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WHAT’S IN A FRAME?: PHOTOGRAPHY, MEMORY, AND HISTORY IN CONTEMPORARY GERMAN LITERATURE

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Abstract

During the past two decades, a vast body of German literature has appeared that is interested not only in the Holocaust but also in the way Germans have dealt with the legacy of National Socialism over the last sixty years. Especially since the fall of the Berlin Wall and the German reunification, a number of literary works have appeared that use photographs to approach this limit-event and its remembrance in German national and private discourses. At the same time, the scholarly attention given to questions of memory and its representation has also sharply increased over the last few decades. Such debates have brought forth a number of demands in order for Holocaust literature to become productive for remembrance as well as for the creation of the present and the future. The following study investigates works by Monika Maron, W. G. Sebald, and Irina Liebmann. Of particular interest is the question of how these authors have integrated photographs within their texts in order to address and overcome the problems of Holocaust representation: the generational distance, absences and silences as well as the institutionalization and instrumentalization of memory. The first chapter lays out the theoretical framework that informs the discussion of the most vital concepts treated in this study: fact and fiction, history and memory, photography and text. The subsequent three chapters investigate the respective works written by the three authors: Monika Maron’s *Pawels Briefe* (1999), W. G. Sebald’s *Die Ausgewanderten* (1992) and *Austerlitz* (2001), and Irina Liebmann’s *Stille Mitte von Berlin* (2002). I maintain that the complex and paradoxical nature of photography, most significantly its simultaneous claim to truth and to deception, renders it a particularly fruitful means to negotiate questions of factuality and fiction as well as memory and history. It allows these authors
to engage the reader in a problematization of the concept of truth as well as the
constructedness of all forms of representation.
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Interview with Irina Liebmann
Introduction

The recent surge of German literature interested not only in the Holocaust but also in the way Germans have dealt with the legacy of National Socialism over the last sixty years has received much critical and scholarly attention. Especially since the fall of the Berlin Wall and the German reunification, a number of literary works have appeared that deal with this limit-event¹ and its remembrance in German national and private discourses.

One phenomenon, however, has not received substantial scholarly consideration: a significant number of these works offer new and complex approaches not only through their narratives, but also through an additional level of reading. Several of these works, such as Marcel Beyer’s *Spione* (2002), Stephan Wackwitz’ *Ein unsichtbares Land* (2005) as well as the four works discussed in this study, include photographs and reproductions of other documents such as diaries, letters and postcards. While these “stranded objects” (Eric Santner) are often a marginal part of the discussion or have become the topic of individual articles, no major study has linked the inclusion of photographs to the self-reflexive memory projects that German literature has brought forth during the years before and shortly after the turn of the millennium.

While German fiction has seen the inclusion of photographs before,² it has never occurred with such frequency, never in such a complex way that not only cashes in on the medium’s referentiality but also questions its ability to authenticate. It is no coincidence

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¹ In *Probing the Limits of Representation* Saul Friedländer describes the Holocaust as a “limit-event” which lies outside the limits of our comprehension and thus forces us to find new ways of representing it.

² Especially during the seventies, it was quite popular to reprint photographs within literary texts. See for example Thomas Brasch’s *Kargo* (1977), Jürgen Becker’s *Eine Zeit ohne Wörter* (1971), and Peter Handke’s *Als das Wünschen noch geholfen hat* (1974).
that such a twofold approach emerges at a time when dealing with the past has become
the focus of public and scholarly attention. Especially the ceremonies commemorating
the fifty-year-anniversary of the end of the Nazi regime and World War II in the mid-
nineties have fueled criticism of the institutionalization of Holocaust memory. Yet, at a
time when the victims, perpetrators and witnesses of Nazi crimes become fewer and
fewer, a renewed interest in preserving the memories of the victims of the Holocaust as
well as of the crimes committed by the perpetrators surfaces. It is no longer the first-
generation writers, that is, survivors or witnesses of the Jewish genocide, who put to
paper such accounts. Instead, second- and third-generation authors look back on a time
they did not consciously experience themselves, but to which they have access only
through the historical or memory accounts of others.

Born in the final years of World War II, Monika Maron, Winfried Georg
Maximilian Sebald, and Irina Liebmann all belong to this second generation of authors.
Their parents experienced the effects of the Nazi persecution and the war to a greater or
lesser degree through the loss of loved ones, through exile or even through the total
destruction of their living space by way of the Allied bombings. All three authors grew
up in post-war Germany, where the effects of this catastrophe were much felt, but little
talked about. Silence permeates their childhood experiences and finds its way into their
narratives in forms of gaps and voids. Consequently this second-generation perspective
shapes their works in important ways: Maron’s *Pawels Briefe* (1999), Sebald’s *Die
Ausgewanderten* (1992) and *Austerlitz* (2001), and Irina Liebmann’s *Stille Mitte von
Berlin* (2002) are characterized by these silences and by a historical and generational
distance to their subjects. This study is interested in how these authors attempt and
manage to overcome the afore-mentioned distance and silences: How do they write in the face of silence and how do they approach and appropriate a history that they have not personally experienced? How do they transform this part of history into a personalized narrative that defies the institutionalization and instrumentalization of memory, of which all three are so weary?

The three authors chosen for this study share yet another experience. Maron, Sebald and Liebmann all have distanced themselves from their homelands and exchanged it for another. Maron and Liebmann were dissatisfied with the GDR regime they had grown up in and emigrated to the West just a year before the fall of the Wall. Sebald left Germany for Great Britain in the late nineteen sixties. This experience of emigration grants these authors a unique perspective: They share a critical and somewhat distant stance to Germany and its public (memory) discourses. All four works, then, also represent personalized alternatives to public commemoration ceremonies of a country (East and West Germany respectively) with which these authors have (had) conflicted relationships.

As a result, it is not surprising that these books are in part autobiographical. We know that inquiries into the past are equally informed by present needs and desires. The kinds of breaks and turning points that characterize the Germany of the second half of the twentieth century are also reflected in the personal lives of Maron, Sebald and Liebmann: the post-war years, the Cold War, the fall of the Wall and the “Aufbruchsstimmung,” as the time after German reunification in 1990 is often called. Especially for Maron and Liebmann, whose homeland no longer exists in the form in which they had left it, the
search for their private and public past is also a search for their present selves, for their post-GDR identity.

By tying their narratives closely to their own life stories, Maron, Sebald, and Liebmann are able to tell the history of the twentieth century as one marked by breaks and gaps. Due to their own fragmented nature, photographs can dramatize such fragmentation as well as the attempts to overcome the discontinuities. At the same time, because photographs are able to withstand the total integration of their visual and spatial content into a temporal narrative, this medium allows the authors to draw attention to the impossibility of establishing continuous narratives that will make sense and provide closure to this troubling and haunting past. In this context, photography’s parallels to the characteristics of trauma are especially useful to approach an event that has traumatized so many people and, as some would argue, a whole nation.3

The most obvious and most alluring quality of photography that renders it so useful within texts that negotiate questions of memory and history is its simultaneous claim to truth and to deception. The most important question evoked in debates on the representation of the Holocaust is how factual or fictional such literature ought to be. This discussion is closely linked to the debate on memory and history. While the majority of scholars and writers agree that close historical linkages to the events described must be established, they also point out that a purely historical approach will not yield a productive engagement with the past. Likewise, all three authors seek to ground their narratives in facts they have researched in reference to their visual and other documents. Yet, the literary genre offers them a more complex dialogue with their artifacts. Very

3 Not all scholars agree, however, that trauma theory, which was established with regard to individual experiences, is a fruitful way of approaching the “psychological state” of a nation.
importantly, Maron, Sebald, and Liebmann can engage the reader in a discussion of the usefulness of facts, of means of verification, of the search for the truth. Through their use and discussion of photography within their texts, they are able to problematize the concept of truth and the separation of fact and fiction as well as point to the constructedness of all forms of representation, visual or written.

In chapter one I offer an overview of the theoretical considerations on which this study is based. I outline the different approaches to a representation of the Holocaust, ranging from a purely fact-driven, historical to a more imaginative approach. I not only highlight the concerns with the literary medium but also the reasons why scholars believe that a literature based on individual accounts might be very productive for a personal engagement with the past. Above all, I shed light on photography’s paradoxical and ambivalent characteristics that make it useful for a complex, critical, self-reflexive and ongoing remembrance.

In chapter two I will turn to Monika Maron’s *Pawels Briefe*. I will propose that the purpose for writing her family’s history is twofold: Firstly, she aims to preserve the memory of her Jewish grandfather, Pawel. I base my analysis on the demands of John K Roth, who is representative for many other scholars who have argued for similar requirements. I maintain that Maron has composed a very self-reflexive and critical work that takes into account the problems associated with inquiries into the past and that takes the mandate of Holocaust scholars very seriously. Secondly, *Pawels Briefe* also serves as a platform for her explorations of self. Maron’s quest for memory goes hand in hand with the search for her own history, which is marked by many breaks and turning points. This
chapter examines how the author negotiates the past, the photographs and other
documents in order to define her present self.

Chapter three will shed light on W. G. Sebald’s approach to the representation of
the Nazi genocide in his books *Die Ausgewanderten* and *Austerlitz*. I argue that Sebald
has sought to find a way to defy conventional and institutional forms of memory and
forgetting and to keep the remembrance of those who suffered from the Holocaust alive
in the minds of the reader. To this end, Sebald creates a complex web of narrative
structures, photographs and extra-textual commentaries that requires a slow and
painstaking working through that defies a mindless and superficial reception. *Die
Ausgewanderten* and *Austerlitz* are characterized by a “poetics of uncertainty,” which
intentionally unsettles the reader, and makes him or her insecure about questions of fact
and fiction in Sebald’s works. Above all, his playful treatment of the paradoxical nature
of photography results in a self-reflexive and ever-questioning text that continuously
draws attention to its mediated nature. Sebald also draws explicit parallels between
photography and trauma which allows him to address the severity of the horror and the
damage of the psychological state of his characters indirectly, but ever so powerfully.

Finally, the fourth chapter concerns itself with Liebmann’s approach to the
representation of the Jewish genocide in Berlin. We will learn that *Stille Mitte von Berlin*
is far less experimental than Sebald’s work. This book functions as a platform for
Liebmann’s desire to find and represent truth, and the ultimate understanding that it is an
impossible endeavor. Liebmann problematizes most explicitly the different paths into the
past: memory, history, and the archive (with photography most closely associated with
the latter). She describes her initial enthusiasm for each as well as her subsequent
frustration as she discovers that each is marked by gaps and is shaped by institutional and personal selection processes. Like Maron and Sebald, Liebmann also highlights the constructedness of all these discourses and proposes that a combination of different approaches and media might ultimately be the best way to deal with the past.

In this study I argue that, based on its paradoxical and complex qualities, photography allows Maron, Sebald, and Liebmann to problematize the desire to find historical truth as well as the simultaneous awareness that it is impossible to find truth. Photographs enable these authors to personalize their writing, to unsettle the reader and ultimately to invite an ongoing and personal engagement by the reader. The following chapters will illuminate the individual approaches and outcomes.
1. What’s in a Frame?: Photography, Memory, and History

The goal of this chapter is not to give an exhaustive overview of critical literature that has been published on questions of memory, history, photography and text. With the explosion of scholarship on how past events are recalled this has become an almost impossible endeavor, one that would certainly go beyond the scope of this work. Instead this chapter will trace some key discussions related to the most vital concepts treated in this study: fact and fiction, history and memory, photography and text. I will demonstrate that the photographic medium is linked to these discussions in various ways and that the use of photography in fiction might offer a productive way to address key issues when representing twentieth century German history.

With the explosion of interest in the Holocaust in many fields such as history, sociology, psychology, and literature, the attention given to questions of memory and its representation has also sharply increased over the last few decades. Especially with the gradual loss of the generation who still shares first-hand experience with the Nazi era, renewed interest in the events and personal experiences of this time period but also in questions of mediation has developed in recent years. There are, in essence, two opposing views (with many advocates somewhere in the middle): On one end of the spectrum we have those who advocate a “historical approach.” They believe that one can only talk about the Holocaust in terms of real historical events, in terms of numbers and other facts. They insist on the authenticity of any material referred to. They also warn that a
fictional treatment of this limit-event would distort the facts, would dehistoricize it and, therefore, play down its extraordinary and horrific nature.4

Others, on the other end of the spectrum, however, have argued that the historical approach leads to a detached treatment of the Holocaust, to a ritualization and institutionalization of its remembrance because it lacks a personal engagement with it: “Pflichtgemäßes Erinnern lähmt die Memorialkultur, hindert sie daran, im Kultur- und Lebenszusammenhang wirksam zu sein” (Scherpe, Stadt.Krieg.Fremde 129). According to those numerous scholars an engagement with the past can only be productive if it leads to a personal implication (see LaCapra, “Holocaust Testimonies” 102-03) and to the ability to imagine and participate in a different future (Huyssen, Present Pasts 2-19). It has been argued many times that fiction can offer such personal engagement and implication. In other words, historical facts must gain a personal component, that is, become relevant to us today. In essence, then, these two groups can be categorized as follows: those who insist on factuality and those who favor a fictional approach. The fact-fiction dichotomy, therefore, lies at the heart of the debate on Holocaust representation.

At the heart of the debate over the adequate approach is the discussion about factuality. Both the advocates on the historical as well as the literary approaches insist that, if dealing with the horrific past of the Holocaust is to bring forth alternate versions of the future, it must be grounded in actual facts. Thus, the authenticity of the material is of utmost importance, even for those who find the fictional genre acceptable or even desirable. This is why the historical archive is so often evoked in this context. While it is common knowledge that memory is fallible, unreliable and constructed, to many the archive is still the ultimate source of true facts: “No society has ever produced archives as

4 See for example Berel Lang in “The Representation of Limits.”
deliberately as our own, not only in volume, not only by new technical means of reproduction and preservation, but also by its superstitious esteem, by its veneration of the trace” (Nora 290). Some scholars have, however, problematized the contents and selection processes of the archive (see Blouin). They have shown that it is subject to institutional or national practices, just as public memory discourses are.
The abundance of scholarship on questions of memory and history, fact, truth, authenticity, as well as fiction has led to an acute awareness of the constructedness of all forms of accessing and representing the past. The need to establish close historical linkages goes hand in hand with the consciousness that one can never really know or tell the truth. The mediated character of any representation of the past comes into focus, just as the content of the representation itself. The discussion in this chapter will shed light on those qualities of the photographic medium that render it particularly productive in negotiating the issues described.

The brief outline of current debates shows that there is much conflict and little agreement on the representation of the past. In the following I will demonstrate that photography, too, presents a site for conflict and ambiguities that are strikingly similar to the ones discussed above. First, we shall turn our focus to the discussion about a historical representation, based on facts and authentic material. Photographs, of course, carry precisely such an aura of authenticity often called for. Emile Zola once said: “You cannot claim to have really seen something until you have photographed it” (cit. in Sontag 87). This seems to be the ultimate statement of referentiality: one has not seen until one has photographed simultaneously means that one must have seen what is photographed and what has been seen must inevitably have been there to be seen:
“Photographs show people being so irrefutably there […]” (Sontag 70; emphasis Sontag).

By referring to the referential quality ascribed to photographic prints, unlike any other media, photography does, in fact, depend on the presence of a referent and a subject, as well as on the existence of light from an external source:

[a] photograph is not a rendering, an imitation or an interpretation of its subject, but actually a trace of it. No painting or drawing, however naturalist, belongs to its subject in the way a photograph does. (Berger, About Looking 54; emphasis Berger)

It thus seems to offer the kind of grounding in a past reality that the historical approach is calling for.

Because the camera is a mechanical device, however, we often forget that it is really operated by a person, the photographer, who makes a number of choices to optimize (from his perspective) the results. Thus one would have to agree with German writer Heinrich Böll that “[t]he great deceit of photography lies in the prior deceit of 'objective reality.' It is not the lens which makes the decisions, but the photographer’s eye” (cit. in Price 131). The power of photography, especially within the context of current debates of Holocaust representation, is rooted precisely in this myth of realism: that the print is perceived as a precise miniature copy of “reality as it exists,” not as the photographer saw it or wanted it to be seen. In that, it mirrors the debate about the

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5 Sontag claims that “as people quickly discovered that nobody takes the same picture of the same thing, the supposition that cameras furnish an impersonal object image yielded to the fact that photographs are evidence not only of what’s there but of what an individual sees, not just a record but an evaluation of the world” (88). Although this statement is certainly true for the professional photographer and anyone who has seriously considered this medium’s qualities, I would argue that the majority of people who take and consume pictures in everyday life do so without this realization in mind.

6 Virtually any critic who has written on photography has commented on this powerful illusion of realistic representation that is constitutive of photography. See for example Susan Sontag (4, 22, 74), Mary Price
representation of historical truth: the desire to search for and represent truth while, at the same time, acknowledging that it is impossible to do so.

Particularly because the processes of developing and printing have been separated and removed from us (most amateur photographers only take their completed roll of film to the photo lab and pick up the prints – they never actually become involved in any darkroom activities), we often tend to ignore the fact that “taking the picture” does not automatically yield the print (except for Polaroid cameras, which also develop and print almost instantaneously). Only rarely do we become aware that even the finished product does not yield the same color scheme or proportions that we perceived when we took the snap.7

The naïve viewer is unaware of the many choices made in the process of creating the image. Naturally, these depend greatly on the nature of the photograph and the purpose of its use. A studio portrait, for example, or any work by a professional for that matter, will generally be manipulated to a greater degree than a spontaneous amateur snapshot. These manipulations range from considerations of setting such as studio backgrounds (landscape backgrounds were often used to simulate outside photography, which very long exposure times made nearly impossible until well into the twentieth century) over clothes and props (which were often available in the studio and allowed for illusions of social status and wealth) to standardized poses to stage affection or character

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7 Color film, for example, will always privilege a certain color: red or blue in the United States, brown in Europe, yellow in Asia. Different lenses and angles provide certain distortions that the eye does not offer.
qualities. Hence, even before the actual exposure, a complete fantasy could be created and later disseminated to friends and family.

The availability of such disguises to anyone who could afford to have his picture taken by a professional made the photographer’s studio a chamber of fictions, offering clients spatial illusions where they could escape from the evidence of their material successes and failures: the kind of evidence that would inevitably be found in their own living rooms, parlors, and housefronts. (J. Hirsch 70)

Other decisions that influence the final result are more directly related to the photographic process: angle of vision, proximity, framing, lighting, the shutter-speed, focal depth, type of lens, filter, the choice of film (including the color) and printing paper as well as many other factors can cause considerable differences in how the picture will “turn out.” In this sense, a photograph can also be read as “a record not of reality but of a set of judgements made in front of reality” (Scott 33).

Even so-called candid photography (Scott 3) is rarely, in fact, “candid.” Subjects often smile and pose. Moments are chosen when subjects look “good” or “right,” moments that symbolize happiness, success, community belonging or whatever other story the amateur wants to tell about him- or herself or others. Rarely do we produce, keep and display prints of someone “just” working, preparing a meal, watching TV or engaging in some other ordinary daily activity. Even here, then, the result depends on what the person pressing the shutter release sees and finds worthwhile recording.

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8 In *Family Photographs* Julia Hirsch describes how backgrounds, poses, props, and other means were used in the nineteenth and early twentieth century to create illusions of location, affection, social status, and character (see especially pp. 68-79).

9 This is true despite the fact that the availability, low cost and convenience of relatively good snapshot cameras, film development and printing has caused the production of images showing “nothing special” to infiltrate our practice. However, those – although perhaps coming closest to a “candid” representation of
However, we are often oblivious to the many manipulations that do occur during the act of photographing and in the photo lab and, much like Stanley Cavell argued, we do take a photographic image to be an objective record of reality: “a photograph emphasizes the existence of its subject, recording it, hence it is that it may be called a transcription” (3-4). Understanding an image as a transcription or as a record means to grant it an aura of authenticity. And it is precisely photography’s perceived innate power to attest, bear witness and reveal which enables “[a]ll photographic products [to] cash in on authenticated origins in the indexical” (Scott 42-43). And though this may be problematized even within the texts, neither the narrator nor the reader can escape photography’s inherent referentiality: “it seems to me that the conclusive refutations of copy or illusion theories somehow fail to be convincing; we are left with a strong feeling, after all the refutations are advanced, that there must, nonetheless, be a natural or privileged or unreasoned relation between realistic picture and world” (Snyder 222). Photography, then, seems to be the medium that brings together the current debates traced earlier: it continues to be viewed as a form of representation that does have a privileged relationship to past reality, despite the awareness of all the manipulations and selection processes that shape the becoming of the photographic image. It becomes a symbol of the constructedness of all representation, even the most referential one. Such problematization offers one opportunity for the kind of personal engagement by the reader, for s/he must face photography’s problematic relationship to truth. If the authenticity of the image and its “true” relation to the reality of the text are called into

what the photographer sees – are usually also the ones that fall through the net and do not make it into frames or albums and are eventually discarded, inaccessible to future generations.

10 Scott describes how the same referential quality empowers even obvious manipulations, such as photomontage (see Scott 43).
question, the reader must engage with the ambiguities of an apparently reliable referentiality, must invest his or her energies in order to come to terms with the discomfort of not being able to establish a truth, not even through a seemingly “truly documentary” medium, such as photography. I would argue that this direct, indexical connection between the photograph and the referent, and ultimately the consequential claim to authenticity as well as its illusions are the most powerful of all of photography’s characteristics which all three authors have put to use in their work.

The constructed qualities of photography multiply when it enters into a relationship with the text. Tracing the semantic theory of C. S. Peirce we can say that photographs are able to refer to the represented iconically, indexically and/or symbolically.\(^\text{11}\) Which significance is favored depends ultimately on the context is used in: “A photograph changes its meaning according to the context in which it is seen” (Sontag 106). That is to say that photographs themselves offer no hint about how they are to be read, they contain no inherent self-evident and fixed meaning (Price 1; Hall 152). An image of a desolate apartment block from the seventies will hold a different meaning to me – who associates fond memories of growing up in and around this building and the knowledge that the place of my childhood and teenage years no longer exists – than, say, an architecture student, who encounters this image in a textbook as an illustration of poor

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\(^{11}\) The American semiotician C. S. Peirce developed the sign-system in his *Collected Papers* (8 vols), which were published between 1931 and 1958. For useful discussions of Peirce, see Katja Silvermann 14-25 and Clive Scott 26-45. Peirce understands visual signification in terms of icon, index and symbol. The icon refers by means of resemblance and imitation. It need not be present to what it represents – it can be a purely imaginative and imagery reconstruction: “A looks like B.” The index represents a relationship of physical, sequential or spatial contiguity, of cause and effect, like a fingerprint. Here, the camera must be present to its subject. The connection between the “symbol” and its referent, on the other hand, is arbitrary. It draws on shared cultural conventions of the photographer, the person presenting the picture and the viewer in order to understand the symbolic meaning of the image, for example, a graveyard as a symbol of death.
architectural planning in the East Germany of the seventies. We must note, however, that while it is the use of a photograph that determines its meaning, it cannot be wholly arbitrary. The meaning ascribed to a photograph is limited by its visible content (Price 11). Thus, there is some substance to the image, a context that is linked to past events, people and/or places. In the following chapters we will see that Maron, Sebald, and Liebmann cash in on both, this irrefutable “there-ness,” the need for a meaningful context, as well as the illusions and conflicts that the medium itself and its narration present. How they have done so and what messages they each have created shall be explored in each chapter individually.

What becomes apparent is that photographs seem to foster an inherent demand for narration, to which all three authors have succumbed. Precisely because they carry no meaning within themselves and because of their vulnerability to manipulation, these images call for a context in which they can become meaningful.12 While the story is to “tell” what the photograph cannot, it – as all narrative – comes to us as interpretation. Even in its shortest form, such as a caption, language can never simply “speak the truth” about an image: “even an entirely accurate caption is only interpretation, necessarily a limited one of the photograph to which it is attached” (Sontag 109). As such, the use of words seems to defy the very purpose of using photography in the first place: to “speak the truth” through irrefutable “documentary evidence.” In addition to that, by favoring one meaning, one interpretation, one truth over many possible others, language limits the semantic wealth of an image. As Scott maintains: “Photographs are semantically richer

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12 In my mind, Mary Price’s claim that “description is necessary to complete the meaning of a photograph” (5) would have to be modified: a description will never actually “complete the meaning” of an image. As I maintain in my discussion of photography and text, it can only confer some meaning, merely a part of many possible readings.
the more ‘speechless’ they are” (11). This dilemma, then, runs parallel to the debate of Holocaust representation. While it is necessary to write about the Holocaust, doing so will inevitably interpret and distort. It will narrate and therefore appropriate as well as imagine the unspeakable and unthinkable. Likewise, to narrate photographs is to put into words what lies outside of restrictive linguistic representation, is to limit their semantic potential, to appropriate and to interpret.

Of the three types of photography generally classified13 – artistic, documentary and family – one kind, in particular, reveals how images themselves are fabricated and how they can then be used to construct narratives in order to achieve an end. Family photography comprises all those pictures taken of one’s own family or individual members in order to record the presence at particular events or simply to produce evidence of the family’s existence and endurance. It is in the arena of family use that photography took momentum as a mass medium. As the technology of cameras advanced and offered portability and easy use, virtually every household in the Western hemisphere was able to possess one. Even lower-class families, who could previously not afford professional photography, had now access to this device, enabling them to record and construct their own histories, offering glimpses into the lives of a greater variety of people. This common use of photography runs parallel to the explosion of memoirs written by ordinary people, as Pierre Nora points out: “But who, today, does not feel compelled to record his feelings, to write his memoirs” (Les Lieux de Mémoire, 14).

Most family snaps are shaped by the photographic conventions and codes of posing, often adapted from traditional portrait painting. In many ways, they depend on a

13 The categories, of course, overlap allowing one frame to belong to two or all three at the same time. Artistic considerations will not be a focus of this study.
shared cultural understanding of what “family” means and how it should be visually represented. Generally, the nuclear family is privileged as it offers powerful ties and a structured framework to our sense of community and identity (Holland 1). Especially, when families break apart (whether through internal differences or external forces, such as war, exile, etc.) family photographs help to sustain a sense of continuity:

Photography becomes a rite of family life just when, in the industrializing countries of Europe and America, the very institution of the family starts undergoing radical surgery. As that claustrophobic unit, the nuclear family, was being carved out of a much larger family aggregate, photography came along to memorialize, to restate symbolically, the imperiled continuity and vanishing extendedness of family life. Those ghostly traces, photographs, supply the token presence of the dispersed relatives. (Sontag 8-9)

Striking enough, it is precisely these family snaps that draw on ancient themes of unity and cohesiveness and promote nothing more than a myth: “that the family, as an institution, can overwhelm and control our most confused impulses by promoting the triumph of community over self, of history over moment, of the “haven in a heartless world’” (J. Hirsch 32).

Through the moments of taking, the development processes as well as their subsequent keeping and displaying family photographs, then, epitomize the idea of

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14 Marianne Hirsch casts doubt on her own interpretations of family snaps of the Goldsteins, a white middle-class family, who had hosted a seven-year-old African American child from Brooklyn for a summer in the mid-seventies. Hirsch becomes aware that a certain awkwardness she notices in the boy’s facial expressions and postures may not at all justify her suspicions that he may not have had the good time he and the family later claim in an article in the New York Times. Instead, the fact that he seems to not quite fit into these joyous snaps may simply mean that the boy was unfamiliar with photographic conventions of posing (see M. Hirsch 41-47).

15 Within the context of the Holocaust, this shocking revelation takes a traumatic turn: while the photographs reassures the myth of familial unity and stability, it also points to the powerlessness of the family as institution to act in any way as a protection (M. Hirsch 36).
constructedness. This becomes especially clear when we turn our attention to the most common practice of how photographs are traditionally kept and displayed, the album. An album constitutes a book that can be read; its contents are ordered, unfold in time, have no loose ends, and a certain significance is guaranteed simply by the picture’s inclusion. Because this book requires decisions about the selection, layout and sequence, it automatically seeks to optimize its contents, presumably from the maker’s point of view. In other words, there are principles guiding the selection and arrangement of frames. The album establishes some kind of narrative. Captions are usually given to provide the framework for its meaning, to limit the wealth of information offered in the print in favor of the preferred meaning(s). We can see, therefore, that family photography presents – on a very private level – the same issues that are currently discussed within the realm of Holocaust remembrance. Above all, it stands for a struggle with the promises of authenticity and the simultaneous awareness of photography’s deceits. As a result, it points to the crisis of representation, to the constructedness, not only of the written but also of the referential visual medium. At the same time, it lays bare the continued need for representation, for a grounding in the real and the creation of narratives that reflect our present and oftentimes very personal desires, conflicts and concerns.

However, family photography is by no means merely a private medium. On one hand, it is determined by the meanings we bring to it, which in turn are shaped by social, historical or cultural conventions: “the personal histories [family photographs] record belong to narratives on a wider scale, those public narratives of community, religion, ethnicity and nation which make private identity possible” (Holland 3). On the other

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16 This practice may, in time, be replaced by a digital form of storage that may be guided by other principles, such as the dates of the taking etc. Nevertheless, I would argue that the traditional album will maintain its status as a guarantor of familial identity and continuity.
hand, as soon as we give other people access to these frames, for instance through the display of an album, a transition from private to public takes place: “The family album is, precisely, a form of publication, consecrating and enshrining family memory and family history, for the benefit of the larger community” (Scott 229). Family pictures, therefore, operate at a junction between personal memory and social history, between public myth and personal unconscious (Holland 13-14). By publishing their own family pictures as well as those of others, Maron and Sebald transfer them into the public realm, exposing them to the reader’s gaze. The following chapters will investigate how the photographic medium, family photography in particular (above all in the works by Sebald and Maron), is problematized within the text and what kind of narratives and meta-narratives the authors strive to establish. What role do these images play in the construction of these image-texts? What kind of messages do these public(ized) “albums” convey?

Photographs touch on a number of other issues and conflicts that also form an integral part of current scholarship on the representation of the Jewish genocide. The highly selective nature of this medium discussed earlier, for example, results in gaps. Absences are associated with the Holocaust in many important ways. On one hand, we are speaking of the void left by the extinction of an entire people who cannot narrate the memories of their lives themselves. On the other, especially within the context of literature, we are concerned with the absence of words that arises out of the notion that the Holocaust, as an unspeakable reality, defies conceptualization in language, let alone literary language.17 Photographs, then, can draw attention to these gaps as well as to the controversies about selection and linguistic representation, while being able to offer non-

17 See Saul Friedländer for a discussion of this notion in Probing the Limits of Representation, 5.
linguistic presences that may grant new ways of interacting with this past. This study is interested in the kind of interactions offered by Maron, Sebald, and Liebmann.

Thus, when speaking of photographic prints as a form of representation, one must consider the editorial authority exercised by those who take, keep and display photographs. Generally, – this is especially true for family and amateur photography – pictures that give evidence to failure, unhappy or even just mediocre, everyday moments are neither taken, preserved or shown. Most images are of people smiling, celebrating major events, rituals, relationships or achievements in their lives. Those that resist the personal (family) history we would like to construct are discarded based on social and family conventions, as well as on the quality of the print or the purpose of the display.

The negative and horrific only exists through its absence, creating gaps, which, upon the death of the participants, can never be filled. But it is not just the unwanted that does not find its way into the frames. In some way “[a]ll photographs are […] an expression of absence,” as the well-known photographer and essayist John Berger points out (Fortunate Man, 13). These absences may be persons or things that were kept outside the viewfinder at the instant of exposure or all those people, things and situations which were simply not recorded. A further absence is comprised by those photographs that were taken but not kept because of their perceived unacceptable or insignificant content. Hence, they fall victim to the selection processes described above. Photography’s ability not only to offer presences, but also to draw attention to the absences within or outside of frames, also makes it a particularly compelling link between past and present.

Due to their simultaneous claim to life and death, photographic images also seem suitable to inquire about an era in which millions of lives were brutally taken. To Susan
Sontag “[a]ll photographs are memento mori” (15; emphasis Sontag) and they compare to “death masks” (154). She explains that “[p]hotographs state the innocence the vulnerability of lives heading towards their own destruction, and this link between photography and death haunts all photographs of people” (70). It is precisely this relationship between photography and death that renders the use of this medium so powerful within the process of writing about lives that have violently and abruptly been put to an end. The very fact that they once existed but are no longer among the living as a consequence of a violent death is what haunts the viewer:

Nun geistert das Bild wie die Schloßfrau durch die Gegenwart. Nur an Orten, an denen eine schlimme Tat begangen worden ist, gehen Spukerscheinungen um. Die Photographie wird zum Gespenst, weil die Kostümpuppe gelebt hat. [...] Die schlimme Verbindung, die in der Photographie andauert, erweckt den Schauer.

