are some graves in the Garden, for those whose names are known. But the piles of bones and rags that I imagine lying intimately tangled below the surface are mostly nameless and quiet. I imagine they feel reclaimed, never having left the Ghetto and the grounds of the Synagogue, where they should not have been buried, but have now been welcomed. The Ghetto has been dismantled, opened, but the bodies are not able to leave even now that freedom has arrived, and have been made part of the landscape. A gentle breath exhudes from them, leaving the Garden in a faint mist, or at least that is how I imagine it. This place is more human than the Holocaust Museum, which under dark lights tells how the names were stripped from people, step by step.

The museum tries to return the names by telling the stories of four or five families of different classes, different levels of orthodoxy, recordings played through Bakelite telephone receivers beside screens of old family photographs. Some of them are people my grandmother could have known, and some are people she would have pretended not to see if she passed them in the streets. A lawyer, an entrepreneur, a shopkeeper, a peasant, a Romany. Someone was never heard from again. Someone else returned home from the labour camp only one day later than he had promised. But the family trees and photographs, the small episodes of love and parting and random improbable return, only emphasise the darkness, the impossibility of representing many by a few. Telephones were invented so that the dead could speak to us, but we have filled up the space with gossip. Most of the names have escaped, only to be pasted, disembodied, across the Perspex in identical, regimented rows on the memorial on the roof of the museum, as if they had flown away from the people who were now too abject to carry them, and been caught on their way to Heaven, leaving their marks like a crowd of insects. There are not enough names. I look for the ones I know, and cannot find them. Some of the names seem to have flown away, although I read later that it is possible to search for them in the database, a catalogue of the dead. The Nazis also made lists. I wonder what the difference is.

But that is the purpose of the Museum. To make visible the violence. The man at the ticket counter has a badly shaven head, and I am sure it is on purpose. As I hand him the ticket I feel as though he is scrutinising me, although his manner is friendly and welcoming. On the way out I make a donation in the jar in front of the desk – a generous donation – but he does not acknowledge me. I realise I was hoping he would. As if I can show myself to be good. As if this would make a difference. As if there is a right way to visit the Holocaust Museum, when what happened lives on, in absences and perhaps in my presence. With the same apologetic goodness in the Synagogue I piously cover my shoulders with a scarf I brought for the purpose. As if my respect makes a difference. It does not, but my lack of respect would have been worse. Perhaps I am a trespasser here, whatever I do.

My Hungarian Jewish friend has been telling me I look Jewish; probably this is what people assume. It is a strange stroke of luck, that I can go incognito like this. I do not have to justify my presence. But all the same I keep quiet when the American Jews at the other breakfast table are discussing their own visits to the Synagogue and the Memorial Garden. If I speak, I will have to avert their preconceptions. I will have to confess.

But my mother is not so shy, chats while I am not in the room. The Memorial is beautiful, the woman says. No doubt she makes assumptions about why we care. But she is right, it is beautiful. Sad, silent and beautiful. I wonder what makes people able to make beauty out of starvation, imprisonment and murder. But I have no doubt that if the buried people care, this is what they would like. Nothing is said. Their presence is felt, although it should be absence.

*

On my way home after the museums, I cross the Széchenyi bridge, named for a distant relative of mine, and follow in the trails of my grandmother as she would have walked on her own way home from work, before the war and after it. Across the bridge and up the Buda Promenade towards the Vörösmajor Park, book in hand as she walked, my father said. It must be from her that I got my ability to walk up the street with my eyes closed. It is one way I know that she and I are close, because I also, before everything, preferred books. Often, no doubt, the books she read were by Jewish

authors, or were given to her by her Jewish language teachers, who taught her French and English literature. She herself, of course, never walked home after viewing the Holocaust Museum or the Memorial Garden. Those are new additions to the Budapest landscape that has otherwise been rebuilt into a mirror image of itself after the bombing. Hungary now has a Holocaust in its past, although it prefers not to draw attention to that fact. That story had not been made up then. It was a mere glint in the eye of people who were living other lives, following their own careers, thinking not of the Jews but of how to keep the Russians out. And if they did think, thinking in any case how the Jews and the Communists were practically the same thing – the enemy without and within. I envy my grandmother for living in a Budapest that had not yet fallen, even as it was falling about her ears, for having her nose in a book as history around her begged for someone to notice it; as Jewish people hid and hoped no-one would notice them. Modest as she pretended to be, she raised us to think that her story was the most important story in the world, that our heritage was the main tale, that her suffering defined suffering, that she had once had a place, although that could not have been entirely true.

Now, following her paths, I feel the desire to claim her place, however precarious, however fictional it was, for myself. I want to make the lions on the bridge, the walk by the river, the boys with the guitar, into part of me. I was raised to believe that this all belonged to me, and the slightest sense of familiarity convinces me that it is all true: my father's voice echoes in my ears as he talks about all the stories his mother told him. When I ask him he claims to remember nothing, but when he speaks he has her memories – how she walked, where she went, what she saw. This place of family legend is mine in inheritance, although it does not recognise me until it sees my passport, which bears witness to my birth far away in a place that does not know my history. I am sure that when I open my mouth perfect Hungarian will come forth, even though my father and my grandparents spoke German first. I am sure that Budapest will answer me in its own perfect Hungarian, and that we will understand one another. I am sure that if I wanted I could disappear into the city, could be one of the young people by the pool, drinking beer with my friends with only a precarious future and no past, or could be one of the fashionable women in the Gerbeaud Cafe discussing my shopping and the theatre over *Dobos torte* as if Communism had never been, as if the buildings around me had never been flattened by the bombs that sent my grandmother fleeing into the country in 1944 while her husband prepared for the final battle – or as if the

buildings, in being flattened and rebuilt, had rebuilt the past, reconstructed it as if there had been no damage, as if nothing was lost, just as Gerbeaud and all the squares were returned to their original names after communism. As if nothing and no-one were missing.

I am sure that I know better than this town about how to come to terms with history. I am sure that I can write and make it see. I am sure that Hungary needs me, and I need it to make myself mean something – myself an orphan of migration and an illegitimate country, looking for a home. I want to make Hungary see, but perhaps more I want to become invisible, to disappear into Hungary's amnesia, walk down the street with my eyes closed and become reborn into post-Communism's future, with my past safely enclosed in the Museum of Hungarian Victimhood on Andrásy Avenue, neatly packaged for young people who have no memories and have never been told. Once I was one of these young people who have never been told, perhaps that is why I recognise the Hungarians, who like Australians, prefer not to remember too much, especially if it is not about their own victimhood.

I turn away from the singing young men and walk on over Margit Bridge, past the Island where my grandmother once played tennis and ate ice cream with her friend Matyi, whose fate she did not record in her memoir, and where the musical, mechanical fountain surges. Tomorrow I am leaving this town and going home, to the country that adopted us, we refugees running from the pasts we made. What will I do there? That country has its camps too, its viciousnesses, its paranoias about the others within. I can go home, I have the passport, permission for forgetfulness: I am saved. But it won't save me. History, repressed, haunts, and we are not good at responsibility in our family – we deny it, run from it, give it away, or take on too much, can never really work out where it belongs. I will go home to the town where my grandmother died and is buried on other people's land, and history, which is everywhere, will find me and ask me to account for myself, and on the borders, in the camps, in the prison cells of the family's new nation, people will be dying, unmarked. My grandparents taught me by not learning it, that the trick to history must be to catch it as it goes past: to notice how you are breathing it in and out while walking down the street, having dinner with your friends, sitting at the computer. History is going past and taking you with it, like it or not, so don't try to pretend it has nothing to do with you.