(Kracauer 31-32; my emphasis)

The haunting is intensified – if not exclusively – by the possible identification with the perpetrator, consequently with a feeling of responsibility and guilt. This does not necessarily mean that the onlooker has indeed committed such “terrible deeds” as the photograph shows or reminds us of, but that s/he feels part of a group responsible for such actions. Even just the acknowledgement of his or her capability of engaging in equal atrocities can be disturbing to the viewer: “The images of documentary photography are images that seek to haunt us, barely suppressed memories of, and fantasies about, our own capacity for cruelty, misanthropy, prejudice, condescension, violation. And less obviously, less problematically, perhaps, that is what all photography is” (Scott 97). This is also a critical element of Holocaust literature: It has been stated earlier that most
proponents of the fictional genre emphasize the personal engagement as well as the moral transference that literature can elicit (see LaCapra, “Holocaust Testimonies” 102-03). Due to this close link between photography and death, images, then, may intensify this effect.

For the most part, however, haunting ghosts are not sought after. So why do we care to keep and display pictures in albums and on our living room walls? It is because when we see an image of a person who has passed away, unless we have a specific reason to do so (perhaps because a terrible deed has in fact been committed), we do not contemplate their death but rather their life: Who is this (although often we know that the person no longer *is*, we tend to speak of people in photographs in the present tense)? What is their relationship to us or to the place of display? How did they live? What are the circumstances that led to the existence of this picture? Photographs are generally taken, kept and shared not to remember death – although recognition of it usually coincides – but to confer importance to and remember lives, which is precisely what writing about the Holocaust sets out to do as well.

Clive Scott finds “plenty of evidence to suppose that people look upon their [and their family’s] photographs as evidence of their living, as the sources of their narrative” (235). When we share other people’s images, according to Julia Hirsch, “the living display the pictures of their dead and bring about their resurrection” (127). It is the onlooker’s personal investiture that grants this immortality: “The dead and the dying live forever in our family photographs as long as our eyes see them; and for all the material richness of our photographs – for all the clothes, rooms, cars, and pets we see in them – it is our glance that bestows the final gift of life” (J. Hirsch 131).
However, it is not enough to “glance.” We must accept the image’s invitation, even demand, for narration. To merely glance at the picture is to finalize mentally, to be an accomplice to the subjects’ ultimate death. To revisit their lives, that is to investigate, contemplate, and narrate means to let them “return from the dead,” as Sebald puts it in *Die Ausgewanderten* or to keep them alive, to rescue them from oblivion. Photographs, however, are vulnerable to their own “deaths.” The loss of pictures through destruction (willful or accidental) or the loss of the story because first-hand witnesses of the recorded events are no longer available will also put an irrefutable end to the subjects’ lives. By arranging frames and narratives in a book form, Liebmann, Maron, and Sebald have granted them longevity, perhaps even immortality, and a wider public. In ways which I shall explore in each chapter individually all three authors have been motivated by the attempt to rescue (personal) histories from oblivion.

The images arranged in such books, however, do not offer stories themselves. Photography arrests a specific moment in time, and “removes its appearance from the flow of appearances” (Berger, *About Looking* 54). The photograph becomes a fragment of history and denies interconnectedness. Through photographs, then, the world becomes a series of unrelated, freestanding particles. It is only the context they are woven into that may provide connections. Photographs, therefore, touch on another concept closely associated with the Holocaust. Many have commented on the broken and fragmented world after the Jewish genocide. On one hand, then, isolated photographs can reproduce and dramatize the discontinuities experienced by those who survived the persecution by the Nazis. On the other hand, photographs also hold the promise for a reconnection with the past. As mentioned earlier, we look at photographs out of the very desire for
continuity. This is true in the personal as much as in the public realm. According to Holland, because of today’s fragmentation and atomization of families, images are produced to “reassure us of its solidarity and cohesion” (2). Likewise, historical breaks, such as war, exile, collapsing of regimes and ideologies, cause a fragmentation in personal histories and lives, resulting in a stronger need for an erasure of discontinuities.\footnote{Scott sees fragmentation caused by World War II and consecutive privation of continuity as the prime motivation for the appearance and success of photo novels in the nineteen forties and nineteen fifties (185).} Marianne Hirsch – whose parents went into exile from the Bukowina to Rumania, where Hirsch was born, and then moved via Vienna to the United States when Hirsch was only nine – describes the “comforting continuity” that pictures offer to her (114). As she prepares a family album for her parents’ fiftieth anniversary, she realizes “how much their album is actually mine” and how she “stress[es] repetitions and continuities in [her] arrangement of these pictures” (189). The break she tries to overcome is the experience of exile during childhood and adolescence, “the intense upheaval of cultural displacement. In that experience, photographs [are] useful not because they could be fragmented or destroyed but because they allowed me to reassemble and reconnect – to find myself constant across tremendous geographical and cultural distances” (214).

Especially within the context of the Holocaust, pictures that have survived the intended total eradication of a number of peoples such as the Jews, the Roma, the Sinti, the gypsies stand for the survival of lives. They contest the history deliberately constructed by the Nazis, who destroyed all photographs of arriving inmates of concentration camps and employed camp photographs to document the “polar opposite of family life” as a realm of private existence, belonging, protection and resistance.
They provide evidence of a past that escaped destruction and offer connections to the present and future.

The incident described by Marianne Hirsch points to the extraordinary significance photographs have for people who have left their home – voluntarily or involuntarily. These images of persons and places belonging to the past offer a “comforting continuity” because, as Hirsch assembles them to reconstruct a lifetime in the past, they lead into and connect with the present. These photographs help Hirsch to find herself “constant” while the people and places around her change: “This album erases the ruptures of emigration and exile, of death and loss, of divorce, conflict and dislocation” (192). She does realize, however, that she is constructing her own past to stress continuity and repetition which – because it is lacking – she is longing for. This confirms Holland’s claim that “[d]reams of home and a need for belonging come up against the conflict and fragmentation of […] history” (1). This issue deserves special attention also within the confines of this study since all three authors have left their homes in Southern Germany or East Berlin as adults and have emigrated westward.

Especially to emigrants, whether in exile or not, photographs offer a means to assert endurance and continuity.19 Oftentimes, the dislocation goes hand in hand with the sacrifices of language, culture, and identity, which was true for the majority of exiles during the Third Reich. All three authors belong to a generation that has experienced several of such discontinuities and changes.20 Very importantly, Maron, Sebald, and Liebmann relate to the experience of exile in personal ways as each of them has decided

19 Already in the nineteenth century, emigrants had themselves photographed in front of their homesteads in order to produce evidence of their integrity and survival (J. Hirsch 21).
20 See Friederike Eigler’s study Gedächtnis und Geschichte in Generationenromanen seit der Wende (2005) for a description of the discontinuities that shape the writings of the current “Generationenromane” (10-11).
to leave his or her homeland for another. Whether and how this experience has shaped their memory-texts shall also be the subject of the following chapters.

The discussion in the beginning of the chapter has highlighted the growing awareness of the power structures that govern the writing of history. With the death of the generation that shares first-hand experience of the Nazi-period and the Holocaust, there has been a paradigm shift from a collective history supported by historically established “facts” to the collection of individualized histories. These are often based on personal records, such as letters, diaries, and photographs: “Letters and diaries also [in addition to the family photograph] record intensely personal experiences in the imagery and vocabulary of myth, of folklore, and even of art which we all absorb, often unaware, from the culture and society around us” (J. Hirsch 10). Photographs turn into very intimate artifacts, while, at the same time, providing a wealth of information about historical periods or major historical events such as the Third Reich.

Photographs in particular are attributed the capacity to personalize historical events, which are otherwise too massive to enter our deeper cognition and trigger an emotional response:

People cannot comprehend large numbers or great extremes. They cannot comprehend a thousand deaths, or routine atrocity, or the fact that there are situations […] in which life becomes suddenly so cheap that it is worth next to nothing […]. Those things are pushed to the remote borders of the mind, where perhaps they will be waffled into someone else’s territory. But they can contemplate one death, or one life. (Swift 102)
The photograph, then, is a powerful tool in the process of personalization, which Roger Fowler describes within the context of the news photograph as follows: “Presumably, its functions are to promote straightforward feelings of identification, empathy or disapproval to effect a metonymic simplification of complex historical and institutional processes […]” (15).

Because of the image’s availability for intense study, it offers immediacy of, and intimacy with, the subject, which a narrative by itself would have a difficult time providing. “The picture, with its display of eyes and hands, perhaps even bosoms, groins, and legs, seems to bring intimacy without any formal introduction” (J. Hirsch 6). At the same time, Julia Hirsch contends that this apparent closeness is nothing but superficial (6). It is – once again – the accompanying story that will give life to the image and engage the viewer/reader’s emotions.21

Family photography assumes particular importance as a vehicle for personal engagement. The conventionality of family photography allows a certain degree of personal identification. The majority of people in the western world have experienced being photographed and operating the camera themselves. Because we share these experiences with such great number of people, photographic images even of persons unknown to us provoke our interest, compassion, our curiosity about personalities, relationships and circumstances. Family snaps immediately reach us on a more personal level than stylized portraits or even overtly documentary photography: “[…] empathy and

21 Quite in contrast to the personalizing effect, Sontag also ascribes to the photograph the ability to distance emotions: “As much as they create sympathy, photographs cut sympathy, distance emotions” (110). In her 1978 book On Photography Sontag predicts that the confusion about photography’s realism will eventually “clear [ ] our eyes,” make us aware of its problematic promise (110). My argument in this study is that such a realization does not result in a distancing but rather in an stronger personal engagement by the viewer/reader which is fueled precisely but the ambiguities and insecurities such tensions create.
a sense of community can be triggered by a family photograph even if we do not know at whose kin we are looking” (J. Hirsch 23). Private images taken in the familial realm instantly place strangers in the context of care, need and love and bring them closer to us. This is the very reason why politicians and other persons in (search of) power are often shown with a child in their arm or meeting a group of young children. Such a grouping evokes the image of familial – motherly or fatherly – relationships, care and protection and gives an instant impression of warmth and tenderness.

In the same way, family snaps can bring distant and monumental horrors to our consciousness. Images like the one of a little boy and his mother in the Warsaw Ghetto touch us because they interpret domestic history as a tragedy (J. Hirsch 123). As we all are or have been to some degree part of a family – as sons and daughters, mothers and fathers, husbands and wives – we can relate more intimately to loss in familial terms.

Naturally, the situation changes when we look at our own family photographs. Oftentimes – particularly when we were present at their taking – we know (or once knew) the stories of the persons captured on film. Here, the images can serve to remind us of what has been forgotten or repressed. We bring to them a different kind of curiosity: a search for information about ourselves.\(^\text{22}\) The psychoanalyst Robert Akeret has long recognized the potential for self-inquiry and powerful emotional responses triggered by family photographs as he employs them in his practice in order to help his patients.\(^\text{23}\) This component will become especially significant in the chapter on Monika Maron, who presents the pictures of her own family as she searches for her present self.

\(^{22}\) See for example Rosy Martin who investigates the images of five previous generations of women in her family in order to define who she is today, how she is alike and how she differs from these mothers and daughters who came before her (209-221).

\(^{23}\) See Robert Akeret, Photoanalysis.
There is another quality to photographs that deserves to be highlighted within the framework of this study. Several critics have noted that pictures – above all those shot in black-and-white – evoke feelings of nostalgia, sentimentality and melancholy. A longing for the past that is inevitably no longer accessible to us is expressed in the actions of taking or looking at pictures: “But when we are nostalgic, we take pictures. […] photographs actively promote nostalgia. Photography is an elegiac act, a twilight art. Most subjects photographed are, just by virtue of being photographed, touched with pathos” (Sontag 15). The loss – that which is no longer there – exists painfully in front of our eyes to remind us of the inherent absences and renews our feelings of melancholy and mourning. This is especially true for the Holocaust photograph: “The Holocaust photograph is uniquely able to bring out this particular capacity of photographs to hover between life and death, to capture only that which no longer exists, to suggest both the desire and the necessity and, at the same time, the difficulty, the impossibility of mourning” (M. Hirsch 20).

Hirsch describes an experience in the Tower of Faces of the United States Holocaust Museum in Washington D. C., that demonstrates the emotional engagement photography can incite, if presented effectively: “The Tower of Faces brings out most forcefully photography’s connection to death, and thus the power of photographs as media of mourning” (256). Hirsch’s example reveals that there may be ways in which photography can be used in order to trigger deep emotional responses such as melancholy and mourning. Whether or not images will transgress the psychological barriers we have built depends on how they are presented. The following chapters will investigate different strategies and their effects.
Thus far I have argued that photography is a particularly fitting medium of representation of the Jewish genocide because it involves precisely the kind of debates surrounding such representations. In the remainder of the chapter I will illustrate how this paradoxical and ambiguous form of representation can enter into dialogue with concepts and forms of memory in order to yield productive ways of dealing with a troubled past. Before I go on to discuss the different ways memory relates to photography and the fictional text, some brief medial considerations shall demonstrate the privileged position of image-texts as a form to negotiate memories. While photography represents through the visual, literature does so through text. Memory, however, is a cognitive entity, which can simultaneously include visual images as well as text. At the same time, if the stored visual or linguistic information is to be represented, it must be narrated through text. The spatiality of memory mapped onto its temporality, its visual combined with its verbal dimension, makes memory, as W.J.T. Mitchell suggests, in itself an “imagetext, a double-coded system of mental storage and retrieval” (192). Thus, the simultaneity of visual and linguistic components in memories renders a combination of both forms of representation a much more fruitful and powerful way of inquiry into the past than narration alone.

The relationship between memory and photography is marked by striking similarities as a number of psychoanalysts, cultural and literary critics have pointed out.  

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24 Mitchell also stressed the intentionality of willed memory, the question “remembered for whom,” or “for what purpose” one might add (193; emphasis Mitchell).

25 Photographic metaphors are prominent, for example, in Benjamin’s account of how we know the past. “Nur als Bild, das auf Nimmerwiedersehen im Augenblick seiner Erkennbarkeit eben aufblitzt, ist die Vergangenheit festzuhalten,” he writes, thereby defining the relationship between experience and knowledge in terms of the photographic event („Geschichte“, 695). This becomes yet more obvious in the following quotation from the posthumously published “Berliner Chronik”:
Both seem to capture events from the past and make them accessible to us in the present. However, just like photography, memory is highly deceitful, leading us to trust what we seem to remember so clearly. We readily ignore the fact that even those memories which appear so accurate may actually have altered over time to fit our personal narratives of the self and the world surrounding us: “But memory, as we know, is an elusive entity, and the human mind is never the same. […] And so we mould it to fit our needs, and in the process distort it, and project that distortion into our future, making it too into a distorted mirror of imagined, fabricated recollections” (Bartov 263).

Both entities, photography and memory, encrypt the past, but because the process of encoding is shaped by conscious (photographic) decisions or less conscious selections processes, neither can offer a complete and true rendering of the bygone. Yet, precisely at the point at which memory and photography differ, both enter into their most dynamic and unsettling relationship. While, based on its referential nature, photography is commonly trusted as a precise and objective record of the past, memories are understood to be subjective. This is why in the courtroom, for example, photographs can function as persuasive pieces of evidence while memories alone rarely do.²⁶ A heightened awareness of the vulnerability to willful manipulation denies the same evidential status to the latter. In other words, we are cognizant of the fact that no one but the person who has

²⁶ The strong legal representational status can be seen in driver’s licenses, medical records, crime photographs, and passports.
experienced the event will know whether the recollections offered have not been intentionally altered. Therefore, if they are to be believed, memories must be verified by trusted documents such as artifacts, letters or photographs. The “document par excellence,” as Sebald somewhat ironically refers to the photograph, can serve to validate our memories. Likewise, in common perception, images gain a higher level of legitimacy and of meaning if substantiated by a context of – narrated – memories limiting the possible interpretations to one of “how it really happened.” Thus, once these two highly hybrid forms of captured past enter into dialogue, they each gain momentum and offer one another a more compelling claim to truth while, at the same time, being able to problematize such claim. As we have seen earlier, this exact conflict lies at the center of debates on Holocaust representation.

There is, however, another side to photography’s relationship with memory that also deserves consideration here. Generally, photographs are believed to be able to trigger memory. If one accepts the notion of photographs as *aides-mémoire*, the deliberate selection and preservation can be read as an attempt to manipulate our memories by discarding the unwelcome and by favoring the pleasant. This echoes Walter Benjamin’s concept of “voluntary memory,” the conscious conjuring up of the past, an event revived, that can be willed and controlled, something identified rather than relived. In fact, Benjamin claims that photographs are the instruments of voluntary, that is, archival, memory and enemies of involuntary memory, the past relived – as if by a gift, by the grace of chance encounter – in all its expanding, self-narrative fullness.27

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27 The unwilled recall of the past is discussed later in the chapter. As well shall see in the following chapters, Benjamin’s notion of photography inhibiting chance encounters is highly contested in contemporary writing.
However, the efficiency of the archive comes with a loss of imaginative play in remembering: “the archival memory preserves the past for us by dispossessing us of it, by taking away our indispensability in its recovery” (Scott 236). The existence of photographs as “reminders” of the past make it unnecessary to fully experience and store internally events, places and people. Archival images allow the external storage and retrieval of recollections: “The past is always at our fingertips, always available on paper or plastic for instant replay. The moment as we experience it is a little less important than it used to be: it can always be ‘taken’ and stored for later review” (J. Hirsch 45). In a sense, then, photographs not only trigger memory but at the same time, paradoxically, promote forgetting.

Most times, however, photography is likened less to our ability to recall events than to the inability to access memories from a troubled past. In fact, even more striking than the parallels between photography and “simple memory,” as Cathy Caruth terms the conscious recall of events from the past (151), are the similarities between photography and traumatic recall. The likeness between the visual nature of photography and memory has long caught the attention of psychoanalysts.28 Sigmund Freud, to cite a very early example, addresses repeatedly the role of the visual within the constellation of repression, latency, and return.29 Painfully exact, compulsively repeated visual recall that

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28 See for example Atkeret’s Photoanalysis or the kind of “photo-therapy” that Jo Spence describes in her works Putting Myself in the Picture and “Shame Work”, an article published in Family Snaps: The Meanings of Domestic Photography.

29 The link between this kind of compulsive recall and the photograph emerges most pronounced in Freud’s Der Mann Moses und die monotheistische Religion, where the metaphor of photography is used to clarify the phenomenon of latency:

[D]ass die stärkste zwangsartige Beinflussung von jenen Eindrücken herrührt, die das Kind zu einer Zeit treffen, da wir seinen psychischen Apparat für noch nicht vollkommen aufnahmefähig halten müssen, […] ist so befremdend, daß wir uns ihr Verständnis durch den Vergleich mit einer photographischen Aufnahme erleichtern dürfen, die nach einem beliebigen Aufschub entwickelt und in ein Bild verwandelt werden mag. (572)
“possesses” the individual against his or her will is, as Freud noted in chapter three of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, the dominant symptom of traumatic neurosis. The purpose of therapy is to turn these compulsive, “traumatic” memories into genuinely “narrative” memories via a process of working through. Visual images, in other words, are integrated within narrative that allows them to lose some of their compulsive character and take their place as elements of a past that is recognized as past. Such conceptualization conjures up associations with photography in many ways. First, the concepts of repression, latency, and (compulsive) return relate to the development processes of the print throughout two distinct steps. During the initial step, when the picture is taken, it registers on the negative but it remains latent for some time, that is, it does not become visible (or knowable) until the film has been processed. Once it appears, it registers as a negative image (still not fully “there”) that needs to undergo another developing treatment before becoming a positive print. Similar to trauma, then, photography is characterized by belatedness and missed or latent experience.

Second, very much like a photograph, traumatic memory can be characterized by the excessive retention of detail, that cannot be integrated into a non-traumatic memory or comprehension of the past:

Perhaps the most striking feature of traumatic recollection is the fact that it is not a simple memory. Beginning with the earliest work on trauma, a perplexing contradiction has formed the basis of its many definitions and descriptions: while the *images* of traumatic reenactment remain absolutely accurate and precise, they

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30 Literature on Trauma is vast. For a useful collection tracing the most important current theories, see Cathy Caruth, *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*. 
are largely inaccessible to conscious recall and control. (Caruth 151; my emphasis)

The way traumatic memory is described here in terms of visual accuracy and precision very much reminds of the photographic medium, which, even in its earliest days, has been referred to as the “pencil of nature.” One could understand the photograph as such a precise image, which defies integration into “simple memory” and thus denies accessibility unless it is narrated. This understanding goes hand in hand with the assumption that photographs – or any excessively detailed knowledge – do not mean anything to us unless they enter our consciousness. This study will shed light on some of the strategies Maron, Sebald, and Liebmann employ in order to engage our minds and hearts with the precise details of their images.

However, as explained above, as soon as a recollection enters conscious memory it is no longer accurate and true, for it becomes subject to the moulding inherent to the integration process (Weinberg 174).

Äußerlich ist nur übrig, was in die folgenden Gegenwarten mehr oder weniger verändert mit übergegangen ist oder was in Erinnerung aufgenommen, d.h. aus seiner Äußerlichkeit in den wissenden Geist und in dessen Kombinationen verlegt ist. In dieser Übertragung aber tritt sofort die epitomatorische Natur des Geistes ein; er kann nur in sich aufnehmen, indem er das Viele und Verschiedene unter Gesichtspunkte, Kategorien, Zweckbestimmungen usw. zusammenfaßt und, was dahin nicht gehört, fallenläßt. An die Stelle der äußerlichen Realitäten setzt er

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31 Henry Fox Talbot named his first book of photographs *The Pencil of Nature*. Daguerre himself described his invention as “not merely an instrument which serves to draw Nature; on the contrary it is a chemical and physical process which gives her the power to reproduce itself” (13).
Namen, Begriffe, Urteile, Gedanken. Und nur so umgearbeitet kann das äußerlich Seiende erinnert, Erinnerung werden. (Droysen 8)

Earlier we have described how any narration of an image is also interpretation, shaping the meaning of the print and, simultaneously, diminishing its truth value. This practise of contextualization and integration of these photographic images, then, mirrors and thereby draws attention to the process of traumatic and conscious recall and to the larger questions of memory and history as the adequate forms of inquiry into and representation of the past.

Trauma is also understood as a rupture in memory. It breaks the continuity with the past and places identity in question. Omer Bartov describes the traumatic experience of Holocaust survival as follows:

[T]hose who survived were left with gaping absences, not only of parents and siblings, but of the memory of their own childhood, of their identity, which came to be split into disparate fragments and had to be put together again and again in different and contradictory versions. These are the unbearable memories that need to be juggled and rearranged over and over again, every day, as part of a perpetual struggle to preserve a reconstituted identity. (269-70)

Here, memories of childhood become disparate fragments, which – much like individual photographs – can be “put together again and again in different and contradictory versions” (269), and “juggled and rearranged over and over again” (270) as if to assemble different versions of an album that will grant a life narrative and ultimately an identity. This is precisely the process Marianne Hirsch describes as she assembled her parents’ wedding anniversary album. Ultimately she was not trying to document her parents’
years of marriage, but to construct her own version of the family history. Both traumatic memories and photographs only exist as fragments, arresting a certain instant or a short period of time, leaving behind those absences that will never allow a complete or “true” representation of the past.

In fact, particularly these absences caused by major breaks or traumatic events result in an even more compelling demand for an imaginative filling of those gaps in order to establish continuity: “And when the past is violent and traumatic, filled with loss and absence, then its memory will be all the more directed not merely at recollection, but at making continued existence possible” (Bartov 264). If those who could narrow the gaps are no longer alive or if memory has become inaccessible because of its traumatic dimension, fictional accounts appear to be the only recourse for constructing a narrative of continuity and identity.

At the same time, to turn traumatic into conscious memory and thus allowing its integration into our narrative of self means that the struggle with the trigger events will come to an end. While this is certainly desirable for traumatized victims, it goes contrary to what current Holocaust scholarship is calling for.32 We have noted earlier that most critics advocate an ongoing engagement with the Jewish genocide. Photographs, again, hold the promise to defy such integration and subsequent closure. While they can be woven into a narrative that bestows certain meanings onto the images, they will never lose their enigmatic and opaque qualities. Because of the many ambiguities and paradoxes traced above, photographs will always remain fragmented sites of conflict,

32 This is where I see the shortcomings of trauma theory as a model for a coming to terms with the events of the mid-twentieth century.
open to manipulation, interpretation, juggling, and questioning and therefore resist ultimate integration and closure.

This chapter has demonstrated that, based on the paradoxical and ambivalent characteristics outlined above –photography’s distressing problematization of the relationship between evidence and truth, its semiotically multiform existence, its general instability and its vulnerability to language – the medium is an especially powerful way of representing a past that has often been deemed unspeakable and unrepresentable. It epitomizes the most critical concerns of the debates of the representation of the Holocaust. At a time when not just the depiction of the Jewish genocide but narration itself has become problematic, photography serves as a particularly fruitful means of inquiry into narration for three reasons. First, due to its illusionistic nature, it constitutes a useful venture for deconstructing illusionism. Secondly, because of the photographic image’s inability to narrate itself, it shifts attention from narrative to questions of narratability. Both of these characteristics can be very useful devices in order to raise a certain textural awareness in the reader and break passive perceptive modes. Third, the difficulty of “entering” a photograph dramatizes our need to use narratives as ways of reading and justifying our lives (see Scott 309). The goal of this study, then, is to examine the ways in which photography and narrative enter into dialogue in the works by Maron, Sebald, and Liebmann in order to personally engage the reader with the German Nazi past, the Jewish genocide and questions of memory and history today. How are memory processes, historical inquiry and documentary information negotiated and problematized in their works? What conclusions do these authors suggest regarding the second-generation representation of
Holocaust (traumatic) memory and history? We will find that, while all insist on a factual grounding of their work, none of them believes that “history” with its facts alone will produce the kind of personal and sustained remembrance they, along with many other critics, writers, and scholars, are looking for. Instead, their works are multi-layered, self-conscious and hybrid texts that problematize their quest for truth and their inability to find it, in ways we shall explore in the following chapters.
2. “The Quest for Memory is the Search for One’s History:”

Monika Maron’s Pawels Briefe

This chapter examines Monika Maron’s approach to her family’s history traced in Pawels Briefe (1999).<sup>33</sup> I argue that the author’s interest in the past is motivated by two objectives: First, she undertakes to research her family’s history out of a quest for memory and remembrance of her Jewish grandfather Pawel Iglarz. Second, this family narrative becomes the platform for the search for her own past leading up to her present self. This chapter will reveal the tensions at work in Pawels Briefe: the desire to fix truth through the authenticating force of photographs and documents as well as the simultaneous consciousness of selection and manipulation processes that render these “documents” unreliable. Maron is painfully aware of the constructedness of memory but also recognizes the need to engage with these personal and often conflicting recollections of herself and others, particularly of her mother Hella. I will also shed light on the role of photography in the problematization of truth and as a site for personal “encounters” with the past.

In the first part of this chapter, I will examine Maron’s use of photographs, letters and other documents as means of inquiry into Pawel’s life. I will argue that they offer the

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<sup>33</sup> In her book Gedächtnis und Geschichte in Generationenromanen seit der Wende (2005) Friederike Eigler dedicates one chapter to Maron’s book. She investigates questions of affective and critical memory and comes to very similar conclusions as I have presented in this study. Unfortunately, I gained access to her book only after I had completed this chapter and was unable to incorporate Eiglers arguments throughout my chapter. In a previous article, published in The German Quarterly (2001), Eigler offers a comparative study of Pawels Briefe and Marin Walser’s Ein springender Brunnen (1998), which also discusses questions of “gendered” cultural memory (a German version of this article also appeared in Elke Gilson’s Monika Maron in Perspective, 2002). Katharina Gerstenberger also compares issues of gender and generation in Maron’s work and in Zafer Şenocak’s Gefährliche Verwandtschaft (1998).
kind of encounters described by John K. Roth34 and thus generate sustained remembrance not so much because they authenticate the author’s narrative – although this may be her initial intention – but because they become sites of conflict precisely because of their inherent illusions. In addition, family photographs are particularly well-suited to generate a personal response such as empathy or even mourning because they elicit an affiliative look through which we connect with the image on a very personal level. Such personal engagement is necessary for “deep memory” to occur (Roth).

In the second part, I will focus on Maron’s search for identity and how she negotiates the memories and documents she encounters in the process of her self-construction. My argument is that Maron’s inquiry into the past is very much motivated by her own desire to understand as well as attribute meaning to her own life, not only to that of her forbearers. I will also show that her critical questioning of memories and material pertaining to the more distant past gives way to a less judicious handling of her own memories of more recent developments. This, in turn, results in a conflict that may actually be productive in her quest for an ongoing engagement with her past and present because it abandons the idea of a harmonizing narrative that offers closure.

The discovery of long-lost family documents, seventeen of which are now reproduced in her work, motivated Maron’s writing of her book Pawels Briefe. The photographs, postcards, and letters constitute the legacy of the last exchanges between Maron’s Jewish grandfather and her mother Hella before he was murdered by the Nazis in Poland. Maron herself never knew the grandparents whose life-stories she writes as she

34 I use the criteria of John K. Roth’s “encounters” which he laid out in his book Holocaust Politics (2001) because they provide a useful description of the kind of features that will elicit a personal engagement with the past. They mirror closely the different mandates proposed by many Holocaust scholars, which I have outlined in chapter one.
traces her family history from the Weimar Republic through National Socialism and the GDR.

Pawel und Josefa Iglarz, who had married and left their native Poland after having separately converted to Baptism, moved to Berlin in the early 1900s. There they led simple but happy lives as tailors with their four children Bruno, Paul, Marta and Hella until the outbreak of World War II. In 1939 Pawel, a born Jew, was forced to leave Germany. Together with his wife who had refused to divorce him, they went back to her place of birth in Poland, Kurow. Their four children remained in Berlin and the correspondence between them and their father began. In the spring of 1942, Pawel had to report to the ghetto Belchatow, a few miles away from his very ill wife. Two months later she died (presumably of cancer), while Pawel was shot shortly thereafter in the woods surrounding the ghetto. After the end of World War II, Hella moved (together with her sister Marta) to East Berlin and – through her marriage with the Minister of the Interior Karl Maron (in office 1955-68) – became an insider to East German power structures. Monika Maron, born in 1941 and raised with the socialist ideals of her mother and step-father, broke with the GDR and ultimately left East Germany in 1988. After the fall of the Berlin Wall, she returned to Berlin, where she resides and works to this day. Life-writing shapes her earlier novels Flugasche (1981), Die Überläuferin (1988), Stille Zeile 6 (1991), and Animal Triste (1995), all translated into English.35 Auto-reflexive essays and opinion pieces frame those texts.

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35 Autobiographical aspects are discussed in depth in the articles by Sylvia Klötzer, Hyunseon Lee, Andrea Geier, and John Wieczorek, comprised in the German Monitor volume Monika Maron in Perspective.
Quest for Memory

Pawel Iglarz was killed by the Nazis in 1942 because he had been born as a Jew. Maron\textsuperscript{36} never knew much about him other than his Jewish heritage and his untimely death. *Pawels Briefe* is her attempt to defy his ultimate obliteration through forgetting. Through the publication of this book, she seeks to create a site of remembrance for his life and undue death.

Many scholars, artists and writers have commented on the institutionalization of memory, specifically the memory of Holocaust victims. Anyone seeking to approach and represent this horrible past faces the question how to accomplish this without feeding into the numbing and distancing effect of institutionalized forms of memory such as monuments, memorials or commemoration rituals. The ongoing debate surrounding monuments serves as one representative example for the issues involved in the contemporary quest for public and private memory. In recent decades, the monument has, indeed, come under much attack. German historian Martin Broszat, for example, suggests that in their references to history, monuments may not remember events so much as bury them altogether beneath layers of national myth and explanation. Monuments reduce historical understanding as much as they generate it (“Plea for Historization” 129). Others have argued that rather than preserving public memory, the monument displaces it altogether, supplanting a community’s memory-work with its own material form. Maron certainly shares this aversion to institutionalized forms of memory. In an interview with the German newspaper *Tagesspiegel* Maron explains her stance toward public memorials:

\textsuperscript{36} *Pawels Briefe* is autobiographical (although this book presents more than an autobiography; see Eigler *Gedächtnis* 145-46). We can therefore say that Maron is the narrator.

This is precisely what the author does, or rather tries to do when traveling to Poland with her mother Hella and her son Jonas. However, because of the total annihilation of Jewish life in Ostrow-Mazowiecka, she – like many other descendents of survivors – is unable to revisit those places where her Jewish ancestors had lived. When, instead, she visits Josefa’s place of death, her grave in Kurow, she experiences doubts whether these kind of memorials, these images of the past, which will now be fixed in her mind, unquestionable, do not rather inhibit her own approach to the past: “sogar als wir vor dem Grab standen, fragte ich mich, ob mich all diese Bilder nicht eher störten, ob die Festlegungen mir meinen Weg der Annäherung nicht verstellten” (PB 94). Here, she echoes a number of critics who warn that, based on the monument’s stiffness and grandiose pretensions to permanence, its meaning is fixed and thus oblivious to the essential mutability in all cultural artifacts (see for example Young, Writing 174-75). The author thus chooses to resort to other “Stätten ihres Lebens,” or artifacts of their lives. Such can be photographs, letters or even other objects that once belonged to them. While standing in front of her grandmother’s grave, for instance, Maron thinks of a photograph of Josefa standing in the kitchen with a bowl in her hands. This image, which we will
return to later, obviously has more meaning to her than the sight of her gravestone (PB 95).

However, if – as is often the case – not even such artifacts have survived, if there are no “Lebensstätten” to visit, no pictures to cherish, Maron still proposes an alternative to the remembrance of death through memorials: “Dann sind Bücher immer noch die bessere Stätte für lebendiges Gedenken. Oder ein Museum mit Zeugnissen” (Maron in Becker 25). With Pawels Briefe, Maron has tried to create such a work of “living remembrance” for Pawel, in which authentic pieces of evidence (‘Zeugnisse’) are given a voice to testify for themselves, but also to be integrated into a personal and historical narrative. Maron thus posits photographs and writing contrary to monuments. While the latter inhibits an engagement with the past, the former become the vehicle of such an engagement. It is thus worthwhile to investigate photography’s relationship to memory in Pawels Briefe. How can this medium be incorporated into text in order to bring the past into present consciousness?

Many scholars and artists suggest that the only way to ensure an ongoing process of remembrance is to become personally engaged with the lives of those who died in the Holocaust. One scholar, John K. Roth, insists that “deep memory” cannot occur unless it takes place in form of encounters: “Encounters are meetings. They are meetings that take place by chance, fact to fact, as conflicts, or as some combination of those elements” (128). In the following, I will show that Pawels Briefe fulfills Roth’s request for conflict, personalized chance and face-to-face meetings and thus may make for a more sustained remembrance.
First and foremost, Maron’s work represents a site for conflict. The author struggles with notions of authenticity and truthfulness. The apparent veracity of her grandfather’s story is crucial to her quest for his remembrance and thus she feels compelled to emphasize the documentary nature of her work. Already in the title *Pawels Briefe*, Maron sets the parameters for what is to be revealed in this book: authentic personal and – at the same time – historical documents of one man and his family. The subtitle of the German version: *Eine Familiengeschichte*, a family hi/story, reinforces the documentary intent of this work. *Pawels Briefe* is not simply a result of the author’s imagination as is her previous work, it is a history, a “family history,” specifically Monika Maron’s family history.37

Thus, Maron seems to take great care not to leave any doubt about the genre of her work. This “Geschichte,” which bears both meanings in German, is not a fictional story, but historical truth – or is it?38 At first glance the author tries to establish a sense of factuality by including authentic documents, such as the photographs, letters, and certificates mentioned earlier, in order to verify the persons and events she narrates. Throughout the book, Maron refers to letters and photographs as documents, which “prove” (*belegen*) an event (13), as “conclusive” (*beweiskräftig*) “evidence” (*Zeugnis*) of family relationships (*PB* 45, 94). In a TV discussion Maron asserts: “Es war nun aber einfach so. Und unter anderen Umständen hätte ich diese Geschichte ja sicher gar nicht geschrieben “ (Maron, *Literatur im Foyer*).

37 See Katharina Boll who cites a personal statement by the author: “Es handele sich nicht um eine fiktive Geschichte, sondern um die Geschichte ihrer Familie, welche sie anhand authentischer Dokumente rekonstruieren möchte” (89).

38 I suspect that this nonequivalence of meaning in both languages may be the reason why the subtitle has not been translated in the English version. While English also carries the meanings of careful recording as well as of a tale, they do not have equal weight as in German. The first association with the word “history” is clearly the former sense.
Herein also lies the motivation for employing what critics have called a “scarce” and “matter-of-fact” language. In the same discussion, the author tells of her difficulty in holding herself back as much as possible, of giving only what she believes to be the facts (drawn, of course, from the memories of family members, documents and pictures) without trying to fill the gaps. Thus Maron responds to the question of why she refrained from making a novel out of this material as follows:

Also ich hab’ hin und her überlegt, was ich mache. Ich hab’ sogar beim Schreiben überlegt, ob ich’s noch ändere. Ob ich nicht doch einfach schreib und die Leerstellen fülle. [...] Das Entscheidende war aber, daß ich irgendwie wirklich große Scheu hatte, diese Geschichte dieser Großeltern zu Stoff und Material zu machen. Und zum Beispiel: was wären diese Briefe gewesen, wenn man immer hätte für möglich halten können, daß ich sie erfunden haben könnte. Die wären dann gar nichts mehr wert.  (Maron, Literatur im Foyer)

Martin Lüdke, the moderator of the TV program Literatur in Foyer, puts it even more poignantly: “Nicht für möglich halten können, sondern für möglich halten müssen. Sie wären nämlich dann in dem Großen Ganzen aufgegangen und dann wären Sie auch Fiktion geworden “ (emphasis Jones). A fictionalization appears quite contrary to Maron’s intent. Her claim that these letters would be worth nothing if one had reasons to question their authenticity demonstrates the critical role of an apparent veracity of these „documents.” Precisely because these letters, the written documents, would be easy to invent, „erfinden,“ photographic images are included in order to restore the evidentiary force of these letters and consequently their value. Maron even includes a photographic reproduction of one such written document, a postcard written by Pawel from the ghetto.
Although one can hardly decipher any of its content, the names of the sender and addressee, Pawel and Hella Iglarz, are clearly legible, as is the Belchatow postmark. The postcard thus serves as a powerful piece of evidence for the existence of the correspondence between Maron’s grandfather and mother, as well as of the places the author names: the Belchatow ghetto and Schillerstraße 4 in Berlin-Neukölln. Drawing on the referentiality of photography, the reader is to learn that, if the author, addressees and places of writing and reading can be visualized, they must have existed as told: What has been photographed must inevitably have been there to be seen and to be captured on film. At the same time, the above quote already signals the author’s struggle with her material. While it is important to Maron that her grandparents’ story not become the material of fiction, it is difficult for her to find an adequate format for the telling of their lives. The photographs and other documents seem to offer the kind of verification Maron longs for and thus allow her to proceed with her project.

Several other passages highlight the documentary quality of the photographic medium. During the family visit to Kurow in 1997, for example, Maron presents the pictures of her grandparents, “wie einen Ausweis,” in order to solicit recognition by someone who may have known them and might be able to tell about their lives (PB 60). Of course, this is not proof for the fact that the photographs in this book are, indeed, authentic. In fact, Maron never does try to prove the authenticity of her images to the reader, which might be difficult to do at any rate. Rather, she presupposes their credible authenticity and uses them to document her text, that is to verify that what she is writing

39 In this sense, the images Maron presents to the persons she questions about the past also have the function to trigger their memory. This function, however, is not much explored in this book. In fact, in most instances, the documents and photographs recovered in the attic fail to provide a point of entry into this past for Hella.
has actually taken place. This passage does show her own desire for photography’s ability to verify, in this case the existence of her grandparents and her relationship to them.

In another instance, the author talks about a family picture which shows Josefa and Pawel together with their four children on the eve of a planned emigration to America: “Einziges Zeugnis dieses ungeheuren Vorhabens, das kurz darauf scheiterte, ist ein Familienfoto, das der amerikanischen Einwanderungsbehörde oder einer anderen genehmigenden Institution zugesandt werden sollte” (PB 45, emphasis Jones). This image, however, reproduced on the following page, bears contradictory messages. Maron herself is quite sensitive to the deceptive nature of family photography: “ich weiß, daß die choreographische Geschlossenheit der kleinen Gruppe dem Fotografen zu verdanken ist” (PB 47). It is in fact quite customary, especially in formal studio portraits, for persons to be arranged in standardized poses in order to stage affection and bonding or to portray certain character qualities (see Akeret for a psychological interpretation of these).

Remarkably, however, Maron’s awareness of the constructed nature of photography does not prevent the image from producing its intended effect on the author. The complete sentence, quoted from above, reads as follows: “Obwohl ich weiss, daß die choreographische Geschlossenheit der kleinen Gruppe dem Fotografen zu verdanken ist, wirken sie auf mich einander so verbunden, einer so gesichert durch den anderen, daß mich bei ihrem Anblick das schon erwähnte irrationale Heimweh überkommt” (PB 47). Thus, the image has a strong emotional impact on Maron, which goes beyond the rational knowledge about manipulative processes in photo sessions. It inspires a sense of home, of strong familial ties, which the author feels deprived of because they have been broken by a number of personal decisions and historical events (I will return to this lack of
familial unity as well as to the affective quality of photography later in this chapter).

This photograph allows her to reconstruct those ties, to attach herself to this family, become a part of it. Maron is also cognizant of the fact that this attachment may be based less on the information the picture itself offers, but rather on the memories her mother Hella has passed on to her: “Vielleicht sehe ich ja auch nur, was ich über die sechs weiß, weil Hella es mir erzählt hat, und ein unvoreingenommener Betrachter könnte in dem Bild nichts erkennen als ein übliches Familienfoto aus dieser Zeit” (PB 47).

Indeed, one could argue that the photograph does not exactly portray the strong bonding Maron conjures up. No one looks at one another. Instead, all stare into the camera in rather rigid positions. There is a clear divide between the sons and daughters, each grouped with their father and mother respectively as is typical for the family choreography of the time. In fact, those two groups do not even seem to touch. Josefa is the only person slightly leaning towards her family. Everyone else sits or stands up straight and does not portray any particular sense of belonging or bonding. Although they are all positioned very closely to one another and Marta and Paul have placed their arms on their mother’s and father’s shoulders in a seemingly relaxed way, there is no real sense of touch. The whole scene strikes one as being very orchestrated. Not only Hella appears uncomfortable because of pain in her leg. All but Josefa have a stern, if not disturbed look on their faces. Other than the choreography of placing these persons closely together, children framed by their parents, it is difficult to feel the sense of protective unity that Maron clearly harbors. Thus the author’s description is not precisely based on what is actually encoded in the image – at least not, as Maron suspects, to an unattached viewer (“unvoreingenommener Betrachter” 47) – but rather a reflection on what she is
able to see in it because of what she knows about this family. Perhaps it is only what she wants to see out of a desire for proof of the stories told by her mother, a confirmation of her mental image of this family.

In fact, desires may even overpower what we know. The “protective unity” Maron senses in this photograph stands in stark contrast to the narrative that is about to unfold. Pawel and Josefa’s children could not protect their family from the persecution by the Nazis. Josefa dies alone in Kurow because her children are not allowed to visit her and Pawel is ultimately shot along with other occupants of the Belchatow Ghetto. This goes to show that photographs and other documents serve not only to authenticate history but also to construct individual narratives shaped by personal experience, expectations and desires, sometimes quite contrary to factual knowledge of the past. We also learn that family Holocaust photographs can point especially forcefully to the powerlessness of the family as an institution to act in any way as protection against the horrors of Nazi persecution. In exposing the ways in which contextual information or our own hopes can manipulate our viewing of photographic images, Maron raises awareness of the many deceptions photographs can create or at least perpetuate. At the same time, she can never really escape the strong illusionist impact of these images and oftentimes even proliferates the illusions through her text.

40 In an interview with David Werner, Maron comments on her desire for strong familial ties: “[D]ie Sehnsucht nach Sicherheit und Geborgenheit, nach einer Familie im traditionellen Sinn auf der einen Seite und der Wunsch nach Flexibilität und Mobilität auf der anderen Seite, das ist ein Dilemma, das mich umtreibt und auf das ich keine Antwort weiß. In meinem Leben war Platz für gerade mal ein Kind, das schleppste ich dann mit mir herum – wie ein Känguru. Das Leben hat sich bis heute enorm verändert, doch die Sehnsuchtsbilder, die funktionieren noch nach ganz alten Mustern” (Interview with David Werner, „Ich lebe“ 67).

41 I am adapting this term from Marianne Hirsch in the same wider sense: “In the broad category of ‘Holocaust photograph’, […] I include those pictures which are connected for us to total death and to public mourning – pictures of horror and also ordinary snapshots and portraits, family pictures connected to the Holocaust by their context and not by their content” (20-21).
The most striking and most openly discussed example of photography’s ability to deceive is manifested in the third image reproduced in the book. It shows the author’s great grandfather in a kaftan, Pawel’s father Juda Lejb Sendrowitsch Iglarz. Maron begins by describing the backdrop and props of the image: painted background, heavy curtain, a chair made from bamboo, a small table with an open book. It is this book – reproduced four pages later in close-up – that becomes problematic: “Auf dem Buch die Hand meines Urgroßvaters, die vier Finger leicht angewinkelt und dicht beieinander, als hielten sie die Zeile fest, bei der er seine Lektüre für dieses Foto unterbrochen hat. Aber Juda Lejb Sendrowitsch Iglarz konnte nicht lesen, wie die Geburtsurkunde meines Großvaters amtlich bescheinigt” (PB 27). Clearly, in this case, two accepted “court-proof” documentary artifacts – the photograph and the birth certificate – offer contradicting information and Maron has no choice but to give one preference, the birth certificate, over the other, the photograph. Although, one could argue, just as gravestones can err – Josefa’s stone dates her death five years after it actually occurred (1942 / 1947) – so may birth certificates. What is important, however, is that the author chooses to mistrust not the certificate, but the photograph, attributing a higher truth-value to the textual than to the visual. Most times, it is the written document that is perceived to be more prone to manipulation and we saw earlier that Maron generally subscribes to this notion as well. Here, however, the author foregrounds not the construction of a textual narrative, but of a visual one, that of her great-grandfather’s literacy. In a reversal of sorts, words take on the evidentiary and authenticating force of photographs, while the image is – once again and this time more compellingly – exposed as a medium of illusion. In Pawels Briefe, the power of photography as a technology of personal and
historical memory is thus both revealed and contested. The continuous conflict present throughout the book arises out of Maron’s awareness of the deceptive nature of photography and her overwhelming desire for truthfulness and verification of her grandparents’ story.

The following frame, another family photograph, shows Josefa and Pawel in a park-like environment (identified by the caption as the Berlin Volkspark) with their first two children Paul and Bruno (PB 32). There are no direct allusions to this image. It seems as if it is placed here only to confirm Pawel and Josefa’s move from Ostrow-Mazowiecka to Berlin, which Maron describes on the accompanying pages. Josefa in her stylish dress and hat as well as Pawel in his suit and butterfly tie seem to lend proof to the fulfillment of the promise that “diese Millionenstadt hielte auch für sie einen bescheidenen Platz zum Überleben bereit” (PB 32). The image falls short of actually providing such evidence. Although the author tells us in the caption that it was taken in the Volkspark in Berlin, it could very well have been any other park in any other city. There are no markers identifying this place as Berlin. The reader is required simply to trust the caption, of which s/he does not know the origin. Is this information written on the back of the print? Has it been passed down through Pawel or Josefa to Hella and on to Maron? Surely, none of the persons shown on this image are alive to tell her. Or was it the photographer who remembered the event? It is striking that the author, who is often so keen on providing the sources for her “facts,” does not do so in this case. This raises the question of reliability even of the captions and forces the reader to make a decision on whether to regard the caption-writer, the author, as trust-worthy or not. There is a third option, namely to dismiss this question as irrelevant altogether. Perhaps, for reasons we
will explore later on, and despite the repeated affirmations of authenticity, it is just as important to be willing to suspend one’s disbelief and simply to engage with the story instead of allowing the constant need for verification of each detail to inhibit such investment. The insecurity experienced by the reader, which is fed by the tension between an ongoing drive to authenticate and the inability or conscious choice not to do so, may thus be a productive one. The reader not only witnesses the author’s struggle with the nature and materiality of her sources but is placed in a position to experience Maron’s image-text precisely as the kind of conflict discussed by Roth. The treatment of the images in *Pawels Briefe*, therefore, draws attention to their mutability and thus opens them up for ongoing engagement in the present and the future.

The pages inserted between this family photograph and the close-up of Pawel, reproduced four pages later (*PB* 31), do not directly comment on the image, rather they complement the visual in another way. Here Maron tells the story of their lives in Berlin, the story the pictures cannot tell. Maron refers to these limits of photography and her subsequent need for narration: “Ich weiß nicht, wie seine Stimme klingt, ich weiß nicht, wie er aussieht, wenn er lacht, weil es kein Foto gibt, auf dem er lacht. Ich kenne nichts von dem Leben, das ich mir vorstellen will, weder die Armut, noch die Enge, noch die Frömmigkeit” (*PB* 33). The still photograph can only capture very specific chosen moments for later viewing. As pointed out in chapter one, during the lifetime of Pawel these occasions would have been carefully chosen and did – by no means – reflect the everyday reality of the persons photographed, but rather a desirable image of the self. Precisely the details Maron wants to explore would have inevitably been left outside of the frame. Because all these details have neither been experienced by the author nor
captured visually or narratively, the author, obviously struggling with these limitations, sees no other option than to act contrary to her intentions and to revert to her own imagination. The narrative tries to fill those absences of the past, those memory lapses and gaps left by isolated images and letters with fictitious elements. Here, the word “Geschichte” takes on its second – and also much intended – meaning of “fictional story.” When photography and other documents fail her, Maron reverts to the memories of others and her own as well as to her imagination in order to approach the lives she wants to recount. Frustrated with the gaps left behind by the images or letters she invents the details she cannot know. Her thoughts on a photograph of Pawel and Josefa, presumably taken shortly after their arrival in Kurow are as follows:

Meine Eltern sind vor drei oder fünf oder sechs Tagen in Kurow angekommen. Ihnen gehören zwei Schlafstellen in Jadwigas kleinem Haus und die Kleider in ihren Koffern. Pawel hat für seine Frau einen Schemel oder einen Stuhl hinter das Haus getragen. Meine Großmutter sieht über das abgeerntete Feld hinter Jadwigas Haus oder in den Himmel oder auf die sandige Erde zu ihren Füssen. (PB 96-97; emphasis Jones)

The frame does not reveal who carried the chair behind the house, nor the focus of Josefa’s gaze or what exactly Pawel might have been saying to his wife. And no one was there to give testimony to their lives. All the author has is this image and a few lines from Pawels’s letter, written three years later from the camp Belchatow, which describe precisely how Pawel occasionally brought a chair out for his wife. Yet Maron appears to harbor a need for such details. However, when even the family’s visit to Kurow does not bring forth further information, the author resorts to her imagination in order to fill the
void. She literally conjures up images of how it may have been. That these are only possibilities is made clear by the various alternatives Maron offers, indicated by the ample use of the conjunction “oder.” Beyond the mental pictures triggered by the photograph, it is virtually impossible for the author to come up with any satisfactory notion about these past events. There are nagging questions throughout the book, the answers to which will always remain unclear: “Weint sie? Oder betet sie? Fragt sie ihren Gott, womit sie diese Strafe verdient hat? Flackert vielleicht, nur für einen einzigen kurzen Augenblick, der Gedanke auf, daß es vielleicht doch eine Sünde war, einen Juden zu heiraten? Juscha, sagt mein Großvater. Was sagt er noch? Was kann er, der sich als Verursacher ihres Unglücks fühlt, ihr sagen?” (PB 97)

Maron marks this approach to the past as a constructive process. She cannot know but only imagine what her grandfather may have been saying. Yet, sometimes, there are limits even to such an inventive process. For lack of any concept of what the two may have discussed during this distressing time, Maron gives in to resignation: “Juscha, sagt mein Großvater, die Kinder werden bald schreiben” (PB 97). Nevertheless, although the author’s strong personal investment, her attempt at (re)creating the stories fails to truly fill the gaps left by displacement and death, it is the work if not of memory (in the sense of someone present recalling an event) but of commemoration: it is an attempt to recreate lives in order to defy their undue suffering and deaths. It is her own investment, her struggle with the gaps, her resolve to seek other, non-factual, ways to approach her grandparents’ lives and, finally, her creative energies that ensure a deep and personal engagement with the past, a true encounter.
Gaps, absences and silence play an important role in any writing about the Holocaust and in the lives affected by it. As Sigrid Weigel points out, for the second or third generation it is, however, not as much about the “Unspeakable” (as is the case for the survivors of human catastrophes such as the Jewish genocide) as it is about the complicated relationship between stories and that which is expressed in them through absence and silence. It is about those telling signs and images, which stand for the gaps, for the inaccessible and buried (Weigel 69). Thus, it is not necessarily the dead that haunt later generations, but the void left behind by them: “Ihren Kindern und Nachkommen aber fällt das Schicksal anheim, solche verborgenden Gräber in der Gestalt eines Phantoms zu vergegenständlichen. Diese Gräber der anderen sind es nämlich, die die Überlebenden in Form von Phantomen heimsuchen” (Abraham, “Aufzeichnungen” 692).

These “graves,” untold secrets of former generations, have created absences that haunt their children and lead to the contruction of phantoms: “Das ‘Phantom’ […] ist eine Erfindung der Lebenden. Eine Erfindung in dem Sinne, daß es, wenn auch auf halluzinatorische Weise, individuell oder kollektiv, die Lücke vergegenständlichen muß, die die Verdunkelung eines Abschnitts im Leben eines Liebesobjektes in uns erzeugt hat” (Abrahams, “Aufzeichnungen” 691-92). In other words, there is a compulsion to fill the gaps with phantoms, with imaginative inventions, which can paradoxically never actually do that, that is, fill the empty spaces, but rather dramatically draw attention to the absences left behind. Thus, the inventive passages in Pawels Briefe have not found their way into the narrative in order to evoke a false sense of authenticity – one Maron,

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42 See for example Ernestine Schlant’s dicussion of absence in the post-war non-Jewish German literature on the Holocaust in The Language of Silence, Sara Horowitz’ Voicing the Void or Eric Santner’s Stranded Objects.

43 Abraham refers here to the “unspoken,” not actual physical graves of the deceased: “Personen, die ein Grab in sich verbergen” (692).
paradoxically, does claim, as we have seen, for her family history as a whole. By foregrounding the fictive nature of these particularities – for instance through offering several alternatives or by openly referring to them as “erfundene Bilder” (51) –, by creating “memories” without erasing her retrospective perspective, she reveals the painful absence of such details, which remained untold due to the death of those who could have shared them had they survived or by the inability or unwillingness to remember. As we have seen in chapter one, photographs serve as a particularly effective media to signal absence and loss while, at the same time, presenting a presence, bringing it back to life and offering opportunities to reconnect.

The obsessive quality of these absences and a consequent need for such detail is also expressed through the return of parts of the images a few pages later. In contrast to Sebald, where the return of the dead haunts the characters as well as the narrator, in *Pawels Briebe* it is the lack of more information on the persons portrayed that is disturbing. Maron zooms in on a hand or a face as if these close-ups could tell her more about the people to whom they belong. Thus she reproduces in the text the anxious search for information about her grandparents. The text itself becomes a performance of her conflictuous toil. Moreover, the mere nature of the return lends a haunting quality to these close-ups: they do not seem ready to let go of the reader, as if a part of them wanted to inscribe itself into his or her memory.

At the same time, the recurrent nature of these images makes for the kind of repeated chance encounters Roth advocates. This experience is intensified by the fact that the photographs often do not accompany the corresponding text. The image of the exhausted and desperate Pawel described on page 84, for example, does not appear until
nearly a hundred pages later (\textit{PB} 183), where it is inserted in speculations about how the family’s life would have progressed after World War II if Pawel had still been a part of it. Maron’s grandfather suddenly and unexpectedly appears in the book, just as he does in her mind, reminding the reader that he should have been alive in the years after the war.

Maron also describes her discovery of the photographs, letters and other documents as chance encounters. They had been sitting in boxes in the attic for decades until a Dutch television team asked for them. Surprised by the finding and shocked by the forgetting, Maron’s mother Hella, her son Jonas and Maron decide to research Pawel’s life and travel to his birth place, Ostrow-Mazowiecka. She finally materializes an always distant thought: “ich müßte einmal, eines Tages werde ich …” (\textit{PB} 10). This chance encounter thus propels Maron to actively seek out and engage with her grandfather’s past.

According to Roth, only personalized encounters can escape an institutionalization of memory and instead have a sustained, thorough and profound effect: “Whether they are firsthand or secondhand, encounters with the Holocaust do not happen in general. They take place through the particularities of an individual’s experience. […] They encourage study and invite reflection. They change one’s life” (131). As noted in the previous chapter, photographs are particularly well-suited sites for such highly personalized encounters. For if we agree with Fowler’s assertion that the photograph’s “functions are to promote straightforward feelings of identification, empathy or disapproval to effect a metonymic simplification of complex historical and institutional processes” (Fowler 15), then they have indeed the capacity to personalize historical events and elicit an emotional response.\footnote{Maron’s intention to write a personalized account that represents twentieth century history in Germany is expressed in the following statement: “Ich glaube, dass ich eine Geschichte geschrieben habe, in der es…”}
to intense study, it offers immediacy of, and intimacy with the subject: “The picture, with its display of eyes and hands, perhaps even bosoms, groins, and legs, seems to bring intimacy without any formal introduction” (J. Hirsch 6). Roland Barthes also notes that because these intimate artifacts invoke our own future death, they “challenge[] each of us, one by one, outside of any generality” (Camera Lucida 97). Thus any reading of a photographic image is ultimately always a private one (97), provoking personal, sometimes literally face-to-face encounters. The same is true for the images in Pawels Briefe. Especially the close-ups of hands and faces seem to establish a more intimate relationship to the persons displayed and seem to allow access to the particularities of that person’s experience. This, in turn, draws the reader in, invite him or her to experience this text on a very personal level.

In fact, the continuous return of these close-ups harkens back to the kind of personal face-to-face meetings described by Roland Barthes in his last published work Camera Lucida (1981). By zooming in on particular visual details, the text evokes what Barthes called the punctum of a photograph, an immediate and unpredictable penetration of the spectator by a particular detail: “it is this element, which rises from the scene, shoots out of it like an arrow, and pierces me” (26). It is important that the photograph did not intend the punctum, but rather that it „occurs in the field of the photographed thing like a supplement that is at once inevitable and delightful“ because the photographer „could not not photograph the partial object at the same time as the total object“ (57; emphasis Barthes): it is that „accident which pricks, bruises me“ (26) and

[...] und irgendwann war mir klar, wie viel aus der bewegten Geschichte dieses Jahrhunderts in meiner kleinen Familie enthalten ist – deshalb wollte ich diese Geschichte bergen. (Interview, „Ich lebe so frei“ 67)

45 Barthes describes two elements of the photographic event for the spectator: the punctum and the studium.
that "fills the whole picture" (45) and thus fulfills Roth’s demand that these meetings take place unintended, “by chance.” With the existence of a punctum, “a blind field is created (is divined)” (57), which offers a story to the persons in the pictures who are otherwise “anesthetized and fastened down, like butterflies” (57). Barthes gives several examples for his idea of the punctum. He describes, for example, a 1926 family portrait taken by James Van der Zee. The punctum for him lies in the necklace of the African-American woman, which reminds him of a relative who once sported a similar one. He goes on to tell the story of her dreary life in the province as an unmarried woman living with her mother:

for (no doubt) it was this same necklace (a slender ribbon of braided gold) which I had seen worn by someone in my own family, and which, once she died, remained shut up in a family box of old jewelry (this sister of my father never married, lived with her mother as an old maid, and I had always been saddened whenever I thought of her dreary life). (53)

The punctum of the necklace consequently opens up – wholly unintended – the “blind field” of an image, a story leading Barthes to sense the same empathy for his relative he had felt whenever meeting or being otherwise reminded of his aunt: “This particular punctum arouses great sympathy in me, almost a kind of tenderness” (43). Barthes demonstrates, in a way, how such images can affect a reader if there is a punctum that will “prick” and “bruise” him or her and open up a personal engagement with these details leading to an affective response.

In light of Barthes’ text, the close-ups in Pawels Briefe can be read in two ways. On one level they may be offered to the reader as a possibility for a punctum – one that
the reader may or may not respond to. However, since a punctum can only be projected
from the spectator, this effort may ultimately fail and produce nothing but a studium,
which allows us to learn something about the political or cultural background of the
image, provides us with knowledge: “It is by studium that I am interested in so many
photographs, whether I receive them as political testimony or enjoy them as good
historical scene: for it is culturally (this connotation is present in studium) that I
participate in the figures, the faces, the postures, the settings, the locations” (Barthes,
Camera Lucida 26).

Nevertheless, the book may be read more successfully on another level: as a
visual projection of the punctum Maron found in the individual images. Understood in
this context, the author may have attempted to solve a problem Barthes himself could not
come to terms with. Since the punctum resembles the pre-linguistic and language-denying
moment of visual contact with the photographed subject, it can never be communicated
through language (Barthes, “The Photographic Message” 30). How, then, can anyone
ever communicate the existence of the punctum to anyone else? And if Barthes is
successful in his descriptions of the punctum then he will have made it socially
communicable and thus turned it into a studium. Maron refrains from explaining the
visual details that “penetrate” her. Instead she reproduces them visually as precisely such
accidents that may “prick” and “bruise” her, thus refusing to turn them into a purely
informative studium. Maron, therefore, offers the particularities of her own experience
with the content of these images in the only way possible: not linguistic, but visual.

Sometimes, as is the case with the Van der Zee image, the punctum reveals itself
after the fact, as a function of memory (Camera Lucida 53). It testifies to the pensiveness
of a photograph, comprising the part of the photo that is at its strongest when one is not looking at it. Consequently, the photograph becomes a very powerful memory device not because it may trigger memory (and thus, as a form of an archive, inhibit a true remembering or “deep memory,” to borrow Roth’s term) but because it may touch the spectator beyond the moment of viewing and demanding a coming to terms of sorts.

According to Barthes, those photographs that project a punctum have a potential to offer the truth of the subject (71). The “truth” about Josefa, though not linguistically representable due to the lack of information, then may lie in the image of Maron’s grandmother standing in the kitchen wiping a bowl dry, the only one of her parents that does not appear to be posed (PB 54). It is this image the author recalls when looking at Josefa’s grave and which she invests with life. And it is these hands, reproduced in the close-up four pages later, that mirror more truthfully the kind of life Josefa led as a stay-home tailor and mother of four – not the initial studio portrait nor the staged family photographs discussed earlier. It is not surprising, then, that Maron would chose this close-up for reproduction, as a possible site of an encounter with the past that repeats itself in the present.

Photographs serve as a platform for personal encounters not only because of what is included in the frame but also because of what is not. The continuous separation of the Iglarz family described by the text runs parallel to the fragmentation represented in the images. This fragmentation is initiated visually by the image of Pawel and Josefa in Kurow discussed earlier (PB 96). It continues with a last – albeit incomplete – family photo to be found in this book. It shows the remaining children – Bruno had died in 1937 after gall bladder surgery – Paul, Erika (Paul’s fiancé), Marta, Hella and for the first time
granddaughter Monika in Berlin. The caption states that this image was taken after Josefa’s funeral. Her death, not her dislocation, is now the reason for her absence. However, there is another salient gap: Pawel, still alive in the camp of Belchatow, is not with his family during the burial of his wife. His inability to be present at the funeral and consequently in the picture marks a very dramatic point in Pawel’s life as well as in this family history. We have noted before that, according to Hella, the story of this family, especially of Pawel and Josefa, had been one of unity, support and loyalty. Thus far the images supplied by the author have made an effort to reinforce the impression that their happiness was not based on material fortune but on their close ties, on time spent together, on mutual support. However, when Josefa nears death, Pawel cannot be there for her nor accompany her to the grave. The tragic dimension of this circumstance becomes even more apparent as Josefa had chosen to leave her family behind in Berlin in order to accompany Pawel into his forced exile. He, on the other hand, cannot offer equal support, but must leave his sick wife to herself as he has to report to the ghetto from which he will never return.