‘Time...to say goodbye,’ sings Bocelli through the fountain’s loudspeaker,
while the dancing water keeps time, its droplets sparkling in the sun as though keeping
time is easy.

Notes on sources

The most important source for this work has been Vera Szörényi-Reischl's unpublished memoir. This work of approximately two hundred pages does not, to my knowledge, have an overall title, but its volumes are titled *Sopron*, *Family Sagas*, and *Nick and his parents: Their life during his early in childhood in Europe*. It was written in the 1970s, when I was a child. The original on its transparently thin, yellowing typewriter paper is kept in my office at home, I having claimed it in order to write this work. There are photocopies at my work office, my father's house and my sister's house. We take care of our family heirlooms, in case of fire or disaster or war; we always know where the important documents are. From this memoir, as I have indicated in the text, comes much of the information about my grandmother's life before, during and after WWII. This has been supplemented with memories of hers, as remembered by me and my parents.

Details of Captain Emil Szörényi-Reischl's life come from the memoir, from my own and my parents' memories of things my grandmother said about him, and from his military staff file, which, as noted in the Acknowledgements, were kindly forwarded by Gyöngyi Farkas and Colonel Attila Bonhardt of the Hungarian Military Archives in Budapest. The story of Emil's death and the anecdote of his pride over his cigarette case were written down for me by Olga Kállai, daughter of Vera's cousin Olga.

Further details of Emil, including a wonderful physical description, come from his colleague László Eszenyi's memoir, *Trianoni Nemzedék (Trianon Generation)*

(Munkaszám: Magyar Világ Kiadó, 1989). Eszenyi's book is also the source for the opinion that it was the role of the military to secure the territory before worrying about the political regime. Géza's Ottlik's books, so useful for the section on Emil's schooling, are *Iskola a Hataran*, and *Buda*, available in English as *School at the Frontier* (translated by Kathleen Szasz, New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1966) and *Buda: A novel* (translated by John Batki, Budapest: Corvina, 1993) respectively. The information that Szorenyi-Reischl was a classmate of Ottlik's is from a web article by Inkei Bence ("Itt az egyik legnagyobb magyar regény titkos folytatása", *Origo*, 27 May 2012, available at <http://www.origo.hu/kultura/20120525-ottlik-geza-iskola-a-hataron-szereploinek-tovabbi-sorsa.html>). However, the records I have suggest that in his junior years Emil went to the Military Real School in Sopron, while Ottlik was in the neighbouring Real School at Kőszeg. It can be assumed that the schools were much the same in atmosphere and methods. The photograph on page 50 of the graduates of the Ludovika Military College in Budapest in 1942 was supplied by the Hungarian Military Archives. The information about the Blood Society of the Double Cross is from Randolph L. Braham's, *The Politics of Genocide: The Holocaust in Hungary, Volume 1* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1981) and Robert M. Bigler's 'Heil Hitler, Heil Horthy! The nature of Hungarian racist nationalism and its impact on German-Hungarian relations 1919-1945.' (*East European Quarterly*, volume 8, number 3, pp. 251-271, 1974).

The discussion of the October 15 coup in Chapter Seven, including information about Emil Szörényi-Reischl's role, is drawn from a number of sources, namely:

Ölvedi Ignác. *Az 1. Magyar Hadsereg Története: 1944, január 6-tól október 17-ig*. Budapest: Zrinyi, 1989.

Nagy Vilmos Nagybaczoni. *Végzetes Esztendők 1938-1945: Átdolgozott, második kiadás*. Budapest: Gondolat, 1986.

Macartney, CA. *October Fifteenth: A History of Modern Hungary*, 1957.

Vigh Károly. *Ugrás a Sötétbe*. Budapest: Magvető Könyvkiadó, 1984.

Szent-Miklós Istvan. *With the Hungarian Independence Movement 1943-1947: An eyewitness account*. New York: Praeger, 1988.

Lakatos Géza. *Ahogy én láttam*. Budapest, Europa Historia, 1981.

Horthy, Nicholas. *Memoirs*. London: Hutchinson, 1956.

Csontos Balázs. ‘Tartalékos főhadnagy VKF hírközpontvezető jelentése az 1944. évi október hó 15.-i eseményekről.’ (An archival document sent to me by the Hungarian Military Archives).

These sources do not always agree. I have tried to acknowledge this, without being drawn into the minutiae of who said what, which often seems to be an attempt to pin blame on individuals for what was clearly a collective act. For the record, I agree with those historians who contradict accounts that Szörényi wrote the counter-proclamation alone and forged Vörös’ signature. Macartney gives three separate witnesses who saw Vörös sign the orders and agree to them, and the conflicting accounts of Vörös’ role suggest strongly that he was a double dealer trying to please all sides. Within days of the end of the war he had switched to the Russian side. Macartney also notes that someone in Vörös’ office was clearly passing information to the Arrow Cross, since information known only to them appears in Szálasi’s memoirs. None of this, to my mind, exempts Szörényi from his clearly active and committed role in the October 15th coup.

The photograph on page 66 may need some explanation. It is a military order containing the text reported by Csontos, only without the sentence ‘Anyone who disobeys will be shot.’ It bears my grandfather’s signature. Gyöngyi Farkas sent this to me from the Hungarian Military Archives, and explained that there were at least two ‘counter-proclamations’, and that this one was sent on October Fifteenth at 2.50pm. She said that while the historian Ignác Ölvedi interprets the signature as meaning that Szörényi-Reischl wrote the order, others say that he simply certified this copy. Trying to match up this document with those described by Csontos and Macartney has proven inconclusive. Macartney reports a counter-order dictated by Nádas to ‘a subordinate’, and another signed in person by Vörös, all shortly before 3pm, as well as another slightly different version broadcast on the radio at 5pm, recorded by the British, and lacking the sentence threatening execution, but possibly distorted in transmission. Macartney notes that the discrepancies were used to good effect by Vörös in his later military trial, where he was acquitted. It seems likely that the orders were repeated in slightly different forms, and also perhaps that some misleading filing may have gone on to cover the tracks. It is even possible that, given that Szörényi was dead and Vörös very much alive and in a high position in the Soviet military, Csontos concentrated on safer accusations in his report. Again, I do not think that any of this suggests Szörényi was not in favour of the actions.

This work does not bear witness to the whole of the Holocaust in Hungary. I have focussed on the Szálasi regime as the aspect to which my grandfather is most closely linked, beginning in October 1944; the time when the persecution of the Jews of Budapest reached its height at the hands of the *Nilyas*/Arrow Cross. The descriptions of this era, including the Yellow Star houses, the ghettos, the labour marches, the massacres and the riverside executions, are drawn from the following historical research and memoirs:

Braham, Randolph *The Politics of Genocide: The Holocaust in Hungary*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1981.

Deak, Istvan 'Hungary'. *The European Right: A historical profile*, Ed. Hans Rogger and Eugen Weber. London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 1965.

Vagi, Szoltan, László Csosz & Gabor Kadar *The Holocaust in Hungary: Evolution of a Genocide*. AltaMira Press in association with the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 2013.