Maron counters this dramatic absence in the photograph (and in the family’s life) with a presence in the text. The pages between the family photograph (PB 138) and the reproduction of the close-up four pages later (PB 141) are dedicated to Pawel and his response to Josefa’s death. This time, Maron does not use her imagination, but instead gives the authority to tell about this deeply disturbing event not to the children present in the picture, but to the missing Pawel. Through his letters, rather than through the voice of the narrator, the reader hears about the circumstances of her death. It is Pawel’s grief, so desperate and mixed with haunting feelings of guilt that touches the reader: “Stellt euch
aber Mamas Sterben vor. Achtunddreißig Jahre haben wir zusammen gelebt und sie hat in
den letzten 3 Jahren mit mir das bittere Leid, von ihren Lieben getrennt zu sein, geteilt,
und es war mir nicht vergönnt, ihren letzten Stunden beizuwohnen, noch sie zu Grabe zu
geleiten” (*PB* 138). Maron immediately and pointedly takes up the insanity of his self-
condemnation: “Von ihnen [den Kindern] erbittet er Verzeihung für seine Abstammung,
für das Unglück der Mutter, für seine Ohnmacht vor ihrem Tod” (*PB* 138). The
positioning of “von ihnen” at the beginning of the sentence emphasizes her expression of
disbelief, even outrage at his unjustified self-reproach. He, the victim, is asking for
forgiveness for a situation he could do nothing to prevent.46 Nowhere in these excerpts
does he blame the perpetrators, the Nazis, for his fate. Thus in allowing Pawel to express
his own emotional reaction, she offers him a presence through his voice when a personal
presence had been denied to him by the Nazis.

In addition, with the publication of this book Maron fulfills Pawel’s legacy: “Ich
bitte euch darum, tragt es mir nicht nach und vergeßt mich nicht” (*PB* 137). It is his hope
that these letters, documents of his and his wife’s lives, will one day be the vehicles for
remembrance. When the stories are forgotten, the letters will remain and remind as
“stranded objects” of sorts (see Eric Santner), will defy the unreliability of our minds. As
if in anticipation of Hella’s memory gaps, he writes:

> Ich schicke dir also den letzten Brief von Mama an mich mit folgender Bitte: […]

> laßt euch den Brief wortgetreu übersetzen und Hella soll denselben mit der

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46 As becomes clear from another letter written shortly before his death, Pawel’s self-reproaches are based
on his inability to commit suicide during his short stay in Berlin after having returned from the border
camp: “Ich hätte damals, als ich die zwei Wochen nach Berlin kam, meine Urabsicht ausführen müssen,
nämlich mich mit Gas vergiften. Ich wäre schon längst vergessen und Mama konnte womöglich bei euch
bleiben. Aber dazu war ich feige und aus lauter Feigheit baute ich mir allerhand Hoffnungs-Türme […]”
(88).
Maschine abschreiben und Original und Abschrift gut aufbewahren. Schließt ihn in irgend ein Fach ein, daß er nicht verloren geht, und wenn Monika groß ist, zeigt ihr den Brief und erzählt ihr, wie tief unglücklich ihre Großeltern gerade in den alten Tagen geworden sind, vielleicht weint sie dann auch eine Träne. *(PB 112-13)*.

This excerpt shows that Pawel must have given the fate of this document considerable thought. He devises precise steps to guarantee its survival and puts all hope for remembrance on his granddaughter Monika, whom he has never met because she was born after his expulsion. It is interesting to note that Pawel intended for these documents not just to inform of their lives but also to trigger an emotional response. Long before contemporary scholars on Holocaust remembrance emphasized the importance of a personal engagement for true understanding and memory, Pawel realized that the facts alone would not guarantee remembrance but that personal investment is required, a mourning of their fate and their undue deaths. His plea for an emotional engagement with Josefa’s and his lot is an expression of his desire for “memory [] experienced from the inside,” not “through its exterior scaffolding and outward signs” *(Nora, “Between Memory and History” 13)*.

The citation of Pawel’s reaction to Josefa’s lonely death, then, elicits the kind of affective impact we have seen with regard to photographs and which may allow for sustained remembrance. Pawel’s personal response of mourning and despair expressed in his straight-forward and, at the same time, emotional language touch the reader profoundly. Thus, they also offer an opportunity for the kind of personalized encounters with the Holocaust advocated by Roth. These letters do not directly describe the horrors
of the camp (in part, of course, because they were monitored by the Nazis). However, they do – in the same fashion as the corresponding photograph of Pawel reproduced some forty pages later (PB 180) – communicate the dismay, isolation, loss of dignity and the horrors experienced by those deported to ghettos and camps. Maron suspects that this image was taken in 1939 during her grandfather’s return from a camp at the German-Polish border. The man who was once described as “jung,” “zart,” “gefaßt” and “verträumt” now looks distressed and aged, an impression the close-up brings even more to the fore (PB 183) and which is supported by the author’s own reading of it nearly a hundred pages earlier:

"Es gibt ein Foto von meinem Großvater, von dem ich annehme, daß es während dieser Tage in Berlin aufgenommen wurde: der Mund sehr verschlossen, als hätte er das Sprechen aufgegeben; Augen, in denen sich keine Erwartung mehr spiegelt, nur schreckliche Gewißheit. Ein erschöpfter, ein verzweifelter Mann. So kam er zurück. Er hatte einen Blick in seine Zukunft geworfen. (PB 84)"

The strong contrast of this picture of an exhausted and desperate man versus the early images of Pawel (PB 18, 32, 46), where he appears optimistic, a young man full of hopes and plans for himself and his family, exposes the crimes committed by the Nazis perhaps more piercingly than actual photographs of the horrors could. It is precisely this “before,” so violently erased, which Maron mourns throughout the book. The early

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47 Polish Jews were in a particularly hopeless situation because once expelled from Germany, Poland also refused to allow them into the country. Therefore, many spent months in the no man’s land between both countries.

48 In addition to arranging unexpected encounters by placing text and images this far apart, this description also shapes the readers mental image of Pawel and also his or her reading of the later image. Thus, this technique is yet another way Maron controls her sources and their effect upon the reader.

49 Maron describes him as follows: “Er war ein neugieriger und geselliger Mann, der viele Leute kannte und immer noch andere kennenlernte” (PB 55); „gutmütig“ and „sanft“ (PB 59).

50 Sonntag explains that because nowadays we are often exposed to images of horror in the news media, on TV or in the movie theaters, these photographs can have a rather distancing effect (28).
Family photographs and letters thus provide a part of a record and a narrative about a world lost in the Holocaust while the text places the images of destruction into a needed contextual framework. In a way, the text provides the kind of “blind field” described earlier, which turns these images and letters into the wounds Barthes invokes (21). They re-create something of what has been destroyed and consequently elicit the viewer’s mourning.

The conventionality of the family photo allows for identification, thereby bridging the gap between viewers who are personally connected to the event – such as the author – and those who are not. As Marianne Hirsch puts it: “They [family photographs] can expand the postmemorial circle” (251). She describes the reaction to family pictures connected to the Holocaust versus pictures of horror as follows:

Confronted with the latter image [pictures of horror], we respond with horror, even before reading the caption or knowing its context. The context, then, increases the horror as we add to the bodies, or the hair, or the shoes depicted, all those others we know about but which are not in the picture. Confronted with the former image – the portrait or family picture – we need to know its context, but then, I would argue, we respond with a similar sense of disbelief. […] And it is precisely the utter conventionality of the domestic family picture that makes it impossible for us to comprehend how the person in the picture was, or could have been, annihilated. (Hirsch 20-21)

Family photographs, far from serving as mere archival pieces of historical evidence, trigger a strong emotional response once embedded in their historical and private context. Because we all are, in some way, part of a family structure and are familiar with the
conventions of family photography, we respond personally to such images even if they
are not of our own kin: “Recognizing an image as familial elicits […] a specific kind of
readerly or spectatorial look, an affiliative look through which we are sutured into the
image and through which we adopt the image into our own familial narrative” (M. Hirsch
93; emphasis Hirsch). Pawels Briefe thus performs the act of mourning not only through
the voice of the narrator but also by extending the grief over the loss of these family
members to the reader through the practice of looking at family photographs. As Maron
conjures up – and “proves” to us – a family idyll before the war, she appeals to a
universal desire for strong family bonding and harmony. The reader then responds to the
loss experienced not only in Pawel’s words of despair and his exhausted looks but also
through the inability of his family to carry on the message of love and mutual support:
“[M]eine Lieben, [ich] bitte euch, haltet fest zusammen, nützt jede Gelegenheit des
Zusammenseins aus, vertragt euch in jeder Weise gut. Seid lieb zueinander, liebet euch
untereinander, wie Mama euch geliebet hat und ich euch liebe. Laßt keinen fremden
Menschen hindernd zwischen euch treten” (PB 149). We get the idea that, with Pawel,
this family not only lost a father and grandfather, but ultimately the guarantor for
happiness, unity and strength. The salient contrast between Pawel’s and Hella’s voices
exhibit this break, which – as Maron has it – would have been avoidable if only Pawel
had been alive long enough to pass on his legacy lost in the fight for survival during and
after the war (PB 181-82). The remaining Iglarz family is ultimately divided by their
political beliefs: Paul leaves the Communist Party and stays in West Berlin while Hella
and Marta move to the East in their fervent desire to help establish a communist way of
life.51 The reader is thus drawn into the mourning of not only Pawel’s death, but the

51 Although Maron never explicitly says so, it becomes clear that, in her view, this divisive force is
deaths in their own families and the death of family continuity as a whole, caused by the persecution of the Jews, by World War II, by exile and by the separation of Germany into two political entities. It is a mourning of individual histories closely intertwined with the history of the twentieth century. In other words, the mourning of individual losses contextualized into historical events allows for a non-institutionalized, but rather personalized, response to the victims’ horrible fate, precisely as Roth and many other scholars advocate.

Psychology has long ascertained the necessity to mourn a loss, and the Germans’ inability to accomplish this process in the years, even decades following the end of the Nazi-era is a well-established fact often referred to in literature about post-war Germany and public mourning.52 Mourning is needed not only to come to terms with the past and achieve a reinvestment in life, but also to assist in restoring to the victims the dignity denied them by their victimizers (LaCapra, Writing History 66). In his article “Holocaust Testimonies: Attending to the Victim’s Voice,” Dominick LaCapra further explains why a personal response, such as mourning or empathy, is called for. He defines empathy as an affective aspect of understanding which both limits objectification and exposes the self to involvement or implication in the past, its actors, and its victims (102): “One’s own unsettled response to another’s unsettlement can never be entirely under control, but it may be affected by one’s active awareness of, and need to come to terms with, certain problems related to one’s implication in, or transferential relation to, charged, value-

personified by Karl Maron. She raises the questions several times whether Hella would have remained a devoted communist if it was not for her love of Maron. Also, she recalls that it was ultimately an argument between Paul and Karl Maron which led to a break between the two families.

52 The original argument made by Alexander and Margarete Mitscherlich in their often cited study Die Unfähigkeit zu Trauern (1967), based on Freud’s concepts of melancholy and mourning, has found wide acceptance and forms the basis for further investigations into issues of collective trauma, melancholy and mourning.
related events and those involved in them” (103). Thus, similar to Roth, LaCapra suggests that empathy is necessary for understanding in that it prevents objectification as well as distancing and requires personal implication in the events, a coming to terms of some kind.\footnote{With regard to the perpetrators, LaCapra admits that empathy might be resisted. He argues, however, that one should at least recognize and imaginatively apprehend that certain forms of behavior may be possible for oneself in certain circumstances. In fact, he suggests that recognition is necessary for being better able to resist even reduced analogues of such behavior as they present themselves as possibilities in one’s own life. It is within this context that we can situate Maron’s desire to comprehend her mother’s involvement with the oppressive socialist regime in the GDR.} It is important to note, then, that the affective response is not an end in itself. But it also involves the work of the mind, as Barthes puts it so poignantly: “As Spectator I was interested in Photography only for ‘sentimental’ reasons; I wanted to explore it not as a question (a theme) but as a wound: I see, I feel, hence I notice, I observe, and I think” (Camera Lucida 21).

If we return to the photographs, letters, and mental images evoked of the time before the family’s fragmentation, we find that similar demands are placed upon the reader. We see Pawel’s face striken by despair, mirroring the words he put down in his letters from the camp in stark contrast to early family pictures. The contrast is sharpened by a narrative which describes a pre-Nazi-era family idyll not based on wealth or material goods but on unity, strength of character and modesty. As a reader/spectator we see the changes, feel the loss and observe the destruction. Placing this annihilation within the context of the family makes even more painfully obvious the inability of the most nuclear structure, the family, to protect against the horrors of the Nazi regime, demonstrates how the public sphere infiltrated and ultimately destroyed every fiber of the private life.\footnote{Another example for the destruction of private relationships by the Nazi regime is Marta’s boyfriend Hans, who left her in 1938 and then again in 1942 because her half-Jewish background posed too many problems for this relationship.}

Because we relate to the universal idea of family, we must implicate ourselves, ponder
our transferential relation to these events: we must think. What if it happened today, to
us? What if the pressure was on us to join the perpetrators – if “only” as passive on-
lookers – or if we were to become victims ourselves. How would we try to protect our
loved ones and how cope if our attempts failed? What other types of victimizations may
we already be accomplices to?

The photographs in Pawels Briefe thus may offer the kind of encounters
advocated by John Roth. First and foremost, Maron’s quest for truth comes as conflict.
We have seen that an affirmation of a certain degree of truthfulness is of central concern
to the author. On one level, Maron does intend for her photographs, letters, and artifacts
to verify the “truth” she wants to tell. The use of matter-of-fact language instead of a
highly literary style also work toward the same objective.55 However, very much aware
of the deceptions of photography, she explicitly problematizes the construction of visual
narratives based on photography’s apparent referentiality. Frustrated with photography’s
inability to offer a true and complete image of her grandparents’ lives, she does what she
meant to avoid: she uses her own imagination to fill the gaps left by the frames, by
documents and by memory. She offers possible versions of the past, conjuring up lives
without ever erasing her retrospective and constructive approach. The use of photographs
thus provides Maron with an especially effective medium to thematize absences within
the frames and gaps left behind by isolated images. By drawing attention to the fictive
nature of these stories, Maron creates phantoms which point to the painful absences in
this book and consequently in her life and thus reinforce the author’s ongoing struggle
with the facts and material available as well as not available. The author thereby

55 As do the numerous passages where the author cites researched material such as the number of industrial
workers, population growth and average earnings in Neukölln in the early twentieth century (PB 36),
citations from local newspapers (PB 63-64) and many others.
demonstrates the kind of personal investment needed to make historical documents and artifacts relevant to us today. In addition to creating conflict, the encounters with the past in Pawels Briefe also occur by chance and happen fact-to-face, as Roth mandates.

By publishing these encounters in book form, the author ensures that her “pictorial” family history will not be left to the same fate as the letters, photographs and documents had before. It will not end up in her son’s or grandchildren’s attic, forgotten until it falls into someone else’s hands, who can no longer tell the stories of those lives. Instead, she presents Pawels Briefe as a kind of public photo album, which not only displays the pictures but also offers the narratives to a wide range of readers who may or may not recognize some of their own family history in these pages.

By closely tying together the history of the twentieth century with her own family history, she allows for personal encounters with individual people and their stories. The use of photography furthers the personalization of history, promotes a transference into family realm. Affective responses, especially that of mourning, are particularly important because of their regard for the victims as well as for the opportunity to facilitate one’s own implication in the events and a subsequent need for a coming to terms. At times the meetings become compulsive, traumatic, piercing and always present themselves as conflicts for we will never know the past as it was, but have to contend with reconstructing possible versions of it based on the traces at hand: photographs, letters, documents.
Search for One’s History

Thus far, we have discussed Maron’s need to keep the memory of her grandfather alive. We have focused on the crucial role of authentic documents and photographs in approaching her family’s past. However, the author does not simply rely on verifiable sources or her apparently fictive variations. *Pawels Briefe* is, above all, a book of memories. In this part of the chapter I will argue that this work is not only about the memories of Pawel’s life but very much of her own. As Pierre Nora puts it so poignantly: “The quest for memory is the search for one’s history” (289). This book, then, is also very much about her search for identity and her construction of self. The (re)construction of her family history is meant to allow Maron to feel a sense of continuity, belonging and meaningfulness. We will see that even her postmodern awareness of her own motivations and of the constructedness of her story cannot prevent her from giving in to her longings for bridges over personal and historical breaks. The result is a multi-layered memory-text that may, precisely because of its conflictuous and unresolved nature, allow for an ongoing personal engagement with the past and, thus, the kind of deep memory called for by many Holocaust scholars.

As has been discussed in the first chapter, family albums and family histories are written in order to create a sense of continuity and belonging. A desire for such a feeling seems greatest when there are breaks in this continuity. Such breaks can be caused by geographical relocation – most importantly if it occurred involuntarily, for instance through exile, and if it involves major cultural differences between the places of
departure and arrival – or by key economic, cultural, historical or political events such as wars, regime changes, economic crisis etc.

The twentieth century particularly has caused a number of breaks marked by the two world wars, massive migration of refugees or economic emigrants, the change of social systems and others. Because communities, especially the most nuclear one, the family, no longer enjoy the continuity of their forbearers, efforts to create sites of memory assume an ever increased importance: “Our interest in lieux de mémoire where memory crystallizes and secretes itself has occurred at a particular historical moment, a turning point where consciousness of a break with the past is bound up with the sense that memory has been torn” (Nora 284). However, with the death of the generation who experienced the times before these massive breaks, before the annihilation of Jewish life or before the “Hour Zero” in Germany, it is no longer unselfconscious “living memory” that we have access to. Instead, memory becomes a sought-after, often materially-based commodity, needed to overcome the discontinuities of history and to re-connect to one’s origins, serving modernity’s “cult of continuity, the confident assumption of knowing to who and to what we owe our existence” (Nora 293): "Lieux de mémoire originate with the sense that there is no spontaneous memory, that we must deliberately create archives, maintain anniversaries, organize celebrations, pronounce eulogies, and notarize bills because such activities no longer occur naturally”(Nora 289).

Maron’s family has suffered precisely the kind of breaks typical for the twentieth century: migration, exile, war, political persecution, death, and change of political systems. These political and historical events have left their marks on the Iglarz family, denying a history of continuity. At one point Maron expresses her desire for familial
continuity precisely because – due to the expulsion and early death of her grandparents – she has been denied this experience: „[… mir wird] bewußt, daß ich meine Mutter nie als Tochter erlebt habe. Jonas kennt mich als Mutter und zugleich als das Kind seiner Großmutter; mir ist diese Dialektik familiärer Kontinuität vorenthalten geblieben. Nachträglich schaffe ich mir nun die Bilder, an die ich mich, wären meine Großeltern nicht ums Leben gekommen, erinnern könnte, statt sie zu erfinden“ (PB 51). Out of this longing for continuity grows the realization that the time has come to inquire more deeply into the history laid out by the newly found photographs and letters while her mother Hella, the only remaining witness of the time, is still alive to tell about Josefa’s and Pawel’s lives.

Comprehending the motivation for and the nature of such historical and personal ruptures, assessing the consequent changes and speculating on possible alternatives if those turning points had not led into the directions they did, are therefore central concerns in Pawels Briefe and are, perhaps more than the remembrance of Pawel’s life, the chief motivation for Maron’s inquiry into family memory and history: “Was mich mehr interessiert, ist dieser kulturelle Bruch, der auch im Leben meiner Mutter stattfindet. Also die aus einer religiösen Familie kommt, mit einer Festigkeit in der Lebensführung. So, und dann gibt’s einen Bruch und sie landet plötzlich auf der ganz anderen Seite. Das hat mich alles viel mehr interessiert” (Maron in Literatur im Foyer). “More than what?” one might ask. This quote is Maron’s reply to a question about the stylization of her grandfather Pawel. This supports the assumption that this book is, indeed, not so much about Pawel as it is – and the subtitle underlines this conclusion – about this family’s history with all its exemplary ruptures and turning points that finally inform Maron’s
self-understanding. Later in that same television broadcast, when asked again about the stylization of her grandfather, she insists once more on her primary concern:


Maron chooses the discontinuities and turning points of the past century, which are so well reflected in the lives of her forbearers as well as her own as a structuring principle for the narrative she constructs. Apart from her grandfather’s undue death, this crucial break of victims of the Third Reich turning into the perpetrators of the GDR is the one the author is most interested in, the one that most directly relates to her own life. However, the book follows many other ruptures and turning points. In fact, and quite paradoxically, the only continuity in this family history is precisely a series of discontinuities. In order to understand Maron’s longing for continuity and belonging that motivated the research underlying this book, we shall trace some of the breaks in her family history.

In Pawels Briefe, the narrative of breaks and ruptures is reflected both textually and visually. The photographs are – with only a few exceptions – arranged in
chronological order. As in any conventional family album, *Pawels Briefe* also begins with the creators of this family, which Maron chose to tell about: following a general discussion of memories and an introduction of her grandfather, a studio portrait of Pawel appears as a small reprint on the upper left side of the left page, and facing him on the opposite page in the lower left corner is his wife Josefa (*PB* 18-19).

This image – along with Josefa’s – offers, as a starting point for this family history, the opening pages of this family album so to speak, an idyllic “before” – one which, as we have seen, Maron also conjures up in her text as well as in the extra-textual commentaries on this book: this is a time when the young couple, still in Poland and unaffected by the geographical dislocation and political horrors that were to follow, had gone to a photographer to have pictures taken for each other. These images therefore aid the author in presenting the narrative of a harmonious, close and happy Iglarz family discussed earlier. However, although a very important component, the main focus of this book does not lie in this initial unity and strong bonding but rather in the reasons for its loss: the photographs in *Pawels Briefe* tell of the separation of family members for reasons of religious origin, ideological beliefs, geographical location and finally death.

Other than the two family photographs previously discussed (*PB* 32; 46), all subsequent pictures of this family show only smaller units of it: one person (for instance Josefa, *PB* 54), the parents (*PB* 98) or the children only (*PB* 138).

Although the above quotes may suggest so, these ruptures do not, in fact, begin with Hella’s assumption of power or her break with religion (however half-heartedly that may have been).\(^{56}\) It begins with Pawel and Josefa – this is how far back Maron was able

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\(^{56}\) During the family’s visit to the Polish town of Pawel’s origin, Ostrow-Mazowiecka, Hella admits to continuing to pray long after her official break with religion (*PB* 43).
to trace this family’s history – when both left their homes, families and religion in order to convert to Baptism (Josefa from Catholicism and Pawel from Judaism). It is Monika Maron’s son Jonas who makes this observation (PB 109). While Hella oftentimes seems unable to recall events at will, her parents promoted a different kind of forgetting by deliberately refusing to talk about the past, to pass on their memories:

   Es stimmt, daß Pawel mit dem Vergessen angefangen hat. Er hat seinen Kinder nichts erzählen wollen über die orthodoxe Welt, die er verlassen und die ihn totgesagt hatte. Er hat den Kaddisch beantwortet, in dem er die, die ihn vermutlich über ihn gesprochen hatten, nun selbst totschwiegen. […] Wir wissen nicht, warum Pawel Ostrow verlassen hat und nicht bleiben wollte, als was er geboren war: Jude. Er hat die Erinnerung an seine Herkunft seinen Kindern nicht hinterlassen wollen. (PB 109-110)

This is the first significant and haunting break in Maron’s known family history. It is also a resemblance of what happens when people are not remembered, or their memories willingly suppressed: it is a killing of a different kind (“totschweigen”). Through his decision not to pass on the stories of his kin, Pawel eradicates their existence, takes their lives out of a family history as if they had never existed. By silencing their memories, he denies his family members the opportunity to live on in the memories of his children and grandchildren, an opportunity he does seek for himself, as we have seen. Thus, in a sense he assists in the elimination of Jewish life before the Holocaust by erasing the memory of this family.

   The author therefore investigates and narrates her family history at a time when memories are no longer passed on spontaneously in order to defy the forgetting that
began with Pawel and was perpetuated through subsequent generations. There is a need
to comprehend the gaps left behind by silence, death, geographical relocation, by
religious conversion and by the assumption of political power. Understanding means to
try to make sense. From the beginning Maron makes explicit her own awareness of her
need for a narrative that will bestow meaning upon her and her family’s lives and which
will reaffirm her own part in this familial history (*PB* 9). Even as a child, this desire to
belong to a family that has a meaningful – by her definition – heritage leads her to
conjure up an image of her grandfather worthy of her admiration and family relationship.
In this process, young Monika deliberately rejects her grandmother’s and mother’s past –
although they do have their place in this family history\(^57\) – as it seems too closely
associated with her apparently unbearable socialist present, and instead chooses her
grandfather as a guarantor for a different, a significant life:

> Ich wollte anders sein, als meine Abstammung mir zugestand. Und weil die
> Fotografie meiner Großmutter, die schmal gerahmt in meinem Zimmer hing, sie
> allzu deutlich als die Mutter meiner Mutter auswies, fiel meine Wahl als einzigen
> Ahnen, von dem abzustammen ich bereit war, auf meinen Großvater. Daß er
> seiner Herkunft, nicht seinem Glauben nach, Jude war, spielte für meine
> Entscheidung keine Rolle. [...] Vielleicht war es auch nur mein erster Versuch,
> dem eigenen Leben einen Sinn und ein Geheimnis zu erfinden. (*PB* 9)

Although she is able to name and reflect on this deliberate selection, she cannot withstand
it even when writing her book. As the title, the content and even the treatment of images

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\(^{57}\) The mere fact that mother Hella is the only family member still alive who was a witness to the
grandparents’ life times and serves as a connecting link to the past for Maron guarantees her a place in this
narrative.
attest,\textsuperscript{58} she has, once again, chosen her grandfather to ensure the significance of her autobiographical work.

This connection to the grandfather allows her the creation of a narrative of continuity, one that the author is willing to identify with. It also promises to enable her to make sense out of the past ruptures, that offers bridges over the gaps and leads up to the present, to the 58-year-old Monika Maron, a desire to which the author is, once again, not oblivious:\textsuperscript{59}

Ich neige dazu, den Zufällen und spontanen Entscheidungen der Vergangenheit zu unterstellen, sie seien insgeheim schon immer einem sich viel später offenbarenden Sinn gefolgt, und ich befürchte, es könnte ebenso umgekehrt sein: weil man das Chaos der Vergangenheit nicht erträgt, korrigiert man es ins Sinnhafte, indem man ihm nachträglich ein Ziel schafft [...] (PB 13)

Maron thus reflects consciously and critically about her own need for such a narrative that makes sense of the “unbearable” by retrospectively shaping the course of events into a narrative, a trajectory towards an end. At one point, for example, she cannot help but read her grandfather’s fear of the cellar in lieu of his murder as a Jew: “Aber sein Tod, in dem seine Angst die schlimmste Erfüllung gefunden hat, deutet Ereignisse und Eigenschaften um. Wie unsinnig seine Angst vor dem Keller vielleicht auch war, nachträglich ist es mir unmöglich, ihr nicht eine Ahnung zu unterstellen, in ihr nicht das Erbe uralter jüdischer Erfahrung zu sehen” (PB 23-24). Of course it is not death that re-interprets (‘umdeuten’) events and characteristics, but Maron herself, who does have –

\textsuperscript{58} The absence of any comments on Josefa’s studio portrait, as well as her placement at the bottom of the page clearly underline the superior significance Maron still attaches to Pawel, even at the time of the writing of this book.

\textsuperscript{59} This age refers to the time of the writing of Pawels Briefe.
however vague – information about the circumstances of his death and lets her interpretation of his life be affected by this knowledge of Pawel’s end. In another instance the author seems to have had such an objective (‘Ziel’) in mind, as for example, when she struggles to accept that Hella’s boyfriend left her in 1933 simply because his feelings for her had changed, not because she was half Jewish and could have caused him complications (which was the case for Marta’s boyfriend Hans). Finally – and not without hesitation – Maron acknowledges the possibility of being overwhelmed by knowledge of the historical situation and leaves it up to Hella to decide upon the true motivations behind this break-up. She concludes: “Und vielleicht ist es ja auch ein Defekt meiner Generation, eine mechanische Einübung unseres Denkens, wenn wir nicht verdachtslos hinnehmen können, daß im Jahr 1933 eine Halbjüdin von ihrem Freund verlassen wurde, nur weil der sie nicht mehr liebte” (PB 79).

Psychoanalysis has indeed established that, even if one was not actually present, cultural memory, that is, the historical knowledge one has acquired, influences the ways in which we integrate new information about this period into our own narrative. Given Maron’s exposure to the kind of cultural memory associated with National Socialism – one she shares with the generation born during or shortly after the war – her skepticism

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60 Maron also cites examples – one of which we are all to familiar with – in which memory fails us in a more innocent context, where an objective is not easily apparent. Every time she visits Schillerpromenade, the street in Western Berlin she grew up in until her family moved to the East in the early 1950s, her memories conflict with what she sees: “Jedesmal wenn ich hier bin, streiten die Bilder in meinem Kopf miteinander. In meiner Erinnerung sind die Häuser höher, die Straßen breiter, die Wege länger; die Bilder der Kindheit drängen sich unbelehrbar durch das, was ich sehe, und sobald ich die Gegend verlassen habe, gelten wieder nur sie. Sie wollen sich nicht korrigieren lassen” (PB 33-34). Maron thus concludes that our memories are strongly affected by our experiences, our perceptions at the time we witness an event.

61 According to Aleida and Jan Assmann, “cultural memory’ uses permanent forms of representation (as opposed to informal exchanges among members of a particular group, which they define as “communicative memory’), such as written or visual media, anniversaries, memorial sites, public events, in order to preserve memory beyond the realm of individual and communicative memory (see “Gestern im Heute” and A. Assmann Erinnerungsräume).
does not come as a surprise. These passages thus describe the author’s struggle to resist the construction of a narrative that fits her learned notions of the past, but instead to allow for other possible narratives. The author draws attention to the difficulties of negotiating the learned historical information and the personal details of her family’s life, passed on through her mother’s memory.

Trying to mold the past into a history that one can understand, then, also means to select desirable information and reject that which simply does not fit the image one wishes to construct. As we have seen, Maron is not oblivious to the constructive nature of her narrative and of how it may effect the creation of self. She realizes that the answers to the questions of how she became who she is have changed over time, depending on the types of episodes she preferred to think of and on her interpretation of them: “Wie die meisten Menschen habe ich mich in meinem Leben hin und wieder gefragt, warum ich wohl geworden sein könnte, wie ich bin, und habe mir zu verschiedenen Zeiten verschiedene Antworten gegeben” (PB 165-66). It is not by accident that she employs the metaphor of a painting in order to underline this constructive process, which happens over time, requires an agent and – quite contrary to the photograph – can be changed throughout time according to the painter’s wishes: “Vielleicht habe ich dabei die kleinen Szenen und flüchtigen Skizzen den großen Gemälden geopfert, die ich mir in wechselnden Stilarten von meiner Kindheit gemalt habe” (PB 166).

Maron thus comes to the conclusion that subjectivity is the product of specific historical and social conditions and that it can easily change (see Kosta 62 and Weedon 239). Naturally, if one’s subjectivity changes, so does the self-image and thus the stories of the past which will be chosen to support it. Cognitive psychology supports this point:
“Remembering the personal past is guided by one’s current concerns, goals, and self-concept” (McNally 38). Memories are framed differently at different times according to different historical conditions and narratives (Peitsch, Burdett and Gorrara x). Maron’s current concern in writing this book is to come to terms with her awareness of her own desires and (re)creative methods. She aims to re-think her self-understanding, taking into consideration information she was previously unaware of or which she had consciously rejected, such as the letters and photographs as well as Hella’s descriptions of the past. In addition, she confronts not only the newly discovered information about the past, but also her treatment of her material and particularly her own as well as her mother Hella’s memories.

This is one of the central concerns underlying the book. Pawels Briefe is a complex inquiry into the workings of memory and forgetting and into how these processes of selecting or suppressing – willingly or not – episodes from the past relate to the construction of self. In Pawels Briefe, Maron thus provides a meta-discourse on the workings of memory and forgetting, as she asserts herself: “[…] mich interessierte, wie die Erinnerung auf uns kommt, durch welche Temperamente und Überlebenstechniken sie gefiltert wird, und wieviel für immer dem Vergessen anheim gefallen ist“ („Rollenwechsel“ 143). The book serves as the platform for a continuous meandering between the need to remember, a desire to fix memories as a true image of the past salvaged into the present, and a skepticism of all those mental images invoked. Quite fitting with this self-reflexive approach Maron, who oftentimes seems more critical of her mother Hella’s recollections, questions her own memories as well: “Ich kann oft nicht unterscheiden, ob ich mich wirklich erinnere oder ob ich mich an eine meinem Alter und
Verständnis angepaßte Neuinszenierung meiner Erinnerung erinnere” (PB 167). In fact, she repeatedly casts doubts on the very project she has undertaken: “[…] autobiographischen Kindheitsbeschreibungen mißtraue ich ganz und gar, meinen eigenen auch” (PB 165). Here, Maron clearly separates herself from numerous authors of her generation, such as Martin Walser and others, 62 whose “memory books” (Kaiser) on their childhood years during and after World War II insist on the validity of personal memory.

This distinction between different ways of coping with recollections brings to mind the seminal discussion of ancient and current ways to remember by Pierre Nora. In his article “Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire”, he makes an important distinction between “real memory” and what he calls “history.” He describes “memory” as unself-conscious, commanding, all-powerful, spontaneously actualizing, integrated, dictatorial while “our memory,” that is “history,” relies purely on historical traces:

Memory is life, borne by living societies founded in its name. It remains in permanent evolution, open to the dialectic of remembering and forgetting, unconscious of its successive deformations, vulnerable to manipulation and appropriation, susceptible to being long dormant and periodically revived. History, on the other hand, is the reconstruction, always problematic and incomplete, of what is no longer. Memory is a perpetually actual phenomenon, a bond tying us to the eternal present; history is a representation of the past. Memory, insofar as it is affective and magical, only accommodates those facts that suit it; it nourishes recollections that may be out of focus or telescopic […].

History, because it is an intellectual and secular production, calls for analysis and

criticism. […] Memory takes root in the concrete, in spaces, gestures, images, and objects; history binds itself strictly to temporal continuities, to progressions and to relations between things. Memory is absolute, while history can only conceive the relative. (*History and Memory*, 285-86)

It would be difficult to resist alluding to the obvious parallels between Nora’s concepts of “memory” and “history” and the ways Hella and Monika Maron store and access the past in *Pawels Briefe*. As we have seen, Maron – very self-consciously of her role as the author of this family history – gathers these traces from the past, always determined to provide as much documenting evidence as possible. “Modern memory [that is history] is, above all, archival. It relies entirely on the materiality of the trace, the immediacy of the recording, the visibility of the image,” writes Nora. “What began as writing ends as high fidelity and tape recording” (290). Maron’s need to prove the veracity of her story through photographs and letters was established in the early part of this chapter.

More importantly, history is characterized precisely by the intellectual distance, analysis and criticism which Maron exhibits throughout the book (and in many of her other writings such as her book *Animal Triste*, which can be described as one long – if at times ironic – discourse on the workings of memory). If history is “perpetually suspicious of memory” (Nora 286) then there can be little doubt that Maron falls into the category of (family) historian. Her “memory” is “voluntary and deliberate, experienced as a duty, no longer spontaneous” (Nora 289). From the very beginning, Maron prefaces her writing with the assertion that she cannot actually remember the story of her grandparents since she did not even know them (*PB* 8). Rather, this story has been passed down to her, has become meaningful to her and has prompted her desire to “deal“ with it at some point:
“Es kann sein, daß Jahre, sogar Jahrzehnte vergehen, während der uns immer wieder
erinfällt, daß wir uns eines Tages um diese Sache kümmern und uns an etwas oder an
jemanden erinnern wollen. So, glaube ich, ist es mir mit der Geschichte meiner
Großeltern gegangen“ (PB 8). The wording „erinnern wollen” indicates a voluntary, a
creative process as opposed to the involuntary nature of actual remembering or
forgetting.

What Maron is able to recall, however, are not the memories of her grandparents
and their death but the ways in which she found out about them, how this knowledge and
the artifacts left behind have affected her. Maron’s subject is thus not Pawel’s death in
the Holocaust so much as how she came to know about it and how it has shaped her inner
life. Similar to what James E. Young concluded for American artists like Art Spiegelman,
David Levinthal, and Shimon Attie, Maron’s “experiences” of her grandparents and the
Holocaust are “[p]hotographs, film, histories, novels, poems, plays, survivor’s
testimonies. It is necessarily mediated experience, the afterlife of memory, represented in
history’s after-images: the impressions retained in the mind’s eye of a vivid sensation
long after the original, external cause has been removed” (At Memory’s Edge 3-4). It is
this awareness of the mediated character of these (re)collections that set it apart from the
mythical memory Nora describes.

In addition to her open problematization of photography’s ability to deceive, the
mediated character of her experience is exhibited also in Maron’s description of her
grandparents “studio photographs at the beginning of Pawels Briefe: following the
discussion of memories and an introduction of her grandfather, a studio portrait of Pawel
appears as a small reprint on the upper left side of the left page, facing him on the
opposite page, in the lower left corner is his wife Josefa (PB 18-19). Other than the caption underneath Pawel’s portrait, “Pawel und Josefa in Lodz”, the text framed by those two images does not relate directly to the photographs. Instead, Maron discusses the mental images she has of her grandparents, based on the different pictures she has seen:

Das Bild, das ich mir von meinen Großeltern mache, ist schwarzweiß wie die Fotografien, von denen ich sie kenne. Selbst wenn ich mich anstrenge und versuche, mir meine Großmutter und meinen Großvater als durchblutete farbige Menschen mit einer Gesichts-, Augen- und Haarfarbe vorzustellen, gelingt es mir nicht, die farbigen Bilder zu fixieren. (PB 18)

The author thus comments not only on how our desires may effect our reading of pictures, but also on photography’s ability to affect our imagination, to influence our memory or even to become memory. Because there are no color photographs of her grandparents, they only exist as black-and-white images in her mind. The author therefore gives another example not only about her images of the past, but simultaneously reflects on the factors that have shaped them, drawing attention – once again – to the mediated character of her “recollections.”

In addition, the colorless frames automatically result in an inevitable distancing: we do not experience the world as black-and-white.⁶³ These images are thus removed from our common daily experience into a different world, a remote time. Hand in hand with this kind of distancing goes a certain degree of stylization of these pictures.

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⁶³ Black-and-white images also evoke a sense of melancholia, nostalgia and mourning. While Pawels Briefe cannot be considered a work of melancholy, we do find a certain degree of nostalgia about the pre-war family idyll and a strong sense of mourning, which I have explored earlier in this chapter.
Especially today, a time in which color snaps abound, there is often a higher aesthetic value attributed to black-and-white photos, a particular aura of sorts. Despite her son’s comments that since the turn of the century photography was no longer the precious medium it once had been, Maron herself evokes this sense of uniqueness, which harkens back to the Benjamian concept of “aura”:

Die Bilder wirken kostbar, Einzelstücke wie Miniaturgemälde; […] Trotzdem suggerieren die Bilder meiner Großeltern dem Betrachter das Gefühl, etwas Gültiges, nicht Austauschbares zu sehen, was allein schon durch den Ernst der Abgebildeten hervorgerufen wird. Das ist ihr einziges, jeder Beliebigkeit entzogenes Gesicht. (PB 30)

Although the author is well aware that any photographic image can be reproduced from the negative (which we can assume is no longer available in this case), these portraits seem unique.64 Maron even goes so far as to draw a comparison to a miniature painting, a singular work of art. Thus, regardless of photography’s general quality of reproducibility, these old photographs are surrounded by an aura that is constituted through the removal in time, the mystery of circumstances (not witnesses of this time, we do not really know what life was like), their rarity and, due to unavailability of the negatives, the inability to reproduce the exact same image. Even as these are copied in this book, they are not the same as the original: a loss of quality – especially on this type of print paper – is inevitable. This resembles precisely Benjamin’s idea of aura as “a strange web of time and space, the unique appearance of a distance, however close at hand” (see Price 46).

64 Neither did the reproducibility of photographs reduce their aura for Benjamin. His remarks with regard to works of art – that they do lose their aura once they can be reproduced by photography – is often misunderstood to be true for photography in general. However, as Mary Price points out, photographic reproductions of other kinds, of persons, places, things etc. are considered separately by Benjamin (46).
Once again, by reflecting critically on how these black-and-white photographs have affected her images of her grandparents, Maron shows her awareness of the many complicated processes that shape our recollections of the past. By discussing these pictures specifically as black-and-white, she reinforces our distance to the subject matter in time and space, removes them from the ordinary, from anything we know today.

The sense of duty, according to Nora characteristic of all modern memory, is also experienced by the author. Because her grandfather had been unable to live his life to its end, she feels as if she owes him something: “Aber daß mein Großvater als Jude umgekommen war, daß er dem Leben etwas schuldig bleiben mußte, weil man ihn daran gehindert hatte es zu Ende zu leben, und daß darum ich ihm etwas schuldet [...]” motivates her remember his story and ultimately to write this book (PB 9). It becomes clear that this memory project is anything but a spontaneous impulse. It has been planned and willed for decades, a duty that has been owed and is finally paid off (PB 7-8). As such it is self-critical and analytical, careful not to readily buy into the memories she recounts, eager to point out discrepancies between her sources.

Hella’s way to remember, on the other hand, is portrayed quite differently from that of her daughter:

Jedenfalls bin ich keine naïve Erinnernde wie Hella, die befragt nach bestimmten Ereignissen aus ihrem Leben, in einem Regal mit der Jahreszahl 1932 oder 1945 oder 1976 nach diesem bestimmten Päckchen sucht, es findet oder nicht, das aber, wenn sie es findet, ein naturbelassenes Stück Erinnerung voller Düfte, Temperaturen, Geräusche enthält, als wäre es gerade erst verpackt und verstaut worden. (PB 166-67; emphasis Jones)
This description clearly propels us to link Hella to that ancient and mythical memory, described by Nora. Her recollections have indeed “taken refuge in gestures and habits, in skills passed down by unspoken traditions” (Nora 289). Hella therefore remembers such detailed experiences as Pawel’s precise morning routine of preparing for each of his children his or her favorite drink but she is unable to recall, for example, the socio-economic circumstances during and after the war. Thus, Nora’s concept of “real memory” would deliver one possible explanation for the coexistence of Hella’s “ungewöhnlich gutes Gedächtnis” (PB 17) and her many memory gaps, which “stehen[] als ein erklärungsverlangendes Warum über den Jahren nach 1939” (PB 17).

“Hella erinnert sich anders. Hella erinnert sich an Glück,” writes the author (PB 70). Her mother’s ability to remember only the bright moments of her life and her “innocent” capacity – even in the author’s eyes65 – to forget the dark moments clearly suggest permanent evolution, manipulation and appropriation paired with an unawareness of these processes. Hella’s recollections of events that do not sustain a “nach vorne leben” can also remain dormant for long periods of time, forgotten unless revived by outside stimulation such as the – likewise long forgotten – photographs and letters found in her attic. Hella does not question her memories but accepts them as absolutes,66 on which she bases her life story: “Wenn Hella die Skulptur ihres Lebens beschreiben sollte, würde sie vermutlich ein harmonisches kompaktes Werk vor Augen haben, mit einigen Schrunden und Scharten, vielleicht ist irgendwo sogar ein ganzes Stück herausgehauen,

66 See for example in the following quote: “'Das mag im Lichte aller Vorkommnisse dieser Zeit unwahrscheinlich klingen, aber es ist die Wahrheit', schreibt Hella in ihren Notizen” (PB 152).
aber insgesamt erscheint es gelungen“ (PB 70). Maron, on the other hand, having adopted a more critical and analytical stance, cannot accept this idyll: “Wenn ich meiner Biographie eine Gestalt suche, kommt ein dürres eckiges Gebilde zustande, mit willkürlichen Streben nach rechts und links, als hätte da etwas werden sollen, was dem Rest seinen Sinn hätte geben können“ (PB 70).

However, while this opposition between “ancient” and “modern” memory (i.e., history) certainly holds some validity when applied to Pawels Briefe, it is by no means a clear-cut one. As we have noted earlier, at times Maron allows for her imagination to play with the artifacts that no longer have actual memories attached to them. In addition to that, the author, while questioning the positivistic memories of her mother, does give them a voice in this polyphonic work. Though problematizing their idyllic nature, she refrains from making a final judgment on their validity:

Es fällt mir schwer, die Idylle, die mir aus Hellas Erzählungen entsteht, nicht zu attackieren. Kann überhaupt eine Kindheit so ungetrübt gewesen sein? Eltern so makellos? [...] Haben ihr gewaltsamer Tod und die furchtbaren Jahre, die Hellas Kindheit folgten, die frühen Erinnerungen nicht paradiesisch verklärt und unantastbar gemacht? Vielleicht; vielleicht aber auch nicht. (PB 50)

In fact, Maron cannot help but conjure up and indulge, from time to time, in that same mythic idyll, of which she is so suspicious. She stylizes her grandfather as a guarantor for happiness and unity, a protector against the kind of life under a communist regime Maron had to face: “Ich kann mir einfach nicht vorstellen, daß unser Leben mit Pawel ebenso verlaufen ware, wie es ohne ihn verlaufen ist. Alles, was ich inzwischen über ihn weiß, läßt mich vermuten, dass Hellas fragloses Bekenntnis zu ihrer Partei und zu der neuen
Macht in Pawel wenigstens Zwiespalt geweckt hätte“ (PB 180-81). Here, she does not question where all her knowledge of hiim comes from and how that may effect her understanding of hiim. In fact, she readily perpetuates such family idyll herself, as we have seen earlier.

Moreover, on several occasions the author also offers her own recollections as an absolute (see PB 167) or at least acknowledges the fact that the fluidity of memories can be far more productive in truly remembering the past than the fixation of facts in archives, monuments, memorials or other institutionalized forms of memory (PB 94).

A look at the way Maron puts the different voices of Pawels Briefe into dialogue also reveals that she is by no means ready to adopt a purely distant and critical approach, on a meta-level continually reflecting on her techniques and motivations. Contrary to what Katharina Boll claims and to the stated intentions of the author herself, Maron does not simply weave together different voices in a neutral and non-invasive fashion (Boll 98). Instead, she comments on the content of Pawel’s letters or Hella’s diary notes, making evaluative statements or dramatizing their effect. Maron cites an episode, for example, in which even Hella is astonished at her own insensitivity when rereading a letter written by Pawel eleven days after Josefa’s death to his son Paul: “Hella schrieb mir ich soll versuchen (darüber) hinwegzukommen, ich kann es aber nicht” (PB 129). Here, the author’s response contains the most explicit criticism of Hella’s optimism, this “nach vorne leben” which Hella – and with her the majority of the German people – exercised so successfully during and after the war:

Vielleicht hat ein nicht willkommener Zweifel diesen Umweg [von fünfzig Jahren] gebraucht, um dem Verstand vorstellig zu werden und zu fragen, ob nicht
auch das Unabänderliche zuweilen nicht hinnehmbar sein kann, ob das kräftige “nach vorne leben” nicht den Sinn für das Zarte verkümmern läßt, ob das unbeirrbare Hoffen nicht blind machen kann für die längst eingetretene Katastrophe. (*PB* 131-32)

Thus, Maron does not simply follow her own motto: “Die Interpretationshoheit für Ihre Biographie gehört Hella”(*PB* 79). Nor does she position the voices of other family members coequally next to the author’s voice, as Boll asserts (98). Instead her commentary often suggests how to read, how to evaluate the voices Maron incorporates.

The inadequacy Maron attributes to Hella’s optimism becomes apparent in other parts of the text as well: “Hellas Briefe lesen sich wie ein einziger, um Frohsinn bemühter, die Bedrängnisse und Gefahren eher aussparender Begleittext zum Leben der Iglarzschen Geschwister in Berlin. Keine großen Themen, dafür immer wieder das Wetter, der Besuch von gestern, das Essen von heute […]” (*PB* 120). Then a quote from Hella’s letter which, again, reflects insensitivity and the inability to understand the parents’ isolation and need for more in-depth information: “Papa, Du schreist immer noch nach inhaltsvollen Briefen, obwohl wir Dir schon sehr oft klargemacht haben, daß wir nichts anderes zu schreiben wissen. Du mußt Dich schon mit diesen Briefen abfinden” (*PB* 120). Especially the words “schreist,” “klargemacht” and “Du must dich […] abfinden” are examples of a rather harsh and forceful language which differs notably from Pawel’s sensitive, emotional and humble words quoted earlier. The carefully chosen contrasting quotes taken from the writings of the two therefore support the construction of a story of contrasting personalities, values and life-decisions, Maron is eager to (re)construct and prove. Oftentimes the author intensifies the effect of the quotes by
highlighting a certain tone or content that will confirm her own image of this family’s history. These are the passages, then, in which Maron seems most vulnerable and oblivious to the impulse to create a narrative that harmonizes with the preconceived notions she has built up throughout the years of her childhood, adolescence and adulthood.

We often have the impression that the quotations in *Pawels Briefe* were chosen by the author with a specific objective in mind. Contrary to the manipulative nature of the photograph and memories, however, Maron never problematizes the construction of a narrative merely by a selection, structuring and contextualizing of sources. The one tentative acknowledgement of her role as manufacturer of this fabric of voices comes on the level of punctuation. The only quotations marked as such are those taken from Pawel’s and Hella’s letters, not those statements made in oral conversations between mother and daughter or others.67 This technique has two effects: on one hand it serves to further emphasize the authenticity of the letter-quotations while, on the other, it acknowledges Maron’s authorial role in reconstructing encounters and conversations. However, the text fails to problematize Maron’s interventions on the level of structuring and evaluating her sources as elaborately as she does the photographs and memories she incorporates. A discussion of her inability to resist these impulses would have made more complete and therefore credible her otherwise very self-reflexive approach to writing this book.

Thus we note that, although *Pawels Briefe* certainly fulfils the attributes of Nora’s concept of “modern memory” (i.e. history), Maron’s handling of the past also displays

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67 Quotations from Hella’s diary present a special case: the author does not consistently mark them with quotation marks. Compare, for example, the quote on page 173 which is embedded in quotation marks while the one on page 176 is not.
characteristics of “mythic memory.” Oftentimes, these result out of Maron’s personal investment in this story, out of her desire to construct a pre-war family idyll and her longing to connect to that as well as out of her need to confirm her pre-existing notions about her family members, namely Pawel and Hella. This meandering between the critical and self-reflexive approach to the bygone and the urge to let personal desires guide such an approach points to the complicated and multi-facetted issues involved in any dealing with the past and their representation in the present.

The complex nature of Maron’s work, the combination of mythic forms of memory with a distanced questioning of those very recollections, adding fictive elements whenever facts are not available, closely resembles Marianne Hirsch’s concept of postmemory:

[P]ostmemory is distinguished from memory by generational distance and from history by deep personal connection. Postmemory is a powerful and very particular form of memory precisely because its connection to its object or source is mediated not through recollection but through an imaginative investment and creation. […] My notion of postmemory is certainly connected to Henri Raczymow’s “mémoire trouée,” his “memory shot through with holes,” defining also the indirect and fragmentary nature of second-generation memory. (22-23)

Thus, precisely the characteristics that distinguish postmemory from memory, namely the strong imaginative investment and deep personal engagement needed to recreate the past, yield this form of memory particularly fruitful for a remembering of events that are increasingly removed from us in time and space.
It has become clear that, although Maron exhibits the self-reflexive and distanced stance of a (family) historian, in *Pawels Briefe* she goes beyond merely collecting and arranging the evidential pillars of her grandparents’, her mother’s and her own lives. She moves into the realm of imagination and grants validity to a number of possible versions of the past based on coexisting, at times conflicting, memories, fictional accounts and artifacts, thereby problematizing the very nature of all “storage media” alike: documentary material as well as personalized accounts. Although there is a strong impulse by the author to write a story that will enable her to connect to her origins and that will provide a narrative that leads up to the present and thus bestow meaning on her life and those of her forebearers, Maron generally resists the harmonizing effect of one true past. In so doing, she forestalls any kind of closure and thereby engages the reader in the workings of postmemory that force him to negotiate the possibilities presented in this book.

In conclusion, *Pawels Briefe* can be described as a complex, multi-layered work, composed as an attempt to come to terms with a past marked by ruptures and dislocations. At a time when spontaneous memory of the events Maron is interested in is vanishing, the author embarks on her quest for memory. While at first sight it appears that *Pawels Briefe* is about the remembrance of her grandfather’s life, it soon becomes clear that it is at least as much about the coming to terms with her own life. The quest for the memory of Pawel becomes the search for her own history.

Holocaust scholars such as John K. Roth insist that the only way to escape an institutionalization of Holocaust memory is to elicit encounters with the past. Such must
come as conflict, by chance and through the particularities of one’s personal experience. Maron’s use of photographs and documents presents possibilities for such encounters. Very importantly, the author presents her own conflicts with her material and even instills uncomfortable insecurities in the reader. On one hand, she does intend to write a history, based on collected evidence and factual information. Maron uses photographs, letters and other documents to convince the reader that s/he is not reading a purely fictional story, but that the characters actually existed. However, photographs also provide her with an opportunity not only to emphasize their apparent relationship to a past reality but also to problematize their referentiality and draw attention to their deceptive nature. By problematizing the truth value of even such a documentary media as photography, she is able to engage the reader in a discussion on the value of such apparently authentic documents in accessing the past. Maron suggests that authenticity of (arti)facts alone may not guarantee an adequate dealing with the past, that it will not lead to true remembering. Personal engagement is needed. This can come in the form of allowing one’s imagination to fill in for those gaps left behind, thereby drawing attention to the painful absences and simultaneously evoking the lives of the persons who were denied the right to live. Photographs with their simultaneous claim to both, life and death, are thus particularly effective in this context. At the same time, they provide for the type of personal engagement Holocaust scholars have argued for. Family pictures, especially, can evoke the horrors of the Nazi persecution more forcefully than images explicitly depicting violence and atrocities, because by alluding to our own family relationships they make us feel the pain of loss on a deeply personal level. Thus, family photographs can elicit deep emotional responses such as empathy and mourning needed in order to restore dignity to
the victims, to reinvest life and to try understanding the extent of the horrors and the crimes by emphasizing our transference relationships to these events.

*Pawels Briefe* presents a site for conflict not only in the way the author negotiates concepts of authenticity and truthfulness with regard to photography. Her approach to the past through memories is equally disconcerting to herself and to the reader. Maron’s expressed aim in writing this family history is merely to understand it. However, understanding means to assign meaning to events, to create a narrative towards an end. The book illustrates how an inquiry into the past is always informed by present needs. They determine what aspects of the past we chose to investigate and include in our narrative and which ones we reject or simply ignore. *Pawels Briefe* also demonstrates how the past, the continuous reframing and re-interpreting of it, based on the changing forms of inquiry, shapes our present self-understanding. Maron, for example, struggles not to stylize her grandfather as a guarantor of happiness and meaning in her search for self-definition. She also finds it difficult to accept that her present self is a result of the breaks of twentieth century history which she may never be able to understand or to integrate into a coherent personal narrative.

The value of Maron’s work lies precisely in the presentation of these unresolved conflicts. Despite the strong impulse to create a homogeneous family history that “makes sense,” Maron never fully gives in to it, thereby fulfilling the demand of many scholars on memory for a more differentiated treatment of the past: “[O]ne may maintain that there is something inappropriate about modes of representation which in their very style or manner of address tend to overly objectify, smooth over or obliterate the nature and impact of the events they treat” (LaCapra, “Holocaust Testimonies” 20). Instead, *Pawels*
*Briefe* presents a constant struggle between the need to understand the past with its ruptures, turning points and lose ends and her own awareness of this need and an acknowledgement of its impossibility. By including numerous passages reflecting on her motivations and the processes of reconstructing the past through documents, memories and imagination, Maron manages to create a complex structure of – often contradictory – artifacts and writing that relate to and comment on one another. The result is a polyphonic self-reflexive work that questions the mechanics of memory and its representation, the construction of the past, and at times the very agenda of this book by providing the reader with opportunities for personalized encounters with the lives she describes. Maron thus counteracts abstract and de-personalized approaches to the past as well as sentimentalized and pseudo-authentic recreations of it. As Friederike Eigler puts it so poignantly: “[i]t is precisely the ‘messy’ nature of Maron’s memory text that allows for a productive engagement with the past” (*Cultural Memory* 402), that is, because her mode of representation in “different and nonlegislated ways, but still in a fashion that inhibits or prevents extreme objectification and harmonizing narratives” (LaCapra, “Holocaust Testimonies” 20) allows for the kind of “emphatic unsettlement” that will truly engage the reader with the text: “Indeed, it is related to the performative dimension of an account, and, despite the ways performativity may lend itself to abuse, the problem of performative engagement with unsettling phenomena is important in an exchange with the past” (20).
This chapter will address questions of representation of the Nazi genocide and will investigate how Sebald’s use of photographs addresses the most common concerns raised within the context of the Holocaust. My overriding argument is that through the writing of *Die Ausgewanderten* and *Austerlitz*, Sebald has sought to find a way to defy conventional and institutionalized forms of memory or forgetting and to keep the remembrance of those who suffered from the consequences of the Holocaust alive in the minds of his many readers.

Sebald achieves that by highlighting the mediated nature of his writing as well as his images. Because of their inherent referentiality, photographs are especially useful to Sebald in pursuing his “poetics of uncertainty,” which I will argue for in the first part of the chapter. By denying the reader the comfort of a separation between fact and fiction, he unsettles the reader, forcing him to personally engage with the text. Photographs also allow the author to stress the fragmentary nature of his text and the lives it conjures up as well as to personalize historical events. Images enable Sebald to speak the “language of silence,” to evoke horror through linguistic muteness countered by visual presences. The result is an unsettling, hybrid text which continuously and self-reflexively questions itself, emphasizes absences and inhibits closure.

Winfried Georg Maximilian Sebald was born on 18 May 1944 in the small southern German village of Wertach. During the Nazi-era, his father served in the
military and did not return from the fighting and ultimately an internment in France until years after the war had ended. From 1954 to 1963, the boy went to school in Immenstadt and Oberstdorf. Sebald began his studies of German and comparative literature in Freiburg until, 2 years later, he decided to continue in Fribourg, Switzerland. After working as a lector at the University of Manchester from 1966-68, he returned to Switzerland to teach elementary school in St. Gallen. In 1969 he went back to England, first to Manchester and finally to Norwich where he was appointed as Lecturer in German at the University of East Anglia. Besides a year in Munich, where he worked for the Goethe-Institut, he remained at the University of East Anglia where he became Professor for European Literature in 1988. At the height of his career Sebald died in a car accident on 14 December 2001.


Although Sebald spent most of his adult life outside of Germany, he wrote mainly in German. Soon after the translation of *Die Ausgewanderten* in 1996, however, the author met with high acclaim not only in Germany but also in the UK and the USA.\(^{69}\) Especially following his death in 2001, Sebald’s works have received increased scholarly attention. Conferences were organized and several book-length studies on this author have appeared within the past two years.\(^{70}\) While virtually all of these books address questions of memory in Sebald’s works and several articles have examined his use of photography, only a few studies discuss the two in relationship to each other. More importantly, no study has been published that links the author’s self-conscious and at times playful arrangement of photographs within these hybrid texts not only to memory but also to the larger project of remembrance of the victims of the Holocaust.

Most critics agree that both *Die Ausgewanderten* as well as *Austerlitz* are books that revolve around the Holocaust, specifically around the effects this limit-event had and still has on individual lives.\(^{71}\) Although some might still argue that literature does not constitute an adequate form to represent this event,\(^{72}\) nearly all scholars and artists agree that it can be a very fruitful vehicle in the remembrance of this horrific past, precisely

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\(^{69}\) In fact, the outstanding reception Sebald enjoyed outside of his native Germany has led some scholars to suggest that Germans have been less enthusiastic about his writings. However, as Anne Fuchs points out in her excellent study “*Die Schmerzensspuren der Geschichte*” (2004), Sebald was widely discussed in the German press as well (14).


\(^{71}\) Although traditionally the term “Holocaust literature” describes works written by victims which deal with their life and suffering during the Holocaust, I agree with Susan Sontag when she calls *Die Ausgewanderten* an “example of Holocaust literature.” Even though the event itself is never directly mentioned, it is continually evoked through images as well as words such as “Seifenfabrik,” “Knochen- und Häutelager,” verbrannt (DA 204), “Asche” (DA 253) or the general content. The same is true for *Austerlitz*, where we have a protagonist who escaped Nazi persecution through the *Kindertransport*. While Sebald has expressed his dislike for the term Holocaust literature, he does conclude that this event is at the heart of many of his works (Jaggi, “Recovered Memories”).

\(^{72}\) See for example Berel Lang (*Act* 151; *Writing* 246) or Irving Howe (“Writing” 188).
because it not only appeals to the mind but also elicits personal and emotional responses that make for an ongoing engagement (Epstein 269):

Erinnern heißt, das geschichtliche Erbe zum Bestandteil der eigenen moralischen und politischen Identität zu machen. Das geschieht aber nur dann, wenn die geschichtliche Erfahrung nicht ausschließlich zum Betätigungsfeld des verarbeitenden Verstandes, sondern zur Herausforderung wird für Phantasie und Emotion, Gewissen und für eine auf die Zukunft bezogene Gestaltungskraft. Hier setzt die Aufgabe der Literatur ein. (Heinz Schuhmacher 59)

The key question at the heart of all debates surrounding the representation of the Holocaust is how to use literature as a way to keep the memory of this event, particularly of the victims, alive without drifting into the voyeuristic, the sensational, the superficial, or the sentimental or without institutionalizing memory itself. This problem is compounded by the fact that these memories are no longer first-hand recollections of the events. Sebald as well as Maron and Liebmann are authors of the second generation who do not share the horrific experiences of those they are writing about. Thus, they must struggle to define artistic parameters to represent this past.

An overwhelming abundance of scholarly books and articles have been published on this subject. The majority of those, however, stress very similar demands. Most importantly, the text must self-reflexively and incessantly question itself, its motivations and possible effects (Brumlik 203). It must draw attention to the mediated nature of its narrated material. The self-reflexive commentary must disrupt the facile linear progression of the narration and inhibit any sense of closure (Friedländer, Memory 131).

Furthermore, while the Holocaust must be written about, many advocate a “language of
silence,” claiming that “silence concerning some massive event is possibly the most explicit narrative of all” (Friedländer, “Historical Writing” 67). Such writing emphasizes absences and privations even as it struggles to find a language to express the horror. Others also stress the importance of indirectness, since the extent of the horrors cannot be directly addressed (Steiner 155-57). Especially for German authors such as Sebald, Maron, and Liebmann, it is vital to lend a voice to the victims and to recreate the everyday history of those who died instead of only focusing on their death and thereby perpetuating the victimization (Friedländer, “Trauma” 262; Domansky 204; Hartman, Remembrance 6). The most crucial issue, however, continues to be the question of the legitimacy of fiction. How closely should the work be based on historical facts? How much and what type of creative inventions are permissible? And how are these treated on the narrative level? This debate also mirrors a very similar one which tries to negotiate history – believed to be based on facts – and memory – a recreation of past experiences – as ways of knowing and representing the past. Saul Friedländer’s request can very well be read as a response to these questions and as a demand on all literature and other representations of the Holocaust: he insists on the “simultaneous acceptance of two contradictory moves: the search for ever-closer historical linkages and the avoidance of a naïve historical positivism leading to simplistic and self-assured historical narrations and closures” (Memory 131).

W.G. Sebald is certainly aware of the issues discussed above. While he also believes that the Holocaust must be dealt with in literature, he is very cognizant of the difficulties of such an endeavor: “I have always felt that it was necessary, above all, to

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73 In her book Language of Silence (1999) Ernestine Schlant investigates the silences of West German literature about the Holocaust.
write about the history of persecution, of vilification, of minorities, the attempt to eradicate a whole people. In pursuing these ideas, I was at the same time conscious that it is practically impossible to do this. To write about concentration camps, in my view, is practically impossible” (Interview with Silverblatt). Yet, as we have seen, many critics maintain that Sebald has done exactly that. In this chapter I will argue that in his books *Die Ausgewanderten* and *Austerlitz* Sebald tries to find a form to write about the Holocaust, taking into consideration precisely the demands cited above. He uses a complex web of narrative structures, photographs and even extra-textual commentaries to create a work of memory that elicits deep personal and ongoing engagement from the reader. Sebald writes against a mindless and superficial reception of his literature that might lead to forgetting. Instead, by demanding a slow and painstaking working through, by unsettling the reader through questioning his own form as well as content, he creates haunting encounters with the past that grant these lives a present and future.

**Suspension of Belief**

In his four stories, published under the title *Die Ausgewanderten*, W. G. Sebald fabricates a complex construct of different narrative levels and interrelations. He integrates stories told by others, memoirs, dreams, flash-backs, autobiographical and biographical details as well as photographs to trace the lives and ultimate deaths of the four protagonists Dr. Henry Selwyn, Paul Bereyter, Ambros Adelwarth, and Max Aurach.