Stephen Spielberg and Survivors of the Shoah Visual History Foundation *The Last Days*. New York: St Martin's Press, 1999.

Gottlieb, Erika *Becoming my Mother's Daughter: A story of survival and renewal*. Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 2008.

Ozsvath, Zsuzsanna *When the Danube Ran Red*. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2010.

Szep, Erno *The Smell of Humans: A memoir of the Holocaust in Hungary*, translated by John Batki with an introduction by Dezsó Tandori. Budapest: Central European University Press, 1945.

Lazarovitz, Erno *Wanderer in Hell: A true story from a survivor* translated and transliterated into English by Jean-Pierre Ady Fenyő, available at <http://webspaces.zierl.info/zierl/texte/Wanderer-in-Hell.doc>

Biro, Adam *One Must Also be Hungarian*, translated by Catherine Tihanyi. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006 (originally published in French as *Les Ancêtres d'Ulysse*, 2002)

Karsai, László 'The last phase of the Hungarian Holocaust: The Szálasi regime and the Jews'. *The Nazis' Last Victims: The Holocaust in Hungary*. Ed. Randolph L. Braham and Scott Miller. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1998.

The quotations from Lieutenant Colonel László Ferenczy on p. 81, General Hans Juttner on p. 82, and Ferenc Szálasi on page 85 are all quoted in Braham, *The Politics of Genocide*, on pages 831, 842 and 874 respectively.

The quotation from Daša Drndić's on page 59 is from page 340 of her novel *Trieste* (London: Maclehose Press, 2012), an incisive exploration of the intergenerational Nazi legacy.

The epigraphs at the beginnings of Chapters Seven and Eight are from the poem *Fragment*, and of Chapter Nine the poem *The Eighth Eclogue*, both as translated in *Foamy Sky: The Major Poems of Miklós Radnóti, selected and translated by Zsuzsanna Ozsvath and Frederick Turner* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992). Radnóti was a Jewish Hungarian poet who died on a forced labour march from the Balkans to the Hungarian-German border in early November of 1944. The poems from which I quote are among those that were found in a checked notebook in his pocket when his body was exhumed from its mass grave in the village of Abda in 1946. In the poem *Razglednicas* Radnóti predicted his own death: shot in the neck by a guard when he could no longer walk.

I have not covered the earlier period of 1944 when the Jews of rural Hungary were deported to the concentration camps, during the German occupation of March to July. Hungarian cooperation with the German regime was extraordinarily enthusiastic and far more 'efficient' than in any other occupied country. Four hundred and thirty-four thousand rural Hungarian Jews were loaded onto trains and sent to concentration camps, primarily Auschwitz, in just two months; the operation run by Hungarian gendarmes led by the notorious state secretaries, László Endre and László Baký, but assisted by countless locals.

Szálasi, therefore, cannot be held responsible for the entirety of the Holocaust in Hungary. To some extent the focus on this single moment of vacillation helps Hungarians to disavow their six years of willing alliance with Hitler and their decades of entirely Hungarian-initiated anti-Semitic thought and practice. However, had Hungary succeeded in backing out of the war on October fifteenth, 1944, hundreds of thousands would have lived; not only the Budapest Jews and those on forced marches, but the many non-Jewish Hungarians who perished in the Siege of Budapest while Szálasi and the Germans pointlessly extended the war, in no small part because they wanted to seize the last chance to eliminate the Jews.

I acknowledge that Jews were not the only people sent to the camps by the Germans, and that from Hungary many Roma were also deported. No mention of this is made in the sources I have consulted, and I have thus been unable to say much about it. I do not know the details, but assume that many political prisoners, people marked as 'homosexual', and others must have been included in forced labour, death marches and deportations.

Part 2: Exegesis

After-Words: Postmemory and Writing Perpetration

After-words: Postmemory and Writing Perpetration.

An exegesis accompanying *Unintelligible: A Memoir of Unassumable Inheritance*.

'How can one tell the story of a history of which one is a protagonist without ever having experienced it directly?' (Gabrielle Schwab, *Haunting Legacies*, 81)

'It is not difficult to dream a book...The difficult thing is to become your dream book's implied author.' (Orhan Pamuk, *Other Colours*, 10)

Unintelligible: A Memoir of Unassumable Inheritance is a short work that straddles the boundaries of memoir and creative non-fiction. It tells the story of the author's grandfather's participation in the coup of October fifteenth, 1944, that established a National Socialist government in Hungary and resulted in the mass persecution and murder of the Jews of Budapest, who might otherwise have survived the war relatively unscathed. The intent of the memoir is not only to confess this legacy, but to meditate on its influence on the rest of the family – Captain Szörényi-Reischl's loving wife, his son born during the war, and his granddaughter, brought up in Australia – and through their experiences to explore more generally the personal and emotional effects of trans-generational responsibility for historical atrocity, a predicament that might be called 'perpetrator postmemory' or 'postguilt' (Kaplan & Herrero-Matoses 140). This exegesis explores this concept and how it has been enacted in *Unintelligible*, concluding that it offers useful ways through which to address the ethical dilemmas of representing perpetration and engage with questions of historical responsibility – questions that have implications beyond my immediate family, given that historical responsibility is perhaps best understood by attending to the ways in which nation, culture and identity are constructed transgenerationally (Thompson 148).¹

The representation of Holocaust perpetration has traditionally been controversial. A strong tradition in the scholarship of Holocaust representation insists that the most appropriate voices to bear witness to the atrocity are those of the victims (Adams 251). Accompanying this is a moral imperative that says the Holocaust is not an issue to be invoked lightly in the service of some other narrative, someone else's story. And there is Lanzmann's famous caution about the 'obscenity of understanding':

that the project of comprehending perpetrators might amount to implicitly legitimating their perspectives (206-7). These issues mean that *Unintelligible* is bound in some ways to be a problematic narrative. There are dangers that it might occupy spaces that are better filled by the voices of victims, or appropriate the experiences of victims in the service of telling stories about people on the ‘wrong’ side (Schwab 77).

However, despite the controversy, recently there has been a turn in Holocaust literature towards the representation of perpetrators, producing such popular (and still controversial) works as Jonathan Littell’s *The Kindly Ones* and Bernhard Schlink’s *The Reader*. As Adams (252) points out, this has been enabled by a recent move in Holocaust studies away from the concern to memorialise victims, in which representation of perpetrators seems inappropriate, towards a reflexive, self-critical examination of perpetration and collaboration. Adams writes,

This multidisciplinary and transnational engagement with representations and contexts of perpetration may be linked not only to the ‘ethical turn’ in the arts and humanities and to increasing temporal distance from the Holocaust, but also, unfortunately, to the enduring relevance of questions of guilt and complicity in relation to ongoing human-rights abuses and neo-fascist violence in the contemporary era. (Adams 252)

The recent turn to representation of perpetration in Holocaust studies and in wider genocide studies has thus been impelled by the hope that understanding what makes genocide appear a plausible or attractive solution might forestall its recurrence. A central insight of this literature is that indeed, the structures of fascism have not gone away, but remain deeply embedded in contemporary cultural and even economic life (Sontag). The recent resurgence of neo-Nazi movements across Europe, especially in Hungary, and even in Australia, make this seem all the more urgent.