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74 This interview is available as a sound record online at http://www.kcrw.com/cgi-bin/db/kcrw.pl?show_code=bw&air_date=12/6/01&tmplt_type=show.
All four are, in one way or another, linked to the suffering associated with the Holocaust or its aftermath and have eventually – long after their emigration to England, France or the United States – taken their lives or have languished and ultimately faded away as a result of their suffering. Austerlitz’ fate is a similar one, except for the important fact that at the end of the book we do not find the protagonist’s death but a new beginning of some sorts. While Die Ausgewanderten contains 80 photographs75 of such inconspicuous things such as small tea makers or tickets of boat rides, of dark and dreary landscapes, houses in decay and finally of people or parts of them, among the 84 images in Austerlitz there is a clear emphasis on architecture, along with a few land- and cityscapes as well as people.

In this first part, I will examine questions of factuality and fiction associated with the images in this book. Are photographs offered to prove the veracity of the text? Or does the author play on the obvious referentiality of the photographic media? What effects does the truth value which Sebald, at times, ascribes to photographs have on the reader? How do extra-textual commentaries offered in interviews engage with his writing and influence their reception? I will argue that Sebald, while invoking the documentary qualities of photographic images, also deliberately calls them into question. He simultaneously seeks to represent truthful facts about the past and questions the very possibility of doing so. His treatment of the paradoxical nature of photography results in a self-reflexive and ever-questioning text that continuously draws attention to the mediated nature of any representation, even such a referential one as photography. Through his ambiguous and troubling use of photography as well as his textual and extra-textual comments on it he smudges the borders between fact and fiction in order to

75 The number of images is slightly different in the English translation, as are the sizes and arrangements of the photographs.
unsettle the reader and elicit a deep personal engagement with the text. It is this ongoing engagement, the reader’s inability to fix meaning and move on, that will grant a future to the lives traced in *Die Ausgewanderten* and *Austerlitz*.

Despite the state of uncertainty which Sebald may try to impart on the reader, clearly, the verification of facts woven into those stories plays a significant role for the author, as it does for many scholars as well as artists trying to approach this terrible past. We have seen that scholars such as LaCapra and Friedländer who acknowledge that the truth can never be told nevertheless insist that it must be approximated as closely as possible (LaCapra, *History and Memory* 182; Friedländer, *Memory* 131). To the author, photography seems to function as a means for such approximation: Most times he carried a small snap-shot camera with him in order to be able to record and subsequently verify events. In one of his numerous interviews he explains:


Here we find the same opposition between photography and the written work – convincing visual document on one side and fabricated writing on the other – as we have already seen in Maron which also mirrors common belief (see chapter one).

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76 Sara Horowitz puts it poignantly: “Broadly speaking, there is a high degree of discomfort with the idea of an aesthetic project built on actual atrocity, as well as a propriety sense of what belongs properly to the domain of the historian” (277).

77 In his book-length study *The Reconfigured Eye: Visual Truth in the Post-Photographic Era* William Mitchell argues that even in our postphotographic era we continue to view photographs as snippets of an unreachable and yet real past.
Photographs, then, are used to show the reader that the narrative which is about to unfold is based on real events and people. In another interview he also concedes that “every narrator has the need to verify his level of knowledge” (Boedecker 1993). His “level of knowledge” (Wissensstand) refers, of course, less to his knowledge in general but rather to the results of his research on the protagonists’ lives.

Although the above statement also bears some irony – to which we will return later – without a doubt, Sebald’s images do bear witness, oftentimes to very meaningful moments, such as the photograph of the keys to the Jewish cemetery in Bad Kissingen and of the sign on the cemetery gate that reads “Dieser Friedhof wird dem Schutz der Allgemeinheit empfohlen. Beschädigungen, Zerstörungen und jeglicher beschimpfende Unfug warden strafrechtlich verfolgt. /§§ 168.304 StGBV. Stadt Bad Kissingen” (DA 333). The authenticity of the image is of great significance, as the reader finds out through the text. The fact that these keys could not easily be found and – once found – did not even fit is an indication for the rarity of their use. No one comes to visit here. No children or grandchildren could mourn the dead, and the Germans refuse to take on the “work of mourning” (Trauerarbeit). On the contrary, if the cemetery attracts attention, it is by those who come to damage it, as the sign indicates. Through these images, Sebald renews and gives evidence to Mitscherlich’s reproach that the Germans are incapable of mourning. In fact, he goes even further to suggest their unwillingness to confront the past and ensuing questions of guilt (DA 338). In addition, text and image point into the most recent German past as well as to the present where graveyard desecrations and xenophobic attacks are the order of the day. Here, the visual has a very powerful effect, one the written word alone could not achieve. While a story about of the cemetery might

78 Throughout this chapter I will cite Die Ausgewanderten as DA and Austerlitz as A.
be fabricated, the photograph of the sign functions as an authoritative reminder of its actual existence. The reader cannot escape the factuality of these images but must confront the stories they tell. Thus, these photographs stand precisely for the “search for ever-closer historical linkages” called for by Holocaust scholars (Friedländer, Memory 131).

However, if the authentication of text was the only motivation for Sebald’s inclusion of photographic images, one begins to wonder why he also includes those which do not directly relate to the text, thus clearly separating text and image. In many instances the written and the visual seem to have nothing to do with each other and the reader is unsure about the reason for bringing both together or for including a particular image at all. What, for example, could possibly be verified by a picture of a landscape darkened by a low-hung cloud (DA 266)? Other than very vague shadows of a telephone post in backlight – perhaps they are bare trees – we cannot discern any details. This picture is embedded in the narrator’s account of his travel to Manchester in the winter of 1989/90, where he was to visit the protagonist of the fourth story in Die Ausgewanderten, Max Aurach. Because one can hardly make out anything, it is unclear how this image is to authenticate the text or vice versa? The reader learns that it may be futile to seek an analogous correlation of text and image in which one illustrates, explains or verifies the other. Rather, Sebald breaks down the traditional referential relationship between photograph and narrative and points to more productive interactions, which shall be discussed in the following.
This becomes even more evident in an instance in which the author problematizes the false nature of one image within the text. Aurach’s uncle Leo comments on a newspaper photograph of the book burning in Würzburg in 1933:

Der Onkel bezeichnete diese Fotografie als eine Fälschung. Die Bücherverbrennung, so sagte er, habe in den Abendstunden des 10. Mai – das wiederholte er mehrmals –, in den Abendstunden des 10. Mai habe die Bücherverbrennung stattgefunden, und weil man aufgrund der zu diesem Zeitpunkt bereits herrschenden Dunkelheit keine brauchbaren Fotografien habe machen können, sei man, so behauptete der Onkel, kurzerhand hergegangen und habe in das Bild irgendeiner anderen Ansammlung vor der Residenz eine mächtige Rauchfahne und einen tiefen Nachthimmel hineinkopiert. Das in der Zeitung veröffentlichte fotografische Dokument sei somit eine Fälschung. (DA 274)

Similar to Maron, Sebald makes the reader aware of possible manipulations of photography and denies him or her the comfort of trusting it as document. Through Aurachs’s uncle Leo, Sebald raises the question of true referentiality of the photographic medium. This is further emphasised by Sebald’s choice of the words “fotografische Dokument” instead of simply “Fotografie.”

Interestingly enough and to complicate matters, this forgery actually does serve a documentary purpose. Uncle Leo’s story, told through Aurach and ultimately through the narrator, prompts the latter, who finds it difficult to believe, to search for this image in order to determine the story’s veracity: “Auch mir war die […] Würzburger Geschichte zunächst eher unwahrscheinlich erschienen, doch habe ich seither die Fotografie, um die
es sich handelt, in einem Archiv in Würzburg ausfindig machen können, und es besteht, wie leicht zu sehen, tatsächlich kein Zweifel, daß der von Aurachs Onkel ausgesprochene Verdacht gerechtfertigt gewesen ist’ (DA 274-75). Within the context of this story, the forgery does indeed give evidence, not of the book burning on the evening of May 10th of 1933, but to its falsification, and thus lends proof to the surrounding narrative. 79

Now aware that a photograph can indeed be used or abused to lend force to a lie or the truth likewise, the reader is often kept in the dark as to the veracity of the images in the book altogether. We have no way of knowing whether the photograph of a man standing on the shore of a water, for example, is indeed an image of the author as the context may have us believe (DA 130). Through later interviews one learns that the author has, in fact, included images which do not display the persons, places or things described. Sebald goes even further to confess his own manipulations of his “documents par excellence.” In one interview, for example, he comments on the photographic reproduction of two pages taken out of the narrator’s uncle Ambros’ agenda. Six pages earlier Sebald writes:

Vor mir auf dem Schreibtisch liegt das Agendabüchlein des Ambros, das mir die Tante Fini bei meinem Winterbesuch in Cedar Glen West ausgehändigt hat. Es ist ein in weiches, weinrotes Leder gebundener, etwa zwölf auf acht Zentimeter großer Taschenkalender für das Jahr 1913, den der Ambros in Mailand gekauft haben muß, […] Die Entzifferung der winzigen, nicht selten zwischen mehreren Sprachen wechselnden Schrift hat nicht wenig Mühe bereitet und wäre

79 The inclusion of a forged picture of a real and shameful event poses an important dilemma. It may appear that such anecdote might feed into revisionist thought. By problematizing the forgery, however, Sebald inhibits such an interpretation and instead calls for a close and mindful reading of any evidential material, whether presented in this book or elsewhere.
wahrscheinlich nie von mir zuwege gebracht worden, hätten sich nicht die vor
beinahe achtzig Jahren zu Papier gebrachten Zeilen sozusagen von selber
aufgetan. (*DA* 187-88)

What follows are pages full of what seems like a direct citation out of this agenda. Then,
as if to prove the veracity of his source – and Sebald often makes it a point to name his
sources or lend them a voice to add another level of veracity – the large image of the
agenda book appears. However, Sebald admits to having photographed these pages only
after first writing them himself: “Ah. That [English entry of Adelwarth’s diary displayed
in text], however, is falsification. I wrote it” (Interview with Angier 13).

Thus, it becomes clear that Sebald carefully manipulates his source material in
order to achieve the intended effect. Eric Homberger explains that Sebald “was an
exacting customer at the University of East Anglia copy shop, discussing what might be
done with his images, adjusting the size and contrast.”

The poor quality and visibility of
his images are, therefore, not by chance. In fact, the author’s technique closely
resembles that of the painter Jan Peter Tripp with whom he collaborated for one of the
author’s last works, *Unerzählt* (posthumously published 2003), and which Sebald
described in *Logis in einem Landhaus*:

> Das photographische Material, von dem sie [Tripps realistic drawings] ihren
>Ausgang nehmen, wird sorgfältig modifiziert. Die mechanische
>Schärfe/Unschärferelation wird aufgehoben, Hinzufügungen werden gemacht und

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80 The obituary by Eric Homberger, published on December 17, 2001 by *The Guardian*, is available online at [http://books.guardian.co.uk/news/articles/0,6109,619971,00.html](http://books.guardian.co.uk/news/articles/0,6109,619971,00.html).

81 Neither are they just the unfortunate result of the bad paper quality provided by some printing presses, as Heinrich Boehncke contends: “Die “Andere Bibliothek” eignet sich offenbar nicht besonders gut für den Abdruck von Fotos. […] Ein merkwürdiger Grauschleier liegt auf vielen Bildern, und das ist […] schade” (44).
Likewise, Sebald manipulates his photographs as much as his stories in order to blur the lines between objects in the images and between truth and fiction in the text. He adds or subtracts, rearranges text or images in order to create a world based in the reality we know and, yet, always points beyond to a “system of representation on the other side of reality.”

What are we to make of that? And what larger implication does this hold for all other “pieces of visual evidence” and sources named in this book? Are they inventions or manipulations as well? To what end does the author carry out this project of demonstrative verification and falsification? And how do we negotiate Sebald’s own commentaries on his work in the numerous interviews he gave? “Every novelist combines fact and fiction,” Sebald explains (Jaggi, “Recovered Memories”). This case, however, is not as simple and straightforward as this comment may suggest. This is an author who has used a number of occasions to assure the reader that he narrates the important events as they were, allowing fiction only to smudge the edges: “The big events […] are all real. […] The invention comes in at the level of minor detail most of the time” (Interview with Angier 13). In other conversations he puts it – although ever so tentatively – in numbers: ninety percent of his photographs are “what you would describe

82 I have accessed this interview, which was published in the Guardian, online at http://books.guardian.co.uk/departments/politicalsphilosophyandsociety/story/0,6000,555839,00.html.
as authentic.” Sebald goes on to explain: “they really did come out of the photo albums of the people described in the texts and are a direct testimony of the fact that these people did exist in that particular shape and form” (Wood 25). We note that he does not ascertain that “authentic” describes a direct relationship between the images and his text, but rather a loose one. The photographs come from the albums of the people described but do they portray them in the specific cases? Or are there also pictures of relatives and friends that are not actually talked about in the text? It is true that these images would serve as a testimony to the fact that these persons existed “in that particular shape and form” that the image reveals, but are they the ones Sebald writes about? And if not, can we say that they give testimony within the context of this book? These questions show that what Sebald describes as “authentic” may not precisely reflect his reader’s understanding of the word. The commentaries on his use of photographs and their referential relationship to the text, then, do not clarify but rather add to the troubling confusion as they play with the reader’s (and critic’s) need to verify his writings.

I would argue that all his commentaries on the veracity of photographs and other documents, especially those given in interviews, contain a good amount of irony.83 Thus, when Sebald claims that photography – as opposed to writing – is the true “document par excellence,” he is reiterating common belief with the twinkling of an eye. In an unpublished interview with Gordon Turner he admits: “You need irony to survive and to keep your readers by your side.”84 In his texts, Sebald clearly sets out to question or even

83 Markus R. Weber also acknowledges that Sebald handles his images with some degree of humor. However, he also suggests that this is less the case as the subject of his writing becomes more and more serious: “Mit zunehmender Ernsthaftigkeit der Themen und ihrer Behandlung schien Sebald zugleich auf jeden augenzwinkernenden Umgang mit Illustrationen zu verzichten” (63).
84 Gordon Turner shared many moments of his conversations with Sebald during a talk at the University of Cincinnati in the fall of 2003.
invalidate such reassuring statements. Commentaries offered in interviews further underscore this pursuit instead of a clear separation between truth and fiction. We find yet another level of uncertainty and ambiguity, causing Sebald’s works to be even more opaque and enigmatic.

If ninety percent of the images are “authentic” (Wood 25), that leaves ten percent which are not. Sebald, however, is far from calling these false: “A small number – I imagine it must be in the region of ten per cent – are pictures, photographs, postcards, travel documents, that kind of thing, which I had used from other sources. They are, I think, to a very large extent documentary” (25). Not being able to distinguish the two, “authentic” and “documentary,” is what is most troubling to the reader. Sebald’s extratextual comments intensify this effect. Although here and there he actually names particular instances where the images do not portray the persons or objects described, no comfort can be gained by that. On the contrary, the suspicions that have arisen during the reading are now confirmed. One must “suspend one’s belief” – of what exactly, one is not sure. “What matters is all true,” the author insists (Angier 13). But what matters? And to whom? Then, Sebald describes how all storytelling results in fiction (Wood 28), admits that “tiny little shifts” are needed to “make it match up” (Angier 14), or – even more unsettling – “to provide l’effect du reel” (Angier 13, emphasis Angier) while at the same time asserting that he tries to “atone for that frivolity in other ways, i.e., by trying to be as faithful as you possibly can in all areas where meticulousness is possible” (Wood

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85 Thus, in Sebald’s view, whether a photograph can be considered “genuine” (he uses this term in another interview with Carole Angier) or not, depends on its ability to give testimony to the persons described by the text, or in other words: if text and image achieve harmony. If this is not the case, the image itself never loses its documentary quality; it does document something which, lacking a context, the viewer may not have knowledge of.
These quotes from different interviews on the factuality of his images and texts illustrate that Sebald deliberately creates an intertext with his written works. Although they sometimes seem to answer questions with regard to a particular image or piece of information, altogether they do not offer the reader the comfort of clarity. Instead they add to the confusion with sometimes contradictory information or simply by a confirmation that we must question the authenticity of Sebald’s sources. Remarks such as the following and those cited above draw attention to the fact that the reality evoked in Sebald’s work may well be invented.

But what I’m trying, fairly consciously […], is to precisely point up that sense of uncertainty between fact and fiction, because I do think that we largely delude ourselves with the knowledge that we think we possess, that we make it up as we go along, that we make it fit our desires and anxieties and that we invent a straight line of a trail in order to calm ourselves down. So this whole process of narrating something which has a kind of reassuring quality to it is called into question. That uncertainty which the narrator has about his own trade is then, as I hope, imparted to the reader who will, or ought to, feel a similar sense of irritation about these matters. (Interview with Wood, “An Interview” 25-26)

Sebald, therefore, does not allow his image-texts to become reassuring historical narrative, but rather points to the impossibility of representing the truth about the past. In that, the author shows his own awareness of his need to avoid simplistic historical narratives and closures based on “naïve historical positivism” (Friedländer, Memory 131), as he also asserts: “I think these certainties have been taken from us by the course of

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86 Hannes Valguth has also noted Sebald’s intent to create such “Realitätseffekt” by always beginning his books with an indication of time and place (34).
history, and that we do have to acknowledge our own sense of ignorance and of
insufficiency in these matters and therefore to try and write accordingly” (Interview with
Wood 27). The author’s comments, therefore, raise the reader’s awareness of the
constructedness of the author’s and, indeed, all narrative and consequently adds another
level of mediation to this already very self-reflexive text.

As clear distinctions between the factual and the fictitious – something very much
needed by most readers and critics within the context of the Holocaust – are unavailable,
the reader becomes insecure, even troubled. This is well intended by the author. In an
interview with the Süddeutsche Zeitung Sebald claims, once again, that most of the
photographs are authentic but that “here and there an image has the opposite function –
that is to make the reader insecure” (cit.in Süddeutsche Zeitung, 4.02.95).87 It is this
uncertainty, this inability to separate fact from fiction, then, that touches the reader
personally, or to cite Braun: “[…] precisely because the border between the so-called
reality and the sphere of the imaginative is constantly and subtly erased, a state of
disquiet and disturbance, which only great literature can provoke, take hold of the reader”
(18). Thus, Sebald’s manipulations of text and images and their relationship to one
another are necessary in order to deny the reader a passive attitude and to trigger an
emotional response.88 Once again, what he has said of the painter Tripp applies to himself
as well: “Ohne dergleichen Eingriffe, Abweichungen und Differenzen wäre in der
perfektesten Vergegenwärtigung keine Gefühls- und Gedankenlinie” (Logis 179).

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87 See also Sebald in the interview with Wood: “It is this kind of strategy, of making things seem uncertain
in the minds of the reader, which the narrator pursues fairly deliberately” (27).
88 The goal is precisely not the kind of content studium Boehncke seems to wish for: “In Bildern scheint der
Melancholiker sich heimisch zu fühlen; aber nicht in allen. Nur, wenn sie der Imaginationsskraft des Autors
standhalten, ‘realistisch’ die Wahrheit des Abgebildeten bezeugen, befriedigt ihr Studium, schwinden
Nebel, Dunst und Dämmerung” (46).
Emotions and thought processes are precisely what Sebald is after. The state of disquiet and disturbance demand from the reader that s/he try to come to terms with the visual and textual representations in this book. We must engage with the text in a personal and contemplative way and must search for our own answers to questions of reliability of memory and documents as well as of their function in this text and the larger implications on questions of truth in historical and fictional narratives.

A similar commentary also surfaces again and again within his literary text. Here, the narrator oftentimes questions his entire memory-project: his motivations, his technique, his justifications for treating this subject the way he does:


He thus problematizes his role as narrator and as mediator of these stories. He underlines the delicacy and complexity of his subject as well as the fear of not doing justice to the victims whose lives he conjures up.

In this first part of the chapter we have seen how Sebald uses specifically photography’s referential qualities to unsettle the reader. Die Ausgewanderten and
*Austerlitz* continuously meanders between the assertion that photographs verify and document the narration and the obvious illusions of this medium. In addition to the texts which problematize the reliability and truthfulness of photography – through an open discussion, through mismatches between visual and written as well as through blurry, non-telling images – commentaries offered through interviews emphasize the ambiguities contained in image and text, the impossibility to distinguish between fact and fiction.

The commentaries within and outside of his literary texts, then, repeatedly disrupt the narrative and foreground his role as narrator and as collector of his putative visual pieces of evidence. Sebald, therefore, succeeds in highlighting the mediation that is part of any narrative, indeed, of any representation. While he does, as Friedländer and others request, seek ever-closer historical linkages, he does not produce a linear narrative that naively buys into notions of historical truthfulness.

To the reader of Holocaust literature, in need of true historical facts, such uncertainties are highly troubling. The text appeals to his mind as well as to his emotions as he must try to negotiate this complex web of facts, visual “documents” and “tiny little shifts” invented for effect. Neither text nor interviews offer answers to the questions of truthfulness. The unease which sets in during the reading of *Die Ausgewanderten* and *Austerlitz* stays with the reader even long after the last page has been turned. The books offer no reassurance, no closure – just as there cannot be closure to the remembrance of the victims of the Holocaust.
Photography and Text in Dialogue

The photographs in *Die Ausgewanderten* and *Austerlitz* not only present questions of authenticity, documentation and falsification. The relationship between text and image is far more complex and has far-reaching consequences on the form as well as the content of the text, thus shaping the reading in important ways.

In this second part of the chapter I will argue that the ways in which photographs enter into dialogue with each other and with the narrative mirror several of the requests posed by Holocaust scholars and thus add to the ongoing engagement with the text. The complex dynamics created by these image-texts defy a linear narrative and, instead, stress the fragmentary nature of the text and the lives evoked in it. The fruitful interplay between the visual and the written continuously draws attention to its highly mediated character. Both books personalize historical events, manage to evoke horror through carefully placed muteness and indirect references which results in personal, haunting encounters with the past that deny the reader a passive, disengaged reception and, instead, inscribe themselves into the reader’s memory.

On a structural level the mere inclusion of photographs breaks down the process of textual reading. One must stop (oftentimes in the middle of page-long sentences), look at the pictures and decide how to read them within the framework of the text. This prevents the reader from a superficial reception, one that Sebald associates with the reading of a novel. Here the poor quality of many prints also assumes another function. It demands from the reader a more in-depth study of the pictures, which, in turn, ensures an even slower reading, an engagement with the text, defying a superficial glance. The
author writes against a mindless reception and instead presents a complex construct of image and text that must be painstakingly worked through, a process that can never be brought to an end.

Oftentimes the photographs provide another level of discourse that narrative alone cannot provide or that stands outside of the narrative. Such is the case with the photograph of a Jewish group in the last story of *Die Ausgewanderten*, “Max Aurach.” *(DA 325)*. It includes thirteen adults and five children who are standing and sitting in relaxed poses in a semi-circle somewhere outdoors, in front of trees. This frame is embedded into the memoir of Aurach’s mother, Luisa Lanzberg, but without a direct reference to it. Upon closer examination we find that the fifth person from the left is the same as the one on the portrait shown on the following page. Thus, one may conclude that this is an image of Aurach’s father Fritz Aurach whom Luisa is writing about (although even the portrait lacks a clear textual reference – the assumption is based on the fact that he is the subject of the surrounding narrative). More important, however, than the precise reference is the symbolic content of this frame. The fact that all people are dressed in Bavarian costume (as is Fritz Aurach on the following page) is proof for the extent of Jewish assimilation in pre-Nazi Germany. Sebald never addresses this symbiosis directly but rather places the images that can “tell[] you more about the history of German-Jewish aspiration than a whole monograph would do” (Sebald in interview with Jaggi). Photographs with their density and symbolic force can thus convey ideas more powerfully and immediately than a description can. They allow Sebald therefore to speak “the language of silence” without risking muteness. Terry Eagleton likewise maintains: “The work’s insights, as with all writing, are deeply related to its blindnesses:
what it does not say, and how it does not say it, may be as important as what it articulates; what seems absent, marginal or ambivalent about it may provide a central clue to its meanings “ (178; emphasis Eagleton). We will find that in Sebald’s works absences and ambivalences carry, indeed, important meaning. Through this particular image, he manages to introduce the idea of a pre-war Jewish assimilation without having to explain it in lengthy paragraphs. Yet, the image does not allow for blindness to this part of German-Jewish history; instead it stands as a silent but at the same time powerful and telling symbol for it.

The picture of the Jewish family in Bavarian costume demonstrates that the power of these photographs to elicit shock and dismay in the reader does not stem from their explicitly horrid content. The images in Die Ausgewanderten and Austerlitz do not portray scenes of terror or violence, but people and things in quite familiar contexts. At most, the depiction of tombstones and graveyards helps to set an atmosphere of mourning throughout the books. Although images of decayed industrialized cityscapes as well as dreary landscapes add a feeling of forlornness, even melancholy and reinforce the themes of grief, solitude and death, they never depict the atrocities committed by the Nazis.89 This technique reflects Sebald’s opinion that events were too horrible to look at them directly. Along with other Holocaust scholars he maintains that horror images do not aid in the process of remembering but rather paralyze and work against our capacity to respond: “[…] the main scenes of horror are never directly addressed. I think it is sufficient to remind people because we have all seen images. But these images militate against our capacity for discursive thinking, for reflecting upon these things and also

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89 Other frames, such as those of Manchester and Jerusalem, or a petrochemical plant near Terezín evoke – with their many chimneys – images of the Holocaust.
paralyze, as it were, our moral capacity” (Interview with Silberblatt). Barbara Zelitzer has also discussed in great detail the paralyzing effects of pictures of atrocity in the past and the present (213-20). By avoiding a direct confrontation with such images, then, the author hopes to elicit reflection as well as a conscientious engagement with these frames and the scenes they evoke. In doing so, Sebald may carry out the kind of indirect representation of the Holocaust Steiner advocates.90

Undoubtedly, there is a strong visual emphasis in both books: in addition to including images we find that the narrative itself is highly descriptive.91 By adding a visual component, Sebald appeals to another kind of experiencing the text. It allows the reader to come in contact with the narrative on a more emotional level. Photographs – be they of people, objects, buildings, or landscapes – invite, as we have seen in an earlier chapter, identification.92 When looking at the frames of others, we always feel the urge to relate them to our own experiences of people and places. The mere inclusion of photographs thus draws the reader into the narrative and through such a transference appeals to his emotions, thereby defying any distant reception (see J. Hirsch 123, Holland 13-14).

The concept of seeing and visual perception, although central in both books, is most developed in Austerlitz, where it is one of the main themes of the book. Here it

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90 In addition, Andrea Liss has pointed out that to show “photographs of Nazi atrocities would result in a revictimization and would only perpetuate the horrific dehumanization of Holocaust victims” (3, 4).
91 It is interesting to note, however, that all central characters, including the narrator, struggle with an impaired vision. They are no longer able to experience the world fully. At the same time, as we have seen, Sebald demonstrates that a “clear view” is not only impossible for his characters, but – by representing vague images within the pages of the book – also for the reader. Thus, paradoxically, while it seems as if a window is opened to the reader it is one that – similar to the windows in Paul Bereyter’s classroom – has been painted in order to obscure the view.91 The reader thus shares part of the paralysis the protagonists are faced with.
92 Ulrich Baer has shown, for example, how, using composition and light, photographs of landscapes can bring the viewer into a seemingly “innocent” scene which the caption identifies as a former site of a concentration camp (79).
becomes most obvious that to the author seeing is more than just looking (and believing, as we have seen in the first part). The topic is introduced on the third page of the text with the images of four sets of eyes, two of animals seen in the Antwerp Nocturama and two of “bestimmte[] Maler[] and Philosophen,93 die vermittels der reiner Anschauung und des reiner Denkens versuchen, das Dunkel zu durchdringen, das uns umgibt” (A 7). The seeing eye is thus associated with the acts of “Anschauung” and thinking as a means of understanding. “Anschauung” is not – as the English translation by Anthea Bell suggests – just “looking” but also contemplation and the ability to visualize. Seeing, therefore, can be described as a fruitful way of experiencing the world only if it involves not solely pure onlooking but also imagination and thinking. Hence it appears logical that Sebald would link the ability to see to the processes (and works) of reading and writing. When the narrator of Austerlitz experiences what turns out to be a case of central serous chorioretinography, for example, he even speculates whether a loss of eye sight would relieve him of the “ewigen Schreiben- und Lesen-müssen” (A 52).94 To Sebald, then, there is a close relationship between the gaze, visual perception and mind-work. Through their poor visibility, their arrangement and problematic referential relationship to the reality of the text, the images included in Die Ausgewanderten and Austerlitz are to stimulate the kind of discursive thinking Sebald described in the interview with

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93 Presumably these photographs are of the German painter Jan Peter Tripp and the Austrian philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein.
94 Those familiar with Sebald’s comments about his unhappiness regarding his obligation to publish scholarly works may wonder whether the “müssen” refers to this obligation or rather to a compulsion to write. In a number of interviews he made it clear, however, that writing about the victims of the Holocaust is something he feels ambiguous about but nevertheless feels compelled to do (see earlier quote). The English translation confirms the assumption that the narrator here regards reading and writing as a compulsion (35, English translation).
Silverblatt. In his text, he describes precisely the kind of looking and seeing he asks of his readers: slow, thorough, and in constant dialogue with the mind. This kind of contemplative reflection, then, may bring us closer to an understanding of the past events.

It becomes clear, then, that the photographs in *Die Ausgewanderten* and *Austerlitz* are not simply add-ons, depicting what is described. One struggles to put the drawings, paintings, and photographs in relation to the text, goes back a page, and then ahead, rereading passages in search for the meaning of this hybrid symbiosis. In line with his poetics of uncertainty, Sebald’s text also provides no clear captions as we found in Maron’s text. This is not to say, however, that there are absolutely no references between text and image. Sebald teases the reader just enough to keep him trying. A number of lines in the German versions, for example, have been placed in a way that would allow them to be read as captions. The photograph of Ambros and other family members in New York is one such example: “Links [the image is inserted here – the following appears underneath the image] wie du siehst, bin ich mit dem Theo, und rechts neben dem Onkel [Ambros] sitzt seine Schwester Balbina, die gerade auf ihrem Besuch in Amerika gewesen ist. Man schrieb Mai 1950” (*DA* 146-7). The surrounding narrative of Aunt Fini thus supplies the place, time and the persons displayed, just like a conventional caption would. The photograph of Paul Bereyther serves as another, perhaps even more prominent, example. The previous page ends with “[…] wie Paul unter diese Fotografie geschrieben hat” (*DA* 82). The following page begins with the actual image, then – centered and in slightly more narrow margins – „zirka 2000 km Luftlinie weit entfernt –

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95 In addition, the previous comment by Sebald that horror images mitigate against our capacity for discursive thinking also supports this idea of a close link between seeing and thinking.

96 Within the framework of this book, of course, these drawings and paintings become photographs themselves. This adds another level of mediation.
aber von wo?” (DA 83). Thus Sebald does, at times, provide the kind of references normally included in captions. However, the author handles captions in the same playful way as photographs. He draws attention to the fact that these, too, are never merely factual references, but are part of the text, shaping the reading of each image just as the surrounding narrative does. This technique, therefore, adds to the very mediated meta-level of Sebald’s work.

A careful reading of Austerlitz will also uncover a number of references. When the narrator visits Austerlitz in his London residence, he finds a few dozen photographs evenly spread out on the table. It turns out that some of these images have already been woven into the narrative such as those of empty Belgian landscapes, train stations and Métro viaducts (A15), various moths and other insects (A 122, 137), as well as Austerlitz’ childhood friend Gerald Fitzpatrick on an airfield (A 169). Other images described foreshadow the protagonist’s visit to Theresín where he takes photographs of heavy doors and gateways (A 272, 273, 274). Because some of these images have been already narrated, the effect here is a certain recognition that the reader shares with the narrator: “Es waren Aufnahmen, die ich, sozusagen, schon kannte […]” (A 171). For the reader this creates the effect of remembering the stories attached to it. At the same time, the technique of retrospectively or anticipatorily referring to the narrative reinforces a sense of discontinuity of experience.

Isolated images, by nature, defy a continuation (versus film, for example) and yield a narrative that is continuously broken up into fragments. This helps underscore the fragmentary nature of the text itself. Sebald is, in fact, very careful to avoid any kind of linear narration. Instead, we find backflashes, dreams, pieces from different sources,
which reflect the broken lives of the central characters Dr. Henry Selwyn, Paul Bereyter, Ambros Adelwarth, Max Aurach and Jacques Austerlitz. The author has commented on his disdain for literary works that offer straight-forward stories with omniscient narrators (see interview with Silverblatt). He claims that such writing is no longer possible after the catastrophes of this century (see interview with Wood 27). Thus, photographs and their dynamic relationship to the text help Sebald in creating a fragmentary world which resists continuation not only for the characters portrayed but also for everyone else who came after the horrors of the genocide, for everyone confronted with those who survived physically but who were unable to go on with their lives. The complex narrative structures of Die Ausgewanderten and Austerlitz reflect such fragmentation and defy the type of facile linear progression of the narration criticized by Holocaust scholars (Friedländer, Memory 131).