The task, therefore, seems to be to get close enough to understand what went wrong in 1930s Europe, in order to be able to recognise when similar situations are emerging, but at the same time not to get so close that the perspective of perpetrators simply gets uncritically reproduced. In this exegesis I outline my attempts to navigate this balance through the concept of ‘postguilt’, exploring how the conflicted, partial and tentative structures of postmemory can lend themselves to the task of understanding, without condoning, the structures of genocide. Postmemory is a complex predicament, made up of juxtaposed second-hand memories, cultural imaginings, and fraught identifications. I suggest here that this position offers a flexible, multi-voiced method

through which to negotiate a textual encounter with the lives of those who have participated in evil: one that might prompt reflexivity through its shifting points of view and variable distance from the subjectivity of the perpetrator. To have grown up in an atmosphere of guilt and denial that found no source in my family's extant stories was to become implicated in that silence – but implication is also a kind of proximity, that might be unpacked to understand something of how perpetration came about. From where I stand, the denials that enabled perpetration and those that perpetuated the silence afterwards are continuous. Telling the story of this denial then does two things: it portrays how that denial works, as a kind of exploration of the subjectivity of people who contributed to evil – even while not engaged in violence directly and even though they thought themselves good. But it also, and perhaps most importantly, breaks that silence on which their denial depended.

Unintelligible thus undertakes three tasks: The first task is to bear witness to the phenomenon of an inter-generational effect of perpetration, and the second is, through this, to explore on an intimate, familial scale the structures that enabled and justified such perpetration, and the structures of denial and avoidance that kept it secret, narrowing lives in the process. The third task is simply to tell the story of what happened; to reconstruct the family history so that it includes what was left out – the consequences of my grandfather's actions – thus breaking the silence and putting responsibility where it belongs. These three tasks are echoed in the structure of the work, which begins by exploring my intimate relationship with my grandmother, progresses through my efforts to find out more about my grandfather, and ends by outlining, in bare horror, the consequences of the 1944 Nazi/Arrow Cross coup of which he was, as the story has made clear by then, an enthusiastic facilitator. A final chapter meditates, from the perspective of a visit to Budapest in 2012, on Hungary's failure to take responsibility for the Holocaust. In this way the work moves on a trajectory that begins with a child's limited and personal perspective and moves outwards towards a broader questioning of historical responsibility. Postmemory takes place at the point where personal memory blurs into cultural memory (Hoffman *After Such Knowledge* 15), and so it has offered a productive method through which to approach these three themes, providing a concept through which to explore the legacies of atrocity, navigate the literary and ethical dilemmas of representing perpetrators, and performatively enact the paradoxes of transgenerational responsibility.

The three sections below address these questions in turn. But before going on to define postmemory, there are some questions of definition to clarify. The first is what I mean by ‘perpetration’. Where my grandfather stands on the scale of perpetration has been difficult to determine. He most certainly collaborated, in that his actions in the final stages of the war were expressly directed towards supporting Hitler’s occupation of Hungary, at a time when it was clear that the main reason for this was to enable the continued extermination of Jews. Beyond this, a very strict definition of ‘perpetrator’, used to mean those who were directly involved in the planning or physical execution of murders, may or may not apply to him. His role in the military, as far as I can establish, did not involve him directly in the enactment of deportations or murders, which in Hungary was largely carried out by the gendarmes, a militarily organised police force. It is, however, quite possible, even likely, that as a General Staff officer he was earlier involved in overseeing the execution of ‘partisans’ while part of retreating occupying forces on the Eastern Front in 1943. And it is also possible that in earlier years he may have been involved in more direct acts of violence against Jewish forced labour regiments, some of which have been documented as being carried out by Hungarian forces during their occupation of neighbouring countries. I have not found specific evidence for my grandfather’s role in any such events, and have only been able to speculate about them in the creative work.

Nonetheless, the term ‘perpetrator’ is often used with a far broader definition, to the point that it can encompass anyone with an enabling role in the Holocaust, up to entire nations or generations – most often Germany, of course. Captain Szörényi-Reischl was Hungarian with German-speaking Austrian heritage, and it’s not entirely clear whether he was most dedicated to Magyar (Arrow Cross) or Aryan (Nazi) racial ideals, but he was most definitely a supporter of Fascism. Whether this came out of an *intentional* commitment to anti-Semitism in particular has always seemed to me to be beside the point, given that his actions were entirely consistent with anti-Semitic goals and had genocidal effects that were foreseeable. To summarise all of this, I do sometimes call my grandfather a perpetrator, or include myself as part of a post-perpetration generation. But at times I also describe him as collaborator. I haven’t settled on the best term, wishing for one that will not let him off the hook, but will also not gloss over the differences between his story and some of the more spectacular stories that circulate in the popular imagination, in which a Nazi perpetrator is often taken to be someone who directly participated in, or planned, mass murder.

It may also be necessary to clarify my own ‘generation’. In discussing the actions of my grandparents, I am of course third-generation in relation to the events that *Unintelligible* describes. But I find myself feeling more emotionally implicated than this is usually thought to imply (Codde 69). I often think to myself that this is because my father ducked his task, leaving the emotional legacy unprocessed. But this in itself may be because he is not actually quite second-generation. Susan Suleiman has coined the term ‘1.5 generation’ to describe child survivors of the Holocaust who were present but too young to remember or understand (cited in Adams 297). If the term were also applied to those on the perpetrator side, my father, who was two when his own father died just days after his participation in the Arrow Cross coup, would be part of a ‘1.5’ perpetrator generation, and this in turn would make me ‘2.5’, somewhere between second and third. This seems right to me. I should be third generation, but my father, for whatever reasons of childhood traumatising, migration, embeddedness in his own mother’s worldview, wilful ignorance, fear, or simple privilege, never took on the role of the ‘second generation’ that in Germany meant questioning one’s parents and locating oneself in relation to the Holocaust. He thus left the task for me. It should also be noted that to speak of ‘generations’ as if they are a meaningful way of dividing experience assumes that the forms of processing trauma and/or denial will be the same across families in different locations and cultural contexts. Australia has not had any kind of inter-generational struggle around the Holocaust of the kind that Germany has had, and Hungary has had a different trajectory again. The most accurate description, then, may be to say that I am the first in my family to ask the questions that in Germany were asked by many in the second generation.

Intergenerational relationships are central to the concept of ‘postmemory’ developed by Marianne Hirsch to describe the experiences of second-generation Holocaust survivors. As Hirsch defines it,

‘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 so deeply and affectively as to *seem* to constitute memories in their own right. (5)

The predicament of postmemory thus might be summed up as one in which the juxtaposition of affect with family story produces the effect of ‘remembering’ without

having been there. It can produce truly uncanny experiences where descendants seem to develop memories of events at which they were not present or even about which they were not told,² creating a generation who feel that their own lives become unreal in comparison to the lives and deaths of those who went before (Hirsch, 5; Hoffman *After Such Knowledge* xi). As Hirsch puts it ‘these events happened in the past, but their effects continue into the present’ (5). As the ‘post’ in the term indicates (Hirsch, 5), postmemory is a state of being *afterwards*, but not yet fully *past*, a traumatic history.

But this does not mean that postmemory is actual memory (Hoffman, “The Long Afterlife of Loss” 407). It is a construction put together from disparate sources: stories handed down by parents, often combined with untold stories and silences; felt identification with the affective, emotional legacies that parents may have admitted to or tried to repress; and the wider cultural archive through which descendants try to make sense of their parents’ lives. The generations of postmemory have the task of putting the conglomeration of feelings, intuitions and uncanny mirrorings that come to them through their families, together with the historical record of what happened. Postmemory is an intrinsically intertextual, mediated relationship, even as it may be an uncannily ‘real’ affective experience.

This location at the boundaries of personal and cultural memory means that even though its basis in psychoanalysis and its focus on ‘trauma’ might seem to make it a purely personal, individual approach to questions of historical responsibility, postmemory is also a productive site for the examination of questions of collective responsibility.³ It is now considered obvious that questions of historical responsibility and restitution must be addressed at national levels as well as individual ones (Barkan xvi), but what qualifies as a ‘national’ issue is always subject to structures of collective memory, practices of memorialisation, and political debate (Barkan xxi; Hamilton 303). In the particular case of the Holocaust, the generations of postmemory have been active participants in such practices of collective memory (Schaffer and Smith 22). Postmemory is, as Hoffman puts it, the point of the ‘hinge generation in which received, transferred knowledge of events is being transmuted into history, or into myth’ (*After Such Knowledge* 15). This makes it a useful site for exploring what Paula Hamilton calls ‘the mutual interconnections between public and private that are both most fascinating and most difficult to uncover’ in discussions of so-called ‘public’ memory (299).

Much of the ‘practice’ of postmemory has been through literary or artistic practice, producing *texts* of postmemory; creative engagements with memory and history, known through mediation, but also marked by deep, even traumatic, affective engagement. It is not coincidence that many of these works, including *Unintelligible*, utilise tropes of haunting. Hoffman writes that haunting is

...a notion that recurs often in writing about the intergenerational transmission of trauma. Something reemerges from the past that we thought had been dead... but that has lain dormant in the turrets and caverns of the soul till it returns in the form of specters and shadows. (*After Such Knowledge* 65)

These, she says, are decidedly uncanny events, ‘because we still do not understand sufficiently how they happen, how the mind, or the unconscious, takes in scarps of moods, or psychic states, or half-heard information, and converts them back into eerily apt symbolism’ (*After Such Knowledge* 65). I have found that haunting is a useful image to convey the experience of postmemory, in which the past occupies the present, but intangibly, leaving those that it touches confused, chilled, disturbed, and perhaps emotionally paralysed or even uncannily possessed by things and events they should not have known.

But of course, as defined by Hirsch (5), the concept of postmemory is mostly applied to the experiences of those descended from *victims and survivors*. Can there be such a thing as a ‘perpetrator postmemory’? The scholarly literature speculates on this question. To begin with, there is acknowledgement that there is a legacy not only for the children of survivors, but those of perpetrators. Dan Bar-On’s work explores the psychological legacy of the Holocaust for the descendants of both victims and perpetrators. Consistent with the idea of postmemory, he finds that ‘untold stories often pass more powerfully from generation to generation than stories that are discussible’ (“Transgenerational Aftereffects” 99). The reasons for the silences differ between survivors and perpetrators, but Bar-On concludes that “[t]he results, however, are similar. The silence usually transmits the trauma to the following generations.” (*Tell Your Life Story* 37). Eva Hoffman concurs: ‘For the perpetrators’ progeny, too, there were unnamed fears and unspoken guilt, strange hauntings and soul damaging identifications’ (*After Such Knowledge* 121). This, she suggests, should not be so surprising:

For after all, a child growing up against the background of horror does not yet have the imagination of cause or consequence. It does not know on what side of the historical abyss it finds itself, or who did what to whom. It only knows the weight of secrecy and silence, the frightening imaginings that fill the gap, and the intimations of a consummately dark, consummately threatening universe. (*After Such Knowledge*123)

Switching from a familial to a historical scale, Gabrielle Schwab, writing from the perspective of having grown up in West Germany, outlines the consequences:

Violent histories generate psychic deformations passed on from generation to generation across the divide of victims and perpetrators. No-one can completely escape the ravages of war or the dehumanizing effects of atrocities, not even those perpetrators who seems to have escaped unscathed or those who frantically rebuild their lives, their cities, and their nations. The damages of violent histories can hibernate in the unconscious, only to be transmitted to the next generation like an undetected disease. (3)

In other words, the descendants of both survivors and perpetrators share the predicament of postmemory. Both are born into an atmosphere of ‘afterwards’, in which their lives are shadowed by experiences that they cannot fully know or understand.

However, it would be a mistake to make simple equations. There are also important structural differences in experience and in ethical positioning. Hoffman notes that where the children of survivors are marked by identification with their parents’ trauma, for the children of Germans the defining feature is one of ‘violent counteridentification’ (*After Such Knowledge* 124).⁴ This, she notes, is not an enviable task.

While the conflict for children of victims is between the imperative of compassion and the need for freedom, the quandary of the children of Nazis – perhaps for children of perpetrators everywhere – is caused by the imperative to hate those whom they love. (*After Such Knowledge* 119)

This predicament complicates the position of *Unintelligible* as a migrant memoir – a genre within which in other ways might have fitted quite neatly. The struggle of the second-generation migrant caught ‘between cultures’ has become a theme of life writing in the multicultural settler colonies of the US and Australia (Hong Kingston, Hoffman *Lost in Translation*, Pung, Palotta-Chiarolli), and such a struggle

harmonises with the genre of postmemory, being marked by a similar disjunction between knowing and not-knowing, a feeling of belonging to a history that one has never experienced ('I am to return to China, where I have never been,' Hong-Kingston writes (73)). But often such second-generation migrant memoirs follow a trajectory of reconciliation, in which the protagonist begins with embarrassed dismissal of her parents' idiosyncrasies and paranoias, but over the course of the narrative comes to discover and understand their histories, and ultimately to forgive and sympathise with them, even if still ambivalently. This seemed inappropriate for a second-generational perpetrator memoir: forgiveness is not mine to give. The task rather was to *begin* with family loyalty, and then to unravel it to show the violence at its heart. In Australian migrant literature, the closest thematic parallel that I know of would be Christos Tsiolkas' work of fiction, *Dead Europe*, in which an Australian character, child of European migrants and brought up to yearn for his parents' romanticised homeland, finds that he is instead haunted by a ghost of the Holocaust.

I found similar themes in Eastern European literature. From Hungary, Péter Nádas' huge and complex novel *Parallel Lives* offers a portrait of contemporary Hungary as haunted by its National Socialist past. All his characters seem to be either gripped by acute shame or lost in complex, self-justifying convolutions of denial. As the novel progresses, more and more characters emerge as being implicated in various ways in National Socialism, anti-Semitic violence, or eugenics experiments, making it clear precisely what shameful history is torturing them in its myriad and inventive ways. Indeed the repressed memories of the city of Budapest itself begin to seep into their meditations, so that as the characters lie awake at night torturing themselves over their love affairs and their inadequacies, they are frightened by the sound of Arrow Cross men marching up the stairs, decades ago. Nádas writes: 'There are nights, however, when the walls of Budapest apartments reradiate the sounds they once absorbed' (640). The city seems to reek; the currents of the Danube and the paddle-steamers that travel up and down it, shaking the city, are offered as metaphors for history; bones from mass graves emerge from the river's banks; and as one character notices, the water stinks. Thus Nádas too suggests that the legacies of the past persist, permeating the present with a consuming sense of guilt.