Although we have seen that the photographs have very powerful functions in Sebald’s works, they only become meaningful within Sebald’s opaque narrative texture. We have said earlier that, barring a context, images themselves have no meaning. Their significance arises out of the story that is attached to them. Sebald has commented on several occasions on the appeal of the photographs to tell their story (see interview with Jaggi). In fact, in an interview with James Wood he explains that it was from looking at photographs that he became motivated to write creatively: “The process of writing, as I drifted into it, was in many instances occasioned by pictures that happened to come my way, that I stared at for long periods of time and that seemed to contain some enigmatic elements that I wanted to tease out” (24). Thus, they serve as the motivation for narration,

97 This interview is available online at http://books.guardian.co.uk/departments/generalfiction/story/0,6000,624750,00.html.
not necessarily of the true facts behind a particular image, but of a story about how it could have been. To the author, the frames provide something “real,” (make sure all punctuation is inside quotation marks!!) a point of departure: these images “have a very real nucleus. And around this nucleus there is a huge halo of nothing. You don’t know the context of these people’s lives, […] And you have to begin to think hypothetically. This path does not only lead inevitably into fiction but also into story-telling” (Interview in Scholz). Such process calls for an investment of one’s imagination. Earlier we quoted Schuhmacher in saying that memory can only occur if we challenge not only our intellect but also our creative energies invested in the future. In Die Ausgewanderten and Austerlitz writer and reader alike are challenged to grant a future to these images by endowing them with a hypothetical story, based on their “very real nucleus” and our imagination.

Yet, story telling needs prior investigation in order to establish that “very real nucleus.” Similar to Maron, who traveled with her family to Poland to find out more about her family, Sebald also travels throughout Europe and visits archives in search for the traces of the people whose stories he tells. He believes that “the acts of writing and photographing are very, very closely related to the art of investigation. Contemporary writers mostly neglect this fact” (Sebald cit. in Scholz 77). In his essay about Günther Grass’ Tagebuch einer Schnecke (Dairy of a snail) he laments: “German literati still know very little of the real fate of the persecuted Jews” (“Konstruktion” 38). Thus, if the German author is to write about the Holocaust and the persecution of the Jews, s/he must first thoroughly investigate not only the historical facts but also the lives of individual
victims. The historical facts and personal information provide the framework, a narrative nucleus, within which imagination can operate fruitfully.

It is in this context of storytelling that photographs of such seemingly trivial things as tea makers, collections of butterflies, entrance tickets or backpacks take on significance. Throughout both texts, Sebald suggests that these objects are the true keepers of stories, mysteries and secrets. Such is the case with a cast-iron column which Austerlitz photographs on the platform of the Pilsen train station because it had struck some cord of recognition in him:

Was mich beunruhigte bei ihrem Anblick [the column] war jedoch nicht die Frage, ob sich die von einem lederfarbenen Schorf überzogenen komplizierten Formen des Kapitells tatsächlich meinem Gedächtnis eingeprägt hatten, als ich seinerzeit, im Sommer 1939, mit dem Kindertransport durch Pilsen gekommen war, sondern die an sich unsinnige Vorstellung, daß diese durch die Verschuppung ihrer Oberfläche gewissermaßen ans Lebendige heranreichende gußeiserne Säule sich erinnerte an mich und, wenn man so sagen kann, sagte Austerlitz, Zeugnis ablegte von dem, was ich selbst nicht mehr wußte. (A 315-16)

Sebald makes the eerie proposition that, while human memory may be fallible in that it can be repressed or simply falls victim to forgetting, objects may, in fact, be able to keep the stories that can only be approximated by the careful observation, research and imagination. We can only gain access to these stories by taking the time to “read” the

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98 This is done best by revisiting the places where people lived, suffered and died, as he insists in an interview:

Well, if there is such a thing as revelation […] then it can be achieved only by actually going to certain places, by looking, by expending great amounts of time, in actually exposing oneself to places that no one else goes to. These can be backyards, or cities, those can be places like that fortress of Breendonk in that particular book. (Silverblatt)
many objects that surround us as we would read a history book: “Da die Dinge uns (im Prinzip) überdauern, wissen sie mehr von uns als wir über sie; sie tragen die Erfahrungen, die sie mit uns gemacht haben, in sich und sind – tatsächlich – das vor uns aufgeschlagene Buch unserer Geschichte” (Sebald, *Logis* 173). Thus, in order to gain a better understanding of the past, we must not only learn abstract facts and look at the monumental, but rather observe the small, everyday things. The author places photographs of such objects throughout the text in order to signal to the reader that it is they that may ultimately enable us to tell a story.

Such images of everyday items thus create the kind of “blind field” Barthes talked about in *Camera Lucida*. Barthes had discussed how a particular detail (the *punctum*) in an image can “prick” him, touch him personally, even wound him. As we have seen in the previous chapter, this experience may prompt Barthes to tell the personal story that is activated by the image, the blind field. The *punctum* – in Barthes always emerging from an object – thus carries an appeal to narrate events closely related to one’s own biography, demanding an emotional engagement with the image and the text. Barthes thus opens a space which Sebald takes up and even widens by bringing the accidental “carriers” of stories into the center of attention. They are no longer “inevitable and delightful supplements” which the viewer may happen to focus on, but are placed within the text in order to become the *punctum*, unsettling the viewer (Barthes 57). This process is no longer left to the viewers themselves. By filling the potential “blind field” with the narrator’s own personal story, he creates the possibility for disquiet in the reader. Such is the case when the narrator in Austerlitz takes the protagonist’s backpack as a point of departure for thinking about his affinities with the well-known philosopher Ludwig
Wittgenstein. After nearly twenty years, the narrator meets Austerlitz by chance – as so often – in the Salon Bar of the Great Eastern Hotel in London. In addition to his posture and clothing, it is his backpack that reveals his identity to the narrator (58). The image of the backpack is reproduced on the opposite page: this obviously older model is hanging from a wooden fixture, leather straps loosened, seemingly well-filled, ready to be taken along to a spontaneous trip. The image is surrounded by the following text:

Ähnlichkeiten zwischen den beiden, in der Statur, in der Art, wie sie einen über eine unsichtbare Grenze hinweg studieren, in ihrem nur provisorisch eingerichteten Leben, in dem Wunsch, mit möglichst wenig auszuragen zu können, und in der für Austerlitz nicht anders als für Wittgenstein bezeichnenden Unfähigkeit, mit irgendwelchen Präludien sich aufzuhalten. (A 58-60)

The lengthier quote demonstrates in a fascinating way how the narrator spins a close net of connections around this image which finally results in the virtual merging of Austerlitz and Wittgenstein. Despite the fact that the narrator has met Austerlitz a number of times before, it is now the backpack which prompts the narrator to notice the resemblance between the two men. As if to scotch any doubts, we are given its origin, price and the place it was acquired at. In fact, this backpack becomes a superlative of permanence: “das einzige wahrhaft Zuverlässige” (A 59). This reliability is replicated in the following sentence on the biography of Wittgenstein’s backpack. Once again, a whole litany of places is to verify the object’s lasting existence and its similar fate. A superlative of emotions is also attached to Wittgenstein’s backpack when we hear that his sister loved it nearly as much as the brother himself. By paralleling the stories of Austerlitz’ and Wittgenstein’s backpacks – the symbols of their lives –, they begin to merge.

Suddenly, we are not sure if the image is really of Austerlitz’ backpack or that of Wittgenstein’s or even of someone else’s. Is it possible that there was, at first, merely

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99 The mere naming, of course, verifies nothing. On one hand this narrator has already proven unreliable on numerous occasions and on the other, he himself expresses uncertainty when he modifies his statement with “ich glaube” (A 60).

100 A similarly unsettling merging occurs in the image of the shop window of the ANTIKOS BAZAR in Terezin (A180). Whose reflection do we see: that of Austerlitz or – based on the resemblance with other photographs of the author – of Sebald himself? Here, too, a verification becomes impossible due to the poor visibility of the reflection and due to the fact that we have no image of Austerlitz to compare it with.

101 The narrator himself likes to go for extended walks and hikes. The backpack could therefore just as well be his very own.
the photograph of the backpack which had this appeal to tell a story which was then attached to Austerlitz’ character? In any event, there are at least two life stories that surround the image of the backpack, merging through the pen of the narrator and subsequently – because one becomes the likeness of the other – also within the frame of the image. Suddenly, both persons resemble each other in figure as well as in the “provisorisch eingerichteten Leben” (A 60). However, at this point the author neither supplies an image of Wittgenstein nor of Austerlitz, thus denying the reader the opportunity of verifying this resemblance. Instead, this presumably banal object, the picture of a backpack, placed so prominently, comes to stand for the existence of both persons and their likeness. This rather lengthy discussion of the backpack image illustrates that it is such everyday objects, placed so prominently within the text, that can give the occasion for a punctum, “pricking” the reader once the blind field has opened up to them.

The backpack also becomes the occasion for the most explicit characterization of the protagonist by the narrator. Similar to Austerlitz’ inability to photograph people directly, the narrator never describes the psychological state of Austerlitz directly. Rather, he uses a parallel description of the philosopher Wittgenstein as “unglücklich,” as “in der Klarheit seiner logischen Überlegungen ebenso wie in der Verwirrung seiner Gefühle eingesperrten Denker,” to serve as a mirror of Austerlitz’ condition. This technique mirrors Sebalds choice not to depict horror scenes in his images. Likewise, we can assume that, as a consequence of his early childhood experiences, Austerlitz’ mental and emotional states are too horrible to address directly. Instead, he does so by reference – the

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102 The only image of Austerlitz we find is one of him as a three-and-a-half year old boy, one he can neither remember nor identify with.
only mode feasible to the author: “[T]he only way in which one can approach these things, in my view, is obliquely, tangentially, by reference, rather than by direct confrontation” (Interview with Silverblatt).

We can conclude, then, that the function of the photographs in *Die Ausgewanderten* and *Austerlitz* goes beyond a questioning of the refentiality of photography or the establishment of truth altogether. The ways in which the author has integrated the images in his memory text add to the ongoing engagement of the reader with the text. Through a number of techniques the author fulfills a wide range of the demands by Holocaust scholars in order to allow for a remembrance of the victims of the Nazi genocide in the present and future.

On a structural level the carefully placed images allow the author to break down the narrative and thus demand a slower, more in-depth and contemplative reading. At the same time, the fragmentary nature of images defies continuity, alerting the reader to the fragmentary nature of the protagonists’ lives. Complex and oftentimes playful textual references also work toward this effect while, at the same time, drawing attention to their constructedness and, therefore, to the mediated nature of this image-text as a whole.

In addition, photographic images absorb the reader’s attention and emotions in that they personalize stories, thus defying a distant or superficial reception. The photographs also provide another level of discourse, one that, because of their informational density and symbolic power, while mute, can express more than words. They can speak the “language of silence” and indirectness so often called for in writing about the Holocaust. By avoiding direct confrontation with the terror, such approach
averts the paralyzing effect of photographs and narratives of horror and, instead, allow for the reader’s transference into the evoked events.

The gaze and visual perception are central themes of Sebald’s works and are closely related to the process of thinking. The author both calls for and also performs in his text a thoughtful engagement with the visual traces of the past – both captured on film as well as scattered throughout our daily lives. He demonstrates that, in order to truly serve as a vehicle of remembrance, such engagement needs to draw from both worlds: the carefully researched reality as well as our imagination. This approach underscores his poetics of uncertainty described in the first part and mirrors the “two contradictory moves” advocated by Friedländer (Memory 131).

Finally, Sebald attributes great importance to photographs of everyday objects. He demonstrates how – in a Barthian sense – such images can offer a punctum to the viewer once the blind field is opened up. Such experience of the punctum, once again, makes for very personal, oftentimes haunting encounters and therefore may offer a future to the lives conjured up in this hybrid image-text.

Photography – Epitome of Memory?

“Photographs are the epitome of memory or some form of reified memory,” Sebald asserts in an interview (Wood 27). After I have examined photography’s referentiality in Die Ausgewanderten and Austerlitz as well as its general function within both books, I will now investigate how these images relate to the memories Sebald narrates. I will
show that the author reinforces obvious parallels between photography and memory but also that one cannot assume a one-on-one relationship. In fact, we will find that while some images are likened to “simple memory,” others seem to display a more plausible relationship to forgetting or to traumatic memory.

Moreover, this part of the chapter is interested in how the text contributes to the debate about adequate ways to engage with the past and what role photographs may have in the memory processes. I will argue that Sebald is, once again, not interested in the material wealth or truthfulness of photographs or memories but rather in a subjective and conscious engagement with the material traces from the past. In *Die Ausgewanderten* and *Austerlitz* Sebald shows how such an engagement can become a fruitful vehicle in keeping the past alive. I will also demonstrate that the author employs trauma theory to evoke the horrifying experiences of Holocaust victims and in doing so he is able to fulfill many of the demands described in the introduction to this chapter.

Our first observation is that the images reproduced in *Die Ausgewanderten* and *Austerlitz* resemble memories in that they are often blurred either by the passing of time, by a blurry recording in the first place, or by copying techniques that have precisely the intent to obscure the picture, as previously discussed. Similarly, memories fade with time, become obscured.

Sometimes we may claim to remember a central part of an event quite clearly while other details have grown faint, if not lost altogether. Herein lies another parallel between the two: while neither is truly trustworthy in terms of their content, at times both lay claim to utmost reliability. We have already discussed photography’s claim to truth. With regard to memory, there are a number of passages in both books where the narrators
assert that they remember a particular detail exactly as it was. Quite suddenly, for example, Austerlitz does remember “in vollkommener, auch nicht den geringsten Zweifel zulassener Evidenz” the steel pattern of the roof over the train station (A 312). In the story of Paul Bereyter, his friend Luci Landau remembers many details of his life with, as she asserts, great clarity: “Sie erinnere sich, so erzählte Mme. Landau, zum Beispiel noch mit großer Deutlichkeit […]” (DA 64). The images she assumed buried beneath grief are still surprisingly clear (DA 67). Even the narrator himself at times yields to this type of assertion of accurate memory: “wie ich genau weiß” (DA 101). Thus, in his detailed accounts, Sebald offers the same kind of presumably reliable materialism normally associated with the photographic medium.

Sebald reinforces the likeness of both media by repeatedly using the terminology of photography to describe the workings of memory or forgetting. This, of course, is not a novelty. As we have discussed in the first chapter of this study, Walter Benjamin had also tried to explain the workings of memory by using the processes of photography on different occasions. In Austerlitz one such instance occurs, for example, as the protagonist returns to the Prague train station that stood at the beginning of his journey as a boy. He tries to conjure up the images of the past, which proves more difficult than he had hoped. Only here and there, like the opening and closing of a camera shutter, short glimpses into the past open up and close almost instantly (A 312). Sebald evokes the parallels with photography even more boldly by using quite technical jargon: “[…] doch wie ich eines dieser Fragmente festhalten oder, wenn man so sagen kann, schärfer einstellen wollte […]” (A 312). Thus, we can say that Sebald is not only aware of striking parallels in the way in which both memory and photography are believed to capture, store
and represent the past, but he very intently draws attention to the likeness of the two media.

The similarities between photography and memory are not only alluded to but also discussed directly within the narrative. The most extensive discourse of both media also takes place in *Austerlitz*. The protagonist draws a very explicit comparison when he discusses his own fascination with photography:

> „Besonders in den Bann gezogen hat mich bei der photographischen Arbeit stets der Augenblick, in dem man auf dem belichteten Papier die Schatten der Wirklichkeit sozusagen aus dem Nichts hervorkommen sieht, genau wie Erinnerungen, sagte Austerlitz, die ja auch inmitten der Nacht in uns auftauchen und die sich dem, der sie festhalten will, so schnell wieder verdunkeln, nicht anders als ein photographischer Druck, den man zu lang im Entwicklungsbad liegenläßt. (A 113)"

We note that it is the darkness of the night that allows for memories – and photographs – to emerge and disappear. However, I disagree with Carolin Duttlinger’s conclusion that photography is “figured as a model not for the permanence of memory but for the phenomenon of forgetting” (158). In Sebald’s works and commentaries no such clear relationship can be established. While it is true that this passage emphasizes the transience of the photographs and – by implication, of memory – we must not forget that the photographic image only vanishes if left in the developing bath too long. This, of course, is not standard procedure in the developing of images. In fact, a well exposed image will not turn dark for a long time. Rather, if the image was either not well exposed during its taking or overexposed during the process of printing, it would turn dark as
quickly as the passage suggests. The key to understanding this passage then may lie in the
fact that the print was left in the bath too long, possibly in order to seek out the maximum
detail. Likewise, memories seem to disappear ever so much faster the longer one tries to
hold on to them. I argue here that this passage underscores a theme that has been raised
throughout both books, Die Ausgewanderten and Austerlitz: the clarity of sharp
photographs and permanent memories – if they were to exist – or even “the truth” are not
what Sebald is after. For Sebald, it seems to be precisely darkness and ambiguity that
yield the most productive engagement because they allow for insecurities that are
troublesome. They deny any clear attribution of truth and thus – as has been suggested
before – requires true “Denk- und Erinnerungsarbeit” (A 172), a tireless “working
through” of the past.

Sebald not only draws parallels between photography and memory. The
relationship between the two media is far more complex. On one level, of course, pictures
can trigger memories that would otherwise be lost. In the third story of Die
Ausgewanderten, for example, Aunt Fini recalls a number of stories associated with
Ambros Adelwarth’s life just by looking through a photo album. Austerlitz is also able to
remember what happened before his breakdown in Paris by looking at the photographs he
had taken just before the “zeitweilige Auslöschung sämtlicher Gedächtnisspuren” (A
377). However, it is important to note that memory does not come simply by looking at
the images. Once again, Sebald makes the point that it takes mind work to open up the
path into the past. In this particular instance the photographs as well as Marie de
Verneuil’s patient questioning ultimately help Austerlitz to reconstruct the past: “Erst als
ich die an jenem Septembersonntag in Maisons-Alfort aufgenommenen Photographien
entwickelte, gelang es mir, anhand dieser Bilder und geleitet von den geduldigen Fragen, die Marie mir stellte, meine verschütteten Erlebnisse zu rekonstruieren” (A 377). The investment of an engaged listener, Marie de Verneuil, is a critical component of this process, as she resembles most closely the type of reader Sebald hopes for: she did not experience or witness the event but through her personal investment she aids in the recovery and integration of Austerlitz’ memories. If there is no engagement, on the other hand, photographs may actually promote forgetting, as Sebald explains elsewhere:

Die entscheidende Differenz zwischen der schriftstellerischen Methode und der ebenso erfahrungsgierigen wie erfahrungsscheuen Technik des Photographierens besteht […] darin, daß das Beschreiben das Eingedenken, das Photographieren jedoch das Vergessen fördert. Photographien sind die Mementos einer im Zerstörungsprozeß und im Verschwinden begriffenen Welt, gemalte und geschriebene Bilder hingegen haben ein Leben in die Zukunft hinein und verstehen sich als Dokumente eines Bewußtseins, dem etwas an der Fortführung des Lebens gelegen ist. (Unheimliche Heimat 178)

Here, the author does link photography to forgetting in that it chronicles a past that no longer exists. But photography does not function as a model for forgetting per se. Instead, Sebald demonstrates how photographs can serve as vehicles of forgetting if they are “buried” in albums, archives or shoe boxes but also how one can “rescue” them and reinvest them with life. It is consciousness (“Bewußtsein”) which motivates any creative process, be it textual or visual that ultimately offers survival through remembrance.

Parallel to the chronicling device of photography, Sebald describes how other archival forms of information storage, such as the collection of researched material fail to
offer true remembering: “Nun ist diese Form der Materialsammlung natürlich nicht vollkommen unnütz, aber ich glaube, sie wird für uns produktiv erst in dem Augenblick in dem wir unsere subjektive Erfahrung hineindenken in das von uns erforschte Umfeld” (Interview in Süddeutsche, Dec. 2001). In the story about Ambros Adelwarth, paradoxically, such “collection of material” comes in the form of memory itself. The narrator’s aunt Fini recounts how toward the end of his life, he began telling her details of his past. However, this is precisely the kind of unproductive collection of material that is not a “Dokument eines Bewußtseins, dem etwas an der Fortführung des Lebens gelegen ist,” but rather a “Memento einer im Zerstörungsprozeß und im Verschwinden begriffenen Welt”:

Es war um jene Zeit, daß der Adelwarth-Onkel angefangen hat, mir die eine oder andere Begebenheit aus seinem zurückliegenden Leben mitzuteilen. Da selbst die geringfügigsten der von ihm sehr langsam aus einer offenbar unauslotbaren Tiefe hervorgeholten Reminiszensen von staunender Genauigkeit waren, gelangte ich beim Zuhören allmählich zu der Überzeugung, daß der Adelwarth-Onkel zwar ein untrügliches Gedächtnis besaß, aber kaum mehr eine mit diesem Gedächtnis ihn verbindende Erinnerungsfähigkeit. (DA 146)

Adelwarth’s detailed but distant recollections take on precisely the characteristics of photographs which are full of material wealth but, lacking personal integration and contextualization, do not contribute to the continuation of life. In other words, the available information alone, whether recorded visually or through other media, does not make for a remembering. Instead, it merely represents memory as defined by Webster’s Third New International Dictionary as “the power or process of reproducing or recalling
what has been learned and retained.” Only the process of consciously and conscientiously accessing this information and engaging with it will allow its remembrance, the “present consciousness of past experience,” a “bearing in mind” (Webster). By recounting the memories of his protagonists and those who knew them well, Sebald tries to attach such consciousness to a number of photographs in his books by linking them to the surrounding memory text in different ways. We can go even further in saying that, as Webster’s definition suggests, for Sebald consciousness is part of true remembrance and vice versa: consciousness comes from the things remembered but it also must inform the way we do remember in order to render the process meaningful.

The last image encountered by the reader of Die Ausgewanderten is a photograph of three young women working on a loom in the Litzmannstadt Ghetto. It illustrates best how photographs and writing can aid the processes of either forgetting or remembering and how Sebald manages to appeal to the reader’s consciousness in order to ensure the latter. The image itself (along with many others), the surrounding text explains, was taken by the national socialist bookkeeper Genewein for purposes of memory, “zu Erinnerungszwecken” (DA 353). As “Mementos einer im Zerstörungsprozess und im Verschwinden begriffenen Welt,” they were to document the efficient organization of life and work in the ghetto. The photographs had been discovered in 1987 in an antique shop in Vienna where they were buried in a wooden suitcase, carefully sorted and inscribed (“sorgfältig geordnet und beschriftet”, DA 352). The image, one could say, was prone to the death of forgetting, carefully laid to rest in nothing short of a coffin. In order for the image to survive, it must be rescued, as Sebald asserts: “Das ist für Photographien typisch, daß sie so eine nomadische Existenz führen und dann von irgendjemand gerettet
werden” (Interview with Scholz). To him, photographs seem to say: “We were here too, once. Please take care of our lives” (Gordon Turner). He reinvests Genewein’s initial look with a different one. At the heart of his engagement with the image is no longer the documentation of the Nazi’s efficient camp organization but the life of the three women captured on film. They, in turn, are no longer passive objects of our looking but become subjects as they piercingly return the gaze. In his writing, then, Sebald takes upon himself the responsibility of trying to rescue these visual fragments from oblivion: “I am not entirely sure that I am able to make sense of anything I write about other than recording it, to rescue something out of that stream of history that keeps rushing past” (Gordon Turner).

Once again, we note that Sebald advocates a slowing down because one cannot contemplate events that “rush past.” Contemplation and thinking – linked closely to seeing –, a true engagement with the past, need time. Photographs isolate a moment from the stream of history and allow us to contemplate its content and to engage with it. This process of slowing down time and isolating individual images is best exemplified by Austerlitz’ viewing of the film about Terezín. At the first viewings Austerlitz finds no access to these images: “nichts von all diesen Bildern ging mir zunächst in den Kopf, sondern sie flimmerten nur bloß vor den Augen in einer Art von kontinuierlicher Irritation […]” (A 348). Finally, he asks for a slow motion copy which allows him to discover things he was unable to see before: “[…] und tatsächlich sind in diesem um ein Vierfaches verlängerten Dokument, das ich seither immer wieder von neuem mir angesehen habe, Dinge und Personen sichtbar geworden, die mir bis dahin verboren geblieben waren” (A 349). Eventually he even discovers the face of a young woman who
seems to resemble his image of his mother Agatha. The still of this woman is reprinted in
the book along with a description of the image. It turns out later that this image is not
“true” in the sense that it actually portrays his mother. Nevertheless, it is a document that
testifies to the existence of this particular woman as well as of her violent death. To
describe it in Sebald’s own words quoted earlier, this photograph may not be “authentic”
but is, nevertheless, certainly “documentary.” By singling out this image Sebald rescues
it from the rushing past of fleeting images. He ascribes meaning to it as he presents it to
the reader as the possible photograph of Austerlitz’ mother. Suddenly, there is a story
attached to her that arrests our gaze as we attempt to make out the details of her
appearance. It does not matter, ultimately, that this woman is not Agatha or even whether
the necklace has two or three lines. This is the type of detail Sebald might have changed
in order to create “l’effect de reel.” What does matter is that we recognize that she, too,
like so many other people caught on this film has a story. One that is without a doubt
equally shocking and painful, but one we have no longer access to.

The author, therefore, points beyond a rational quest for truth that seeks an
objective collection of historical facts, which is impossible, of course. Instead he offers
subjective, personalized accounts of the past. It has already been pointed out that
photographs serve not only to verify but also to personalize experience denying the
reader a distancing rationality based on a treatment of the past as monumental history.
Sebald has expressed his unease with the kind of depersonalized commemoration carried
out in Germany:

103 This frame is another instance of a dissociation of image and text: As Duttinger has pointed out, the
description does not quite match the image we see (169-70): it speaks of three lines created by a necklace
while the photograph only shows two (A 354).
Der Umstand, daß das Thema [der Geschichte der Juden in Deutschland] stets in diesen großen Kategorien abgehandelt wurde, hat mir zudem Mißbehagen bereitet. Es ging immer um die Massen, die da durch die Gaskammern geschleust wurden. Das waren aber nicht anonyme Millionen, sondern immer einzelne Menschen, die tatsächlich auf der anderen Seite des Flurgangs gelebt haben. (Interview with Boedecker 1993)

In a way, this kind of depersonalization of victims bears striking similarities to the workings of the Nazis who intended to depersonalize their deeds as well as the victims of their persecution, for example by erasing their names and giving them numbers upon arrival in a concentration camp. By singling out individual faces with their individual stories, Sebald counteracts this process and instead personalizes history and creates testimonies to individual lives.

However, the author does more than that. The kind of dynamic Sebald creates with his usage of photographs is quite compelling: while using these images to personalize history, Sebald never allows the reader to lose sight of the fact that he is not solely dealing with isolated fates but rather with a history that encompasses millions of similar fates: He uses photographs not only to transform history into something intimate but also to point beyond the details of one character’s story by attaching multiple life stories to one image, by mismatching details in image and text or by disconnecting image and story that were originally connected.

By singling out images and reconnecting them within a complex framework of personal and historical narratives, Sebald attempts to respond to their plea to take care of them and to rescue them from “that stream of history that keeps rushing past” (Interview
with Gordon Turner). In his excellent study on the relationship between trauma and photography, *Spectral Evidence*, Ulrich Baer describes how the pastness of an event is inherent in any photograph. The viewer recognizes the captured moment as past and thus remains outside the image (76). Therefore, a photograph will always be nothing more than an isolated fragment from times long gone without any relation to the present unless it is reclaimed in some way. If we return to the photograph of the three women at the loom described in *Die Ausgewanderten*, we understand that it can only have a future if the viewer can salvage it from its pastness and find a way to make it meaningful in the present. For Sebald, the description of the photo and its circumstances – rather than a depiction – therefore, becomes crucial for its survival in the mind of the reader. Only words can transfer the death of the three women into the present and into our lives: the carpet on the image reminds the narrator of the couch in his living room at home. Also, the women no longer only look at the photographer Genewein, but now at the narrator himself. Although the backlight prevents the narrator from seeing their eyes, he feels their gaze directed at him. In fact, the one on the left looks at him so “unverwandt und unerbitterlich […], daß ich es nicht lange auszuhalten vermag” (*DA* 354). He cannot bear their gaze. Here, the narrator describes precisely the kind of desirable emotional investment with these frames and with the lives captured within them.

The reader now turns the page in anticipation of this image, yet is left with an empty page. The book ends here without a reproduction of the photograph. This allows the reader to feel the pain of the absence of the photograph, and by extension of the three women. This is a very powerful technique. By denying the reader the visual image, Sebald confronts us with a material gap that symbolizes the loss of the women: in
absence of the photograph, we must invest our own imagination in order to let the image described come to life before our eyes. Sebald thus conjures up the image in the mind of the reader by appealing to his or her (re)creative powers. It is this mental image invested with imagination and emotion that has a chance to survive, as the experience of one critic attests:

Curiously, the final proof of this [that Die Ausgewanderten is a great work of art] for me is not a photograph, but the absence of one. The book ends with a description of three young women sitting at a carpet loom in the Lodz ghetto in 1940, weaving literally (but as we know, in vain) to save their lives. I am convinced that I have seen their photograph on the last page; I remember the loom, their hands, their faces. But it isn’t there. (Angier 14)

It is important to point out, however, that the emotions attached to the image neither drift into sentimentality nor false empathy. But we begin to think about their fate and thus grant them a future – not in an exhibition catalogue or in an archive but in our minds.

The image of the three women is only one, and perhaps the most blatant and materialized, of the many absences in Sebald’s oeuvre. In fact, absence becomes the referent in his works. On the thematic level, the photographs in Die Ausgewanderten and Austerlitz oftentimes depict graveyards or tombstones (DA 7, 333, 334, 335, 336; A 170, 189, 324, 328, 364, 411). Here, the presence of the stone stands for absence: the absence of those whose lives were ended prematurely during or as a consequence of the Holocaust; the absence of family members who could mourn the death of their loved ones and who would attend to their graves (many graves have clearly been neglected); finally,
the absence of such sites of mourning for all those who perished in the camps and elsewhere and who have never been put to rest in a tomb.

There are other, less conspicuous sites that – through their very existence – attest to a shocking void. Such is the case with the image of the employment office in Bad Kissingen (DA 312). The clear photograph of the modern building seems almost out of place in this book of ambiguity and clouded vision. Yet, its poised presence stands for a glaring absence: the Jewish synagogue that once occupied its place until it was vandalized during the Kristallnacht and subsequently demolished. Even after the war it was not reconstructed, but replaced by the building housing the employment office to this day.

The images in both Die Ausgewanderten as well as Austerlitz show other spaces that signal the void left behind. There are also photographs of places such as those of Terezín, an unusually empty town: “Das Auffälligste und mir bis heute Unbegreifliche an diesem Ort, sagte Austerlitz, war für mich von Anfang an seine Leere” (A 270). On the opposite page we find an image of a completely empty street in a small town, presumably Terezín. The next few pages show the anticipated pictures of seemingly abandoned, in any case neglected, doors and gates, and finally of the ANTIKOS BAZAR. But apart from the photographer’s own eerie mirror image in the store window, there are absolutely no people. Even the ghetto museum has no visitors, as Austerlitz points out. This emptiness stands in stark contrast to the number of people who once populated this

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104 The narrator in the last story of Die Ausgewanderten makes a similar comment on photographs of the ghetto Litzmannstadt which he saw in a Frankfurt exhibition: “Und es gab Bilder aus dem Ghetto – Straßenpflaster, Trambahnschienen, Häuserfronten, Bretterwände, Abbruchplätze, Brandmauern, unter grauem, wassergrünem oder weißblauem Himmel -, eigenartig leere Bilder, auf denen kaum einmal jemand zu sehen war, obwohl in Litzmannstadt zeitweise bis zu hundertundsebzigtausend Menschen auf einer Fläche von nicht mehr als fünf Quadratkilometern lebten” (354).
place: in this ghetto there were “auf einer bebauten Grundfläche von höchstens einem Quadratkilometer, an die sechzigtausend Personen zusammengesperrt” (A 285), a fact Austerlitz repeatedly draws attention to. After his visit to the Terezín ghetto Austerlitz is haunted by these absences and subsequently conjures up the dead:


This passage, once again, brings back Abraham’s concept of “phantoms” introduced in the previous chapter. As was the case in Pawels Briefe, the empty spaces left behind by those who did not escape the cruel murder by the Nazis compel Austerlitz (as well as the narrator of his story) to fill those spaces with phantoms: imaginary people which must “wenn auch auf halluzinatorische Weise, individuell oder kollektiv, die Lücke vergegenständlichen [], die die Verdunkelung eines Abschnitts im Leben eines Liebesobjektes in uns erzeugt hat” (Abrahams, “Aufzeichnungen” 691-92). Again, the creation of a phantom does not actually succeed in filling the gap but rather – through its very creation – draws attention to the absences. In Austerlitz the “Liebesobjekt” of course, is not as straight forward as in Pawels Briefe. It would be difficult to establish such a strong emotional relationship between the many who died in Terezín and the protagonist as existed between Maron and her grandfather Pawel. However, the
emotional link is provided by Austerlitz’ mother Agatha who presumably died in this camp and thus stands as a symbol for many other victims who shared her fate. The image of her, which Austerlitz gives to the narrator later on, who, in turn, “passes it on” to the reader, allows us to visualize her and – knowing some circumstances of her life and death as well as the anguish of her son – sense the pain of her loss. It gives an individual face to the masses who died there. The photograph of Agatha, however, is reprinted only later in the book. Here, neither the protagonist nor the narrator or reader have any opportunity for a visual identification. This is precisely what makes the conjuring up of the dead necessary and powerful as a means for preserving remembrance.