Daša Drndić's *Trieste* also deals with the legacy of the Holocaust. She paints a vast historical tapestry organised around the narrator Haya Tedeschi as she reminisces as an old woman in an empty room, waiting to meet her adult son for the first time after

she lost him: a boy fathered by a Nazi officer and stolen from her as a baby to become a *Lebensborn* child. The novel is both sympathetic and scathing about Haya's predicament; a secular Jew who turned a blind eye to the Holocaust and sought security where she could find it, only to be betrayed. The novel is vast, and the narrative voice is panoramic, cynical to the point of cruelty, and at the same time deeply outraged as it locates small lives lived passively and in wilful ignorance, and because of this, ultimately supportively of the broader panorama of historical atrocity.

These works thus offer a meditation on the way in which guilt can permeate entire landscapes and communities, and the ways in which untold stories can filter into subsequent generations. Drndić's narrator Hans says:

Besides, for some of us, those of us who like Santa Claus lug sacks on our backs, sacks brimming with the sins of our ancestors, History has no need to return, History is in our marrow, and here, in our bones, it drills rheumatically and no medicine can cure that. History is in our blood and in our blood it flows quietly and destructively, while on the outside there's nothing, on the outside all is calm and ordinary, until one day, History, *our* History, the History in our blood, in our bones, goes mad and starts eroding the miserable, crumbling ramparts of our immunity, which we have been cautiously raising for decades. (335)

For Drndić, an angry confrontation with history is necessary, not only in order to face the past, but to put responsibility where it belongs. The centre of *Trieste* does just this, outlining in bare and unadorned facts the actions and fates of the Nazis who appear as characters in its pages. But at the same time as it squarely holds these outright perpetrators responsible, the book also shows how the blame permeates the whole of the region, so that all the small lives lived there are implicated, perhaps in some way like Hans born from within the violence, inextricably *of* it.

I took these works as inspiration and as justification. If these writers could diagnose and depict an ongoing unaddressed legacy of the Holocaust embedded in Central Europe and continuing to distort the lives of those living there, then I could do so too. They were also stylistic influences, particularly Drndić, whose panoramic, fast-moving ability to connect fleeting personal images with broader historical events was the inspiration behind my own 'lines of memory' passage in Chapter Nine, and whose bare, unadorned reportage of facts when it came to the actions of perpetrators also seemed to me the most appropriate way to write of the violence.

However, *Unintelligible*, being memoir rather than fiction, required some additional textual strategies. Because postmemory is a paradoxical experience of being haunted by memories of events at which one was not actually present, it is a relationship marked by gaps and absences; paradoxes of both knowing and not-knowing, in which there may be affective knowledge without factual knowledge, or factual knowledge without affective knowledge. One of the aims of *Unintelligible* is precisely to put these modes of knowing together, or at least to juxtapose them: to put the facts of historical violence back into the personal story that had been mythologised without them. But this is not an easy or straightforward process. The inevitable gaps in representation caused by the experience of second-hand memory overlay, obscure, mirror and tangle with the gaps in experience caused by denial, trauma and dislocation. Representing the predicament of postmemory thus requires particular textual strategies. Texts of postmemory tend to be complex and fragmented affairs; combinations of fact and imagination, speech and silence, knowledge and speculation (Schwab 13-14).

Often authors of texts of postmemory fill in the gaps in their stories by turning to the cultural archive, and this intertextuality has been a primary strategy for writing *Unintelligible*. What I could not remember, or find in my grandmother's memoir, I looked for on the Internet, and in the many memoirs, historical texts, and even novels that turned out to mention my grandfather.⁵ There were far more of these anecdotes available than I had initially anticipated, in fact while writing *Unintelligible* I have often felt haunted by *books*. Perhaps it is simply because my grandmother loved literature and moved in those circles, but references to literature kept emerging in my writing and research: she knew Count Almásy, the historical figure behind Ondaatje's *The English Patient*; she was once courted by a Count Tolnai, whose fictional relative Frau von Tolna⁶ acted as mysterious veiled benefactor to Adrian Leverkühn the composer in Thomas Mann's *Doctor Faustus*, itself a depiction of the seductions of Fascism; her childhood friend Matyi has much in common with the daughter of Miksa Fenyő, novelist, poet and editor of the literary journal *Nugyat* and second on Hitler's personal hit list. The book in which I found the first serious evidence of my grandfather's actions on October Fifteenth was written by a close friend my grandmother had in her twenties (Macartney). And in an unlooked for serendipity, the Hungarian novelist Géza Ottlik was a fellow military school student in precisely the same years (if perhaps not at the same school, see Inkei), and wrote two semi-

autobiographical novels about it, my best source for guesses about Emil's education and his milieu.

Such 'coincidences' have given me a sense not so much of writing the book, as of finding it. As W.G. Sebald, (a writer whose own works have been described as perpetrator postmemory, see Kaplan & Herrero-Matoses 139) says in an interview when asked about coincidences,

Occasionally, I think when you write or do anything of the sort, there are times when you almost know that you're on the right track...and I think this is confirmed when things come in from the wings, you know, as you sit there, trying to straighten out a page. And, as it comes right, then quotations or figures or things that you hadn't thought of for eighteen years offer themselves all of a sudden. And I've always found that quite a good measure – that once things are going in a certain way that you can trust, then even in the writing process itself, things happen. (Quoted in Cuomo, 96)

I found myself similarly encouraged when, for instance, I found that my and my grandmother's favourite Rilke poems exactly summarised our relationship, or that my grandfather had a Jewish mistress. These felt not so much like random coincidences, as *consistencies*, that suggested an underlying pattern was emerging from my collaging. I have included in the text of *Unintelligible* Daša Drndić's meditation on coincidences from her novel about the legacy of the Holocaust in Trieste, but cannot resist repeating it here:

I know that coincidences are rare, perhaps there are no coincidences, there is only our stupid and superstitious need to duck behind our own carnival life which prances by us. Our coincidences, which are actually our pasts, we bury under our family trees on which grow berries full of sweet poison. (340)

Hence it is not that through a strange series of 'coincidences', images seem to repeat in my family story. It is that these items — books, poems, melancholy, Jewish mistresses, the Margit bridge, trains, starvation — *are* the family story, fragmented by the fact that it has not been properly told. This in itself is a kind of synecdoche for the phenomena the work tries to outline – the way that, in spite of how fragmented it has become, spread so thin across generations that it can hardly be read, the story persists. As Drndić's narrator also says, the past repeats, and goes on repeating, and we are very bad at learning from our mistakes. Generations repeat events and motifs from the generations before. This is precisely not meaningless coincidence, but *pattern*. Such

repetitions only appear as coincidences because we deny the central story that gives them meaning, pretending it has nothing to do with us.

The structure that emerged as I wrote about these coincidences was, in keeping with the representational habits of postmemory, a discontinuous, fragmentary one. Without a clear idea of what I was doing, I wrote in fragments, short paragraphs here and there (often snatched while getting ready for work in the morning), which eventually began to conglomerate and cohere. The feeling was something like doing a jigsaw puzzle – putting things next to each other, juxtaposing them, until they seemed to fit. The resulting text is fragmentary in structure; seemingly random memories and anecdotes are juxtaposed in ways that cumulatively do tell a story, but not one that is easily summarised in a plot. The knowledge to which the work attempts to bear witness emerges slowly, in pieces and amongst uncertainty, and in some ways never emerges. Much of what I have written is necessarily tentative. Often the best I have been able to do is juxtapose conflicting accounts or interpretations and leave them to interrogate one another.

I took all this not as mere difficulty in writing, but as in itself an indication of the central problem. The very fragmentation of the work helps to show that the ‘whole’, this consistency of pattern, that I am trying to identify, is not actually a whole; it is itself fundamentally fragmented. The very ‘pattern’ which I am trying to show is a pattern made of aversion, self-deception, denials and half-truths. The problem with which my ancestors (and no doubt I) have failed to adequately wrestle is the impossibility of seeing the whole of a society built on exclusion and division. It is difficult from a distance and almost unachievable from within, surrounded by the impenetrable barriers and gaps that from the perspective of one life make other lives irrelevant, irretrievable, and finally imperceptible. My grandmother’s story, as written in her memoir, works very well as a story in itself. When I try to insert the Holocaust into it, it no longer works. It begins to crumble and stutter. Points of view become impossible to maintain, arguments cannot be sustained, characters appear and disappear at the wrong moments, heroes become villains without losing their heroism, and climaxes happen in the wrong place.

I could have attempted to cover over such awkwardnesses, but I preferred to leave them in, at least minimally, and sometimes with explanations about what I was doing so that the point will not be missed. I wanted to leave them in because the fragmentation and difficulties of narration should, I think, be taken as an indication of

an actual problem of life in that time (the question of life in my own time I leave open but of course that is what I am really worried about). In mid-twentieth-century Hungary, in order for stories to work, particularly the stories of the privileged, and more than that in order for *lives* to work, certain things had to be strategically forgotten, avoided, excluded from narrative relevance. As much as to individual acts, *Unintelligible* tries to bear witness to that structural corollary of atrocity, and tentatively and with caution, not so much to fill in the gaps, which would have required too much appropriation of the stories of the victims, as to make the gaps visible, to show the limitedness and one-sidedness of my grandparents' worldview.

Nonetheless this representation of the world view of perpetrators and collaborators, as I mentioned above, requires some ethical balancing. Critical discussions of *The Kindly Ones* are useful to illustrate the dilemmas here. Robert Eaglestone argues that representations of Holocaust perpetrators, including Littell's novel, inevitably seem to fail (13). They promise an insight into 'evil', but at the last minute they always 'swerve' in some way away from fulfilling that promise, somehow losing their critical edge in bad writing or, as in *The Kindly Ones*, by embedding their protagonist in fantastical obsessions and sexual perversions that seem to explain the evil as personal pathology, and leave us none the wiser about the more ubiquitous and banal aspects of the Holocaust. Erin McGlothlin, on the other hand, asks us to imagine a version of the novel that did not use such 'filtering strategies' to limit reader identification:

By conjuring a highly mimetic representation of the perpetrator unmitigated by oppositional formal strategies, such a narrative would be unable to sustain any ethical or critical perspective external to the events he describes. (175)

The danger, then, is that such a mimetic representation might entice readers to over-identify with the narrator and be seduced into taking on his point of view for themselves. To navigate such dangers, McGlothlin argues that it is helpful to analyse representations of perpetrators from the point of view of narrative theory, particularly voice and focalisation. 'Such investigation into narrative construction of the perpetrator's mind can assist us in understanding how we, as readers, are positioned vis-à-vis the perpetrator protagonist' (161). She concludes that ideally texts will

...involve readers in carefully controlled exercises in identification. In this way, they enable the reader to engage in complex negotiations with the history of the Holocaust without allowing her to fully and uncritically identify with the perpetrator and his actions and emotions. (175)

The fragmented, postmemorial structure of *Unintelligible* offered some opportunities for such complex negotiations with identification. A text like Littell's *The Kindly Ones*, as an exploration of the inner subjectivity of a perpetrator, has to offer a believable consistency of voice and perspective. *Unintelligible*'s positioning as postmemory, however, offered opportunities for a more varied approach, in which different narrative voices and focalisations could be juxtaposed. Having made it explicit in the text that I was patching my representation of Emil together from a collection of second- and third-hand accounts combined with introspection, intuition and sheer speculation, I had greater licence to move in and out of closeness with Emil's (imagined) perspective, treading a spectrum from identification and middle voice⁷ to distanced analysis, or even staging explicit conversation between him and the narrator. I do not think that this approach removes the risks of the various attempts I make to portray him, but it at least complicates them. I was aiming for an approach that would not so much settle moral questions, as continually unsettle them, prompting further questioning, of Emil, of the narrator, and of the reasons for what happened, and thus hoping precisely to avoid an uncritical identification on the part of the reader.

This fragmented and contradictory structure has implications, of course, for the narrative voice, and this is also both symptomatic and intentional. This IS a problematic narrative, and the narrator who stands in for the author must be a problematic narrator, probably to extents that I am not aware of. As I've indicated in the text, I could not help wondering, as I wrote, in what ways I was bound to reproduce, out of my identification with my grandmother and the structures of thought with which she and my father surrounded me and directed me as I grew up, the very problem I was trying to depict. This embeddedness, as well as being a theme of the work, is a potential problem with it. *Unintelligible* is not only a portrayal of perpetration, but a text written from the situation of being potentially bound up in it, and in ways that might not be visible to me as author and narrator. It is a text that is not merely *about* perpetration, but also *of* it, implicated in it. That implication is, in fact, what it tries to reflexively witness.

In her book *Giving an Account of Oneself*, Judith Butler explores this problem.⁸ Although she is not explicitly writing about transgenerational responsibility, her

theorisations parallel in some ways the structure of postmemory. Butler is interested in the ways in which any account we try to give of our actions might seem to be compromised by the fact that there is inevitably a point at which our own actions are not transparent to us, nor available to us as narratable knowledge (19). This is because we are not simply individuals. Both structurally and chronologically, we are inaugurated as subjects through relations with others, and thus at the heart of our subjectivity we are relational beings (20). Where we had hoped to find our selves and the reasons for our actions, we find instead others, who preceded us and remain obscure to us. This means that within us we will always find something opaque, something to which we may bear witness – to which we are probably inevitably *bound* to bear witness – but which we cannot claim to fully know or understand. Inevitably, then, when we try to give an account of our origins or how our origins may have influenced who we are, we encounter an opacity and are bound to misstep and mislead. The attempt to give an account seems structurally bound to fail.

This seems a theory well-fitted to writing about transgenerational experience, and particularly the inheritance of trans-generational perpetration. This indeed is a situation where I must feel called to give an account – of what happened and my relation to it – but find myself unable to actually do so in any satisfying way, because at the heart of what happened I find not myself, but my ancestors – who are both external to me, and at the same time the stuff of which I am made; my own, but by definition inaccessible to me and beyond my control, coming from the time before I existed and could know.

Given this parallel, I take heart from Butler's conclusion, which is that even as it fails, and to some extent *because* it fails, the attempt to give an account can be performatively ethical. In the best case, something about our inarticulateness might perform, better than we can describe it, the predicament that we are in and the impact it has had upon us, precisely because our inability to give a full account bears witness to our being relational and beholden to the other (20). In this way, the attempt to give an account reconstitutes us into an openness to the other in the present, in which ethical relations might emerge as we rewrite, or retell, who we might be. The attempt to give an account in the face of another becomes a scene of ethical address, in which relations with the other might be reconfigured.

Perhaps most importantly, we must recognise that ethics requires us to risk ourselves precisely at moments of unknowingness.... To be undone by another is a primary necessity, an anguish, to be sure, but also a chance – to be addressed, claimed, bound to what is not me, but also to be moved, to be prompted to act, to address myself elsewhere, and so to vacate the self-sufficient “I” as a kind of possession.’ (136)

Can *Unintelligible* become such an account? At present, it is one-sided, an account offered in the hope of finding a witness, so I cannot say. But for the purposes of this exegesis, the important conclusion is that there is a sense in which the inevitable opacities and omissions of postmemory can be read as one of its messages. This might be said to be the structure of postmemory – the state of being implicated in something that is part of who you are and at the same time inaccessible to direct experience and therefore unreportable except indirectly, perhaps symptomatically. And this means that a text of postmemory can only be fully accurate by indicating that opacity at its heart. This limit to knowing, indeed, can be ethical, in that it prevents the reader from feeling that s/he has penetrated the other’s subjectivity, or encompassed it. There will always be something ‘other’ and unknowable about what creates atrocity, and recognising this is crucial in preventing easy answers. Perhaps as Eaglestone says, the best thing that representations of the Holocaust can do is to keep raising questions, rather than answering them.

... if breaking taboos around Holocaust representation is part of a process of “working through” cultural memories of the Holocaust – a process that requires us to consider who we are, what our place in the world is, and also how we are implicated in the violence that our society inflicts on others – then, following Bernstein, this process must always be wary of its own endpoint. By continuing to raise such questions and probing these more “existential” types of truth in light of the Holocaust, transgressive works of fiction can at least help to ensure that we do not arrive at the kind of dangerous “final resting place’ where the objective truths of mass killing no longer matter.’ (195-6).

This, then, is not quite a conclusion. But I will finish by returning to the quote from Orhan Pamuk which introduced this exegesis: ‘The difficult thing is to become your dream book’s implied author’ (10). *Unintelligible* is a work which bears witness to the way in which identity is sometimes not a possession, or a way of becoming more whole, but rather something which precedes us, comes from outside ourselves, and ultimately *undoes* us, in that even as we attempt to explain who we are and where we have come from, we find that these things are foreign to us, have never been under our

control, and that we do not know what they, and by extension ourselves, actually mean. *Unintelligible* becomes a kind of anti-autobiography, in which by the end the narrator/author is actually less sure of who she is than she was when she began. I have written in order to claim a history and an identity, in an attempt to claim responsibility, but inevitably, responsibility keeps getting away from me. The best that I can hope for is that, paradoxically, the failure to adequately represent, *in its failure*, enacts something of the impossible implication to which I am trying to bear witness: not that I own the history of perpetration, but that in some way it owns me, and the more that I encounter this foreignness within, the more I find myself implicated. This work is therefore not so much an attempt to claim responsibility, as an attempt to speak from the place of finding oneself already claimed by it. No matter how the family has tried to ignore it, it turns out to be there at the heart of things. But in the face of such incalculable responsibility, there is no guarantee that this writing will help to absolve, heal, or make reparation. Perhaps these are things that writing by itself cannot do. Or perhaps it simply cannot ever adequately be done, and the losses must remain. As Ann Murphy writes, summarising Levinas, ‘The problem is not that we cannot be responsible for history, but that we cannot be responsible enough’ (para. 24).

Notes to Part Two

1. Janna Thompson’s approach is based on liberal moral philosophy rather than the poststructuralist approaches that inspire my understanding of responsibility. Nonetheless her conclusion that historical injustice is best understood not only as injury to property or to equity in the present, but diachronically as injury to transgenerational relationships (149), is relevant in its emphasis on relationality and its consideration of the way family relationships have relevance to wider historical responsibility.
2. See for example Schwab’s description of Philippe Grimbert’s childhood construction of an imaginary brother who mirrored an actual half-brother whose existence and death in Auschwitz prior to Philippe’s birth his parents had tried to keep secret (126-31).
3. It is beyond the scope of this exegesis to engage in discussions of the definition of trauma or the dominance of ‘trauma studies’ in contemporary discourse (for

such a discussion see Leys' *Trauma: A Genealogy*). Certainly this concept is not the only one through which to understand experiences and stories of violence, oppression or persecution and it should be noted that psychoanalysis itself is a particular, Western approach to these questions (Schaffer and Smith 22).

Nonetheless it is the dominant approach in the context of the Holocaust, and clearly many writers in this context have found it useful, including myself. I do not think, however, that any particular definition of trauma is required for the argument I make here.

4. Speaking from the post-generation on the perpetrator side, I would also add to Hoffman's formulation the insight that for this side, postmemory also involves not only gaps or silences in memory, perhaps brought about by trauma, but more deliberate structures of secrecy or denial. For those on the perpetrator side there must be a struggle not only with guilt, but with negotiating a family with a great deal invested in not seeing or speaking the truth. Schwab notes this in her discussion of Germany after the war, writing, 'The very fact that children could claim a voice of their own became threatening to many parents' (74). I was an extremely quiet child, and even now I often find myself reproducing the habit of never asking personal questions, in fear of touching on a secret that might hurt the other person. So I relate to Schwab's comment about her own childhood among parents who deliberately discouraged her from speaking her knowledge: 'I grew used to thinking of myself as "the girl without words."' (76).
5. I have given references for the historical works and memoirs not mentioned here in the "Acknowledgements and Sources" chapter of *Unintelligible*.
6. In Hungarian an 'i' suffixed to a surname means 'of' and was a signifier of landed gentry, in the same way as the German 'von' and the French 'de'. 'Tolnai' translated from Hungarian to German would thus become 'von Tolna'.
7. The use of middle voice goes against some respected theorisations of the ethics of portraying perpetrators and collaborators. Dominick LaCapra has argued explicitly that the use of middle voice is questionable for representations of perpetrators, as it encourages too much identification (198). I was a bit disturbed to find that I had gone against this caution. However, I have felt that this is necessary for the kind of text that *Unintelligible* is. What LaCapra wants is moral clarity: for perpetrators and collaborators to be kept at arm's length as potentially dangerous and disturbing to our moral categories. But the

problematic with which *Unintelligible* deals is precisely the state of being at less than arm's length – of being intimate and familiar with collaboration, albeit without knowing it as such. And not only this, but it has been my assumption that this state is not irrelevant to wider debates around the Holocaust. It is one thing to want moral clarity, but beyond the circles of scholarly Holocaust debate, it is not clear that such clarity has been achieved. While the Germans have famously done much to address their history, in other countries, including Australia, there has been little reckoning (Balint 284). It is a worldwide pastime to point fingers at the Nazis as the embodiment of evil, but there is often a determined avoidance and a polite silence about where those Nazis went afterwards and whom they lived amongst as friends, family and neighbours. LaCapra wants the divisions kept clear between victims and perpetrators, and he wants collaborators kept at arm's length as potentially dangerous and disturbing to our moral categories. But the world is having some trouble doing this.

8. For a longer exploration of how Butler's theory can be applied in the context of second-generation Holocaust perpetration, see Szörényi "Giving An Account of Myself."

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