This is not the only time Austerlitz experiences these twilight states which create a space for the past to return. In fact, protagonists and narrators of both books are often haunted by hallucinations or nightmares. Without a doubt it has become clear by now that Sebald is very much conversant in psychological thought and that he consciously integrates Freudian terms into his writing. I argue that the author uses, above all, trauma theory which is central to any current discourse of memory to negotiate his work of memory and forgetting. Trauma is understood as a rupture in memory. It breaks the continuity with the past and places identity in question. The model recent scholars on trauma theory have proposed is characterized by belatedness and missed experience. A lack of conscious memory goes hand in hand with the compulsion to relive or re-experience the traumatic event. This may take the form of uncontrolled experiences of

105 In her article “Traumatic Photographs” Carolin Duttlinger also examines the role of photography with relation to trauma in Austerlitz. Her approach engages, above all, Freud’s theories on unconscious, latent childhood memories and undertakes detailed readings of individual images. Contrary to my own contention that the employment of trauma theory allows Sebald to illuminate the painful and fragmentary experience of the lives he narrates, however, Duttlinger argues that “these visual testimonies […] figure as a protective shield that conceals underlying trauma” (170). In my view, the photographs in Die Ausgewanderten and Austerlitz do not conceal but rather expose and underscore trauma through their content, arrangement and textual references.
hallucination, nightmares or flashbacks. Most importantly, trauma does not disappear but returns in “all too literal a manner” (Long and Whitehead 9).

In Die Ausgewanderten and Austerlitz the discontinuity associated with trauma is exhibited on the visual as well as the textual level. Quite contrary to J.J. Long’s assertion that the images in Die Ausgewanderten seem to establish unity and continuity, one might argue that they do precisely the opposite: they point at the breaks and gaps in history as well as in the lives of the people affected by it as the previously discussed photograph of the unemployment office in Bad Kissingen attests. Even thematically, the images cannot be easily brought together under any single umbrella (although they could certainly be grouped in such categories as landscape images, photographs of objects, architecture, graveyards, etc.).

As I have shown in the previous chapter, we structure memories as we assemble photographs (often in albums) in order to construct a life trajectory that we find agreeable, or that would at least make sense. Throughout his works, Sebald suggests numerous times that memories – as well as photographs – are fragmentary in nature and that they need contextualization: “[...] das einigermassen zu ergründen gelang mir erst, als ich meine eigenen, bruchstückhaften Erinnerungen einordnen konnte in das, was mir erzählt wurde von Lucy Landau [...]” (DA 63). Through contextualization and integration then, memories and photographs alike allow us to identify with an origin, to trace our lives to the point we have come to and open up the possibility of a future. In a way, they bestow meaning to our existence. However, if experiences never registered as conscious memory, they cannot be integrated. They may return as haunting flashes from the past that are disconnected and cannot be grasped.
In this context of trauma theory, Austerlitz’ earlier parallel between memories and
the darkroom procedures can be applied more fruitfully. We come to understand that in
the passage quoted above\textsuperscript{106} Austerlitz neither refers to “simple memory” (Caruth,
\textit{Trauma} 151) nor to forgetting, but rather to traumatic memories. As explained before,
images that are properly exposed will not darken quickly in the developing bath.
However, if the negative was underexposed at the time of its taking (i.e. not enough light
hit the negative either through too small an aperture or insufficient length of exposure),
the image could not register properly on the negative. Thus it will turn dark rapidly once
immersed into the developer. Likewise, traumatic memories do not “register,” that is
enter conscious memory and thus always remain inaccessible. These images, then, cannot
be printed on photographic paper, hence cannot be assembled into an album just as
traumatic memories cannot become part of a life narrative of those who experienced
them. Instead they return as flashes, quickly vanishing again as underexposed images in
the developing bath. This parallel also works with regard to the twilight zone that allows
photographic and traumatic images likewise to appear. In photography the word
“darkroom” is misleading: the process of printing does not actually take place in
complete darkness. A dim light illuminates the room just enough to allow the
photographer to operate without exposing the photosensitive paper. As a consequence,
when the images first appear in the developing bath, they seem somewhat eerie and
unreal in the orange light of the safe lamp. Analogous to that, in Sebald’s works, it is the
twilight consciousness, the in-between-state of the mind – between waking and dreaming,

\textsuperscript{106} “Besonders in den Bann gezogen hat mich bei der pho
tographischen Arbeit stets der Augenblick, in
dem man auf dem belichteten Papier die Schatten der Wirklichkeit sozusagen aus dem Nichts
hervorkommen sieht, genau wie Erinnerungen, sagte Austerlitz, die ja auch inmitten der Nacht in uns
auftauchen und die sich dem, der sie festhalten will, so schnell wieder verdunkeln, nicht anders als ein
photographischer Druck, den man zu lang im Entwicklungsbad liegenläßt” (\textit{A} 113).
between the conscious and the subconscious, between the actual seeing and conjuring up of images – that allows for the ghosts from the past to return. “Für mich aber, sagte Austerlitz, war es zu jener Zeit, als kehrten die Toten aus ihrer Abwesenheit zurück und erfüllten das Zwielicht um mich her mit ihrem eigenartig langsamen, ruhelosen Treiben” (A 192).

The resemblance between photography and traumatic memories can be traced most clearly in *Austerlitz*. Because the protagonist repressed his early childhood memories after his arrival in England, he does not have the comfort of memories that would help him connect with a heritage and construct an identity. Memory flashes come and go, such as those experienced in the Ladies Waiting Room (A 195-199). Austerlitz sees images of traumatic moments in his life, such as the time he is unable to declare himself to Marie de Verneuil which presumably led to their separation. Another image begins to take shape for the first time: that of Austerlitz’ arrival at the London train station as a boy, from which his foster parents came to pick him up. Not only are all these memory flashes described as visual images before Austerlitz’ eyes. They are also referred to as disconnected, “verschachtelt,” rather than ordered in a linear progression. They open up ever new possibilities of Austerlitz’ existence, causing him a numbness that will only worsen as more details of his and his parents’ lives become revealed. This is illustrated by a parallel passage describing how Austerlitz juggles old photographs in ever new arrangements based on different ordering principles. However, these endless

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107 The assumption that this separation is traumatic to the protagonist is supported by the fact that the only truly happy memory of his adult life is associated with Marie de Vernueil. In addition, Austerlitz’ story ends with his search for the two persons that were meaningful in his life and that he can still hope to find alive: his father and Marie de Verneuil.
“games” – the narrator likens this activity to a game of patience – yield nothing but an empty grey table, and mind alike:

Austerlitz sagte mir, daß er hier manchmal stundenlang sitze und diese Photographien […] mit der rückwärtigen Seite nach oben auslege, ähnlich wie bei einer Partie Patience, und daß er sie dann, jedesmal von neuem erstaunt über das, was er sehe, nach und nach umwende, die Bilder hin und her und übereinanderschiebe, in eine aus Familienähnlichkeiten sich ergebende Ordnung, oder auch aus dem Spiel ziehe, bis nichts mehr übrig sei, als die graue Fläche des Tischs, oder bis er sich, erschöpft von der Denk- und Erinnerungsarbeit, niederlegen müsse auf der Ottomane. (A 171-72)

After desperately trying to make sense out of his experiences by arranging these images in a way that would bestow meaning to the whole, Austerlitz repeatedly comes to the point at which he must yield to the exhaustion. These tiring efforts bring about no result other than the renewed recognition of emptiness and meaninglessness as well as a sense of loss. This passage bears striking similarities to a description of traumatized persons by Omer Bartov:

[T]hose who survived were left with gaping absences, not only of parents and siblings, but of the memory of their own childhood, of their identity, which came to be split into disparate fragments and had to be put together again and again in different and contradictory versions. These are the unbearable memories that need to be juggled and rearranged over and over again, every day, as part of a perpetual struggle to preserve a reconstituted identity. (269-70)
The photographs laid out on the table therefore symbolize these “disparate fragments” of Austerlitz’ “unbearable memories.” They stand in for his experiences – consciously remembered or not – which the protagonist is unable to integrate into a whole. The constant rearrangement of images is not a product of conscious reflection but rather a compulsion leading only to total exhaustion.

Here, another similarity between photography and trauma becomes apparent. Both begin to have a pathological effect on the protagonist, similar to Assmann’s description of trauma as an inscription into the body, which is inaccessible to language and reflection and can thus not become memory. While memories are characterized by distance which enables the kind of self-reflection, self-confrontation and the construction and imagination of self that we saw in Maron, trauma connects an experience inseparably with the person (Assmann 95). In the passage cited above, the juggling of the images leads Austerlitz to nearly collapse. Likewise, the repeated returns of flashes from the past inscribe themselves into his body as numbness, paralysis and finally bring about his mental breakdown:

[...] die Vernunft kam nicht an gegen das seit jeher von mir unterdrückte und jetzt gewaltsam aus mir hervorbrechende Gefühl des Verstoßen- und Ausgelöschtseins.

Inmitten der einfachsten Verrichtungen, beim Schnüren der Schuhbänder, beim Abwaschen des Teegeschirrs oder beim Warten auf das Sieden des Wassers im

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108 In fact, one can even argue that in Austerlitz’ adult life photographing becomes a substitute for an actual experiencing of an event. It has become a habit for him to take pictures everywhere he goes. The unbearable past has penetrated into the character’s life to such an extent that even the present becomes traumatized, at times leaving him numbed and paralyzed, unable to register new experiences. The camera becomes a substitute for Austerlitz’ consciousness which is oftentimes overwhelmed and therefore unable to work through new or recurring experiences. As the protagonist searches for traces of his parents in a Prague archive, he is overcome by nightmares and fantasies. When he returns to the archive, he is still very much unsettled and uses the act of photographing to gather himself: “Am folgenden Tag, fuhr Austerlitz fort, bin ich wieder in das Staatarchiv in der Karmelitská gegangen, wo ich zuerst, um mich ein wenig zu sammeln, einige Photoaufnahmen machte [...]” (A 214).
Kessel, überfiel mich diese schreckliche Angst. In kürzester Frist trocknete die Zunge und der Gaumen mir aus, so als läge ich seit Tagen schon in der Wüste, mußte schneller und schneller um Atem ringen, began mein Herz zu flattern und zu klopfen bis unter den Hals, brach mir der kalte Schweiß aus am ganzen Leib, sogar auf dem Rücken meiner zitternden Hand, und war alles, was ich anblickte, verschleiert von einer schwarzen Schraffur. (A 326-7)

Despite the fact that Austerlitz has gained considerable knowledge of his past, he is unable to establish the kind of distance that would allow him to reflect on the events and ultimately integrate them into his life-story. Instead, the feeling of loss and self-disintegration becomes so overwhelming that Austerlitz becomes completely paralyzed, unable to carry out even everyday activities such as tying his shoes or doing the dishes.

The repression of his early childhood memories would affect his whole life, negating him a feeling of home and belonging, leaving major gaps Austerlitz is unable to fill. The photograph of the “Rosenkavalier” stands as a symbol for these gaps as well as for Austerlitz’ subsequent quest for his identity. Věra had discovered it mysteriously between the pages of a Balzac-volume which she had not touched in decades. It is the only image of Austerlitz as a child before the time of his transport and – if we consider the mirror image in the ANTIKOS BAZAR to be of the author – it is the only photograph of the protagonist altogether. Yet, despite Věra’s account of the circumstances of the image, Austerlitz can neither remember the occasion of this picture nor himself in the role of the “Rosenkavalier.” Thus, in this instance, the photograph fails to trigger memory and does not allow Austerlitz to reconnect with his past. Instead, here the presence of the image points to the painful absence of Austerlitz’ recollection of his past. In an attempt to
fill this gap, Austerlitz – once again – tries to compensate with factual information. He repeatedly studies every detail of it:


But similar to the time when Austerlitz learns the information written on the gravestones by heart or when Ambros recounts meticulously the experiences of his life, this scrutiny brings forth no result for him other than the painful awareness of his inability to reconnect these details with his own life.

The compulsion to study every detail not only resembles Barthes’ *studium*, the mode of studying an image for information which ultimately fails to touch the viewer, but also uncovers another allusion to the trauma experienced by several of Sebald’s protagonists. We have noted earlier that traumatic images oftentimes reappear with a clarity not common to conscious memory. Hence there is the assumption that because of their inaccessibility their content – however difficult to grasp – must be closer to the truth than conscious recall:

Perhaps the most striking feature of traumatic recollection is the fact that it is not a simple memory. Beginning with the earliest work on trauma, a perplexing contradiction has formed the basis of its many definitions and descriptions: while
the images of traumatic reenactment remain absolutely accurate and precise, they are largely inaccessible to conscious recall and control. (Caruth 151)

This quote makes two important points: like photographs, traumatic recall comes in the form of images. In addition to that, it carries precisely the same illusion as the one associated with photography: very much like a photograph, traumatic memory can be characterized by the excessive retention of details that cannot be integrated into a nontraumatic memory or comprehension of the past.109

Yet, as we noted earlier, the scrutiny of detail, the logging of more “hard facts” or the establishment of factual truth is not what Sebald has in mind. It blocks access to an event that, as Jean Baudrillard has pointed out, due to “continual scrutiny […] has [become] less and less comprehensible” (91). Instead, one can only approach such images by relating to them on a personal level, „wir unsere subjektive Erfahrung hineindenken in das von uns erforschte Umfeld“ (Süddeutsche, Dec. 2001). Once Austerlitz, for example, acknowledges the failure to gain anything from the studium of this photograph and abandons it, he allows for the punctum to occur: "Und immer fühlte ich mich dabei durchdrungen von dem forschenden Blick des Pagen, der gekommen war, sein Teil zurückzufordern und der nun im Morgengrauen auf dem leeren Feld darauf wartete, dass ich den Handschuh aufheben und das ihm bevorstehende Unglück abwenden würde" (A 264).110 As a consequence of this punctum that pricks Austerlitz, the photograph

109 A number of scholars and critics have discussed the precision of traumatic memory: Sigmund Freud and Joseph Breuer, Studies in Hysteria; Bessel van der Kolk, Psychological Trauma; J.L. Singer, Repression and Dissociation; and Judith Herman, Trauma and Recovery.

110 The English translation makes even more clear that Sebald is obviously alluding to Barthes’ text. Here Austerlitz feels “the piercing, inquiring gaze” of the boy (A 184; my emphasis).
becomes a recurring traumatic experience itself. The boy becomes alive, reappears, returns the gaze in order to demand his dues: both, his childhood and his future life.\footnote{The return of the gaze can be read as the becoming of a subject rather than a mere object of our gaze. As we have noted earlier within the context of the photograph showing the three women at the loom, when the persons return our gaze they become alive, touching, perhaps even “pricking” the viewer, demanding remembrance.}

Austerlitz’ inability to reestablish a continuity leads to his compulsive desire to relive the event in order to make connections with his past. Thus, he visits his childhood home in his native Prague, then Terezín, where his mother was murdered. Later he follows his father’s path to Paris and ultimately to the Pyrenean foothills. Austerlitz finds out very little about his parents’ fate after they had left Prague. Instead these trips spark a number of hallucinations or nightmares that bring back traumatic encounters with the past such as the one in Terezín (A 285). At other times the protagonist is not haunted by visual images but rather by uncanny feelings, an inexplicable numbness, the intuition that something is amiss. When he and his friend Marie de Verneuil visit Marienbad, for example. Almost immediately upon arrival Austerlitz is overcome by an eerie feeling he cannot explain: “Ich glaube, sagte Austerlitz, ich habe versucht zu erklären, daß mir irgend etwas Unbekanntes hier in Marienbad das Herz umdrehe, etwas ganz Naheliegenderes, wie ein einfacher Name oder eine Bezeichnung, auf die man sich nicht besinnen kann” (A 304). At the time he cannot determine the cause for his malaise – he has no name for it (A 294). According to psychoanalytical models of trauma therapy, the naming of unconscious traumatic experiences may offer the only chance of healing: „Was nicht zu erinnern war, wird es nicht werden, aber es ist zu benennen“ (Haverkamp, „Anagram“ 171). If the traumatic event is formulated in consciousness, Weinberg supposes, the traumatic spell is broken and the traumatizing event can be integrated into
personal or historical narrative (184-85). Thus the Marienbad experiences continue to haunt him until Věra tells him of his family’s visit to the spa town when Austerlitz was only four years old. The knowledge of this event helps him explain his unhappy stay with Marie decades later. The haunting feeling has a name and can thus be integrated into his life story. After the protagonist had spent a whole night contemplating and coming to terms with the Marienbad memory (A 310), he is ready to move to the next stage of the search for his lost past. At early dawn he buys a train ticket that will send him on the same journey he had once travelled as a child: from the Wilsonova train station in Prague to London. However, for lack of more information of his childhood few instances of such naming and interpreting take place. Neither *Die Ausgewanderten* nor *Austerlitz* are works that provide closure to the lives of the protagonists. Each of the five stories has an open end, leaving the reader troubled, insecure, engaged.

The integration of trauma theory thus serves multiple functions: It allows Sebald to portray the characters as psychologically severely damaged by the Holocaust. Although they survived physically, all five protagonists are haunted by the effects of this limit-event. At the same time, through reference to trauma Sebald is able to tell the stories in a non-linear fashion, with flashback, dreams and hallucinations, defying continuity, harmonization as well as a closing. The use of trauma theory thus helps Sebald in fulfilling precisely the demands outlined in the introduction to this chapter.

It becomes clear, then, that Sebald is quite aware of the apparent similarities between the mental and the technical ways of capturing and preserving the past employed in photography and recall. While he does clearly establish parallels between photography
and “simple memory,” in his works the author weaves a far more complex net that does not allow for the ascription of definite relationships. Photography can be linked as much to recall as to forgetting or the experiences of traumatic memory flashes. This technique adds to the opaqueness and ambiguities that characterize Sebald’s works. But it also inhibits any kind of straightforward attribution of meaning as the limit-events Sebald touches on also defy any meaning. Nonetheless, they must be dealt with, worked through and remembered and so Sebald felt obliged to conscientiously convey the stories of five characters whose lives were affected by the Holocaust. The recall of facts related to the event alone cannot suffice to ensure remembrance. These facts must enter our consciousness. Sebald achieves this process by personalizing history through the use of photographs and by telling individual stories. Above all, it is the ambiguities and insecurities the reader faces when reading these narratives that demand of him or her that s/he continually engage with these stories and with these lives.

However, Sebald never allows these stories to become mere fiction. It is crucial to him that his narrative is situated within a historical context that can be verified by facts and photographs provided in the text. The message the author conveys is twofold: on one hand he seems to say “These people really lived, suffered and died as the photographs and detailed descriptions verify,” but on the other he must continuously question his role as a reliable narrator of their stories and the role of his “documents” to testify to their veracity in order to “irritate” the reader to keep him engaged. In other words, photographs and other documentary material help Sebald to ground his writing in a factual context while, at the same time, always drawing attention to the fact that an absolute truth does not exist and the search for it is, therefore, futile. It is obvious that this
approach mirrors Friedländer’s call for a two-fold move towards and away from history (Memory 131).

Thus, the use of photographs and self-reflective commentary by the narrator allow the author to make the reader aware of the difficulties of representing what remains incomprehensible. As Baer points out, [T]he scholarly, artistic, and media attention to the Holocaust occasionally obscures, and even blocks, understanding of its impact on all forms of cultural practice. Saturated by references to the catastrophe, many are no longer aware of any difficulty in imagining and mentally picturing an event that has been so effectively packaged and depicted in Hollywood creations, national and local museums, and on television. (69-71)

Sebald writes against such prepackaged reception of the event. He foregrounds the difficulties of representing not the event itself but the horrific and long-lasting effects on those who physically survived but could never reclaim their lives.

With Die Ausgewanderten and Austerlitz Sebald has written the kind of self-reflexive, ever-questioning literature that many have called for. The photographs interspersed throughout the books disrupt the linear progression of the narration. Through his explicit problematization of such a widely trusted means of representation, the author questions the ability to represent truth. He points beyond the quest for historical facts and, instead, opens up a space in between, a twilight zone of ambiguities and uncertainties, as a more productive realm for inquiry into the past. Such an approach highlights the mediated nature of all inquiries into the past as well as the constructedness of all narratives. By acknowledging the inability to write a purely historical account of the
victims’ lives, this in-between-space opens up the possibility to draw upon the writer’s as well as the reader’s imagination.

Sebald repeatedly makes the point that remembrance cannot be achieved by merely recalling facts. He agrees with many other Holocaust scholars that an active and ongoing engagement with the researched information is essential in keeping the remembrance of the victims of Nazi persecution alive. With both texts the author performs such an engagement by reinvesting otherwise forgotten photographs with life. In his gentle and suggestive, multi-layered and highly mediated narrative Sebald evokes the ruptures and discontinuities in history and in the personal lives of those affected by the Holocaust. He draws attention to the absences and the subsequent need to uncover, recover and remember in the present and the future. With Die Ausgewanderten and Austerlitz the author appeals to the reader’s intellect, emotions and consciousness to do just that.
4. Path(s) to the Truth:

Irina Liebmann’s *Stille Mitte von Berlin*

*Stille Mitte von Berlin*, a photographic essay published in 2002, addresses similar issues as discussed in the previous chapter. Irina Liebmann is, above all, concerned with truth and its representation. In her quest to learn about the past, she consults a variety of media and tries different approaches, such as photographs, archival blue prints, address books, encyclopedias and newspapers. As a result, her book presents an inquiry into concepts such as fact and fiction as well as memory, history and the archive. The author problematizes each “path” into the past, first describing its luring promise of factuality and authenticity, only to then demonstrate its absences and its constructedness. I will demonstrate that, despite her own strong desire to lean on true facts, Liebmann does not advocate for a purely historical approach but rather for a combination of different means of inquiry and representation of the past. The truth Liebmann conveys in her book, then, is that the “truth” hidden in the “Stille Mitte von Berlin” cannot be unveiled by the static processes of studying photographs or the details of architectural history. Instead, it takes a more dynamic and engaging process of continuously putting the different and newly emerging forms of learning about the past into dialogue with each other in order to become relevant and productive for the present and the future.

Irina Liebmann was born in 1943 in Moscow as the daughter of the Jewish emigrant journalist Rudolf Herrnstadt and the Russian Germanist Valentina Herrnstadt.
After the war, in 1945, her family returned to East-Berlin. Her father played an instrumental role in the establishment of the journalist media in the early GDR and rose to high ranks before being excluded from the Socialist party in 1953 for criticism of its politics.

Liebmann studied Sinology in Leipzig and worked as a journalist for the political paper “Deutsche Aussenpolitik” from 1967 on. Eight years later she began to contribute to the East-Berlin “Wochenpost” as a free-lance writer; at the same time, she also wrote radio plays and prose. A year before the fall of the Berlin wall, Liebmann emigrated to West-Berlin. Today, the author still lives and writes in Berlin.

Liebmann’s oeuvre consists mainly of prose, such as *Berliner Mietshaus* (1982), *Mitten in Berlin* (1989), *In Berlin* (1994), *Letzten Sommer in Deutschland* (1997), and *Die freien Frauen* (2004). However, the author has also published a variety of dramas (most importantly *Quatschfresser*, 1990), radio plays, children’s books, lyrical texts as well as the essay *Stille Mitte von Berlin* (2002).

As many of the titles suggest, the city of Berlin features at the center of many of her work. Based on conversations with individual people and on archival work, Liebmann tries to convey a sense of life in the former capital of the GDR as well as post-unification Berlin. The history of this place as it effects the present always plays a central role in her writing.

*Stille Mitte von Berlin* was prompted by Liebmann’s finding of pictures and notes she herself had taken in the early eighties of the area around the Hackescher Markt, a central and historical part of Berlin. These images document its radical change over the next twenty years, above all following the German re-unification. This book includes
quotations from her own notes, from archival sources such as newspapers, city and church records, encyclopedias as well as photographs. While Liebmann’s research covers the time from the German Revolution of 1848 up to the present, the focus is on three major time frames: 1848 to 1945 (the past before the GDR); the time of her original research in the early eighties (the time of the GDR); and finally, the time of her writing around the turn of the millennium (post-GDR present).

The author aims to shed light on a part of history that has been neglected and forgotten, and that – once exposed – is to generate a better understanding of how the present has come to be and to prevent catastrophes of the past in the present and future. However, I will also demonstrate that in today’s memory culture even such a seemingly straightforward project bears complexities that must be addressed. The first part will concentrate on Liebmann’s struggle with her desire to write “the truth” and will look at the techniques she employs in order to represent this conflict. It will also discuss specifically the role of photographs as a means of questioning notions such as truthfulness, authenticity and verification. In addition, this chapter will focus on Liebmann’s use of photographic images as a particularly personal way of accessing the past and also as a point of departure for inquiry. The second part will focus in on the author’s methodology: How does she come to know the past? How does Liebmann negotiate the knowledge gained from very different sources? How do these negotiations inform the book?
“Ja, was erhoffe ich mir davon . . . Die Wahrheit!”

The book *Stille Mitte von Berlin* is no easy fare. The author introduces it as a conflict, a struggle. When Liebmann first researched the material and took the pictures in the early eighties, she had planned on turning it into a novel about her time. However, the material, she tells us, became too overwhelming and so it sat in boxes for twenty years until Liebmann finally worked it into this book: “Dieses ‘Material’ wurde mir im Laufe der Jahre zu schwer, es ist mir entglitten oder ich bin ihm davongelaufen. Ich packte all die Tagebücher, Karteikarten, Baupläne in Kartons und rührte sie nicht wieder an” (*SM* 9).¹¹²

In order to understand why the novel could not have been written, we need to examine the content of her writing: What is at the heart of this material that Liebmann could not approach? This is a question the author herself has struggled with as well (*SM* 18, 59). At a first glance, this book is about the area around the Hackescher Markt, about the people who lived here, about the changes these streets and buildings underwent as a result of different political movements and governments as well as historical events. However, it is the information Liebmann encountered that forms the heart of this work and that caused the author to shy away from it. What, then, is this area about?

When Liebmann first began her research, her goal was to find out how the past had led into the present of the eighties, now also a past. How could a city where liberal ideas had once flourished have turned into such a dull, stagnant and repressed place as under GDR-administration, a place where life had virtually come to a halt and where the

¹¹² Throughout this study I will refer to *Stille Mitte von Berlin* as *SM*. 
only topic of interest seems to have been the West. These thoughts permeate her journal
notes (SM 57).

However, it seems unlikely that the author who wrote on similar issues
concerning her GDR present in Berliner Miethaus and in Mitten in Berlin would have felt
overwhelmed by such a project. Liebmann’s struggle apparently originated elsewhere
once her research was taking a direction of its own, one she would have rather avoided:
“Die Juden. Waren sie das Thema dieser Gegend? Ich war in diesem Punkt ebenso
befangen wie die meisten meiner Erzähler. […] Nichts wäre mir unangenehmer gewesen,
as wenn mein Buch über die Große Hamburger Straße ein Buch nur über jüdische
Schicksale geworden wäre, nichts peinlicher als das” (SM 18). The destruction of Jewish
life, then, the topic that begun to penetrate and ultimately dominate all of her research of
this area, became “too heavy” to be worked into a novel. Liebmann’s Stille Mitte von
Berlin, therefore, is a work that – unwillingly, it seems – tries to come to terms with the
legacy of National Socialism which is gradually discovered in this old part of Berlin as
well as with questions of its representation. As such it is part of a large body of fictional
and non-fictional works that have emerged over the past decades and that try to deal with
the horrors of the Holocaust.

As many of these authors, Liebmann must address the difficulties of representing
this limit-event.113 In an interview with Amelie Heinrichsdorff, given in 1995, the author
agrees with some Holocaust scholars who insist that it cannot be adequately dealt with in
fictional works. Berel Lang, for example, has advocated against the literary

113 Numerous scholarly works have appeared on the subject since the early 1990s, including, among others,
such seminal works as Saul Friedländer’s Probing the Limits of Representation, Geoffrey Hartman’s
Holocaust Remembrance, Manuel Koeppen’s Kunst und Literatur nach Auschwitz, Berel Lang’s Writing
and the Holocaust, Laurence Langer’s Admitting the Holocaust and Holocaust Testimonies, Ernestine
Schlant’s The Language of Silence, and Efraim Sicher’s Breaking Crystal.
representation of the Jewish genocide because literature typically aestheticises and draws the attention away from the truth. In his view, the fact that literature must generalize makes it inappropriate as a means to represent such a limit-event as the Holocaust. Lang also cautions that the distortions of literature lessen its factual value: “The effect of additions is then to misrepresent the subject and thus – where the aspects misrepresented are essential – to diminish it” (Lang, *Act* 151; emphasis Lang). He particularly deems the form of a novel unsuitable because “a genre committed to life or even death in the bosom of the nineteenth-century middle class would simply fail as the vehicle for a subject that challenged the very possibility of social existence” (Lang, *Writing* 246). In a similar vain, Liebmann responds to the question of literary representation of horrific events – “daß es bestimmte Dinge gibt, die einfach nicht literarisch dargestellt oder wiedergegeben werden können, wie z.B. der Holocaust” – as follows: ”Stimme ich zu. Das geht doch gar nicht. Kunst beginnt doch da, wo es um Verarbeitung geht, um etwas Geistiges, Ästhetisches [...].”

Liebmann, therefore, pleads for a non-fictional treatment of the Holocaust in which the factuality of information assumes critical importance.

Accordingly, and quite similar to Maron’s *Pawels Briefe*, the subtitle gives an indication for the way the book is not to be read: “Eine Recherche um den Hackeschen Markt.” While the author has published fictional prose, drama and lyric before and after, this work clearly is not meant to fit this designation. If *Stille Mitte von Berlin* is not fiction, however, what genre does it belong too? In May of 2003, I had the opportunity to talk with the author during an interview at the Café “Hackescher Hof” in Berlin. When asked which genre *Stille Mitte von Berlin* is closest to, Liebmann responded:

IL: Ich weiß nicht. Sie sind doch die Literaturwissenschaftlerin. Was würden Sie

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114 The interview is available at http://www.humnet.ucla.edu/ngr/ngr12/heinrich.htm.
sagen?


IL: Ja, dem würde ich zustimmen.¹¹⁵

On the author’s webpage, in existence since 2005, this book is, indeed, categorized as an essay. The genre determination is important. While the subtitle (*Recherche*) suggests the mere description of the research the author undertook, an essay does more than to simply report. It expresses the personal view of the author, comments on the material presented and thus follows an agenda: an essay is “a persuasive piece written to formally present information, defend a position, or accomplish various other specific tasks. Essays are generally written to demonstrate knowledge and expertise in a subject area.”¹¹⁶ *Stille Mitte von Berlin* clearly follows the classic essay structure: “Each essay should begin with an introductory paragraph explaining its purpose, and end with a summing up of the main points. In between should be the evidence.”¹¹⁷ This genre, thus, allows the author to do two things: Liebmann is able to present the descriptions of her research in the eighties as “evidence,” thus giving it the appearance of truthfulness. At the same time, Liebmann is able to frame her “facts” and her narrative about the past with a contemporary perspective, thus situating her material and ascribing a purpose to her writing.

This frame was written in October of 2001, shortly after the attacks on the World Trade Center in New York on September 11th of 2001. Here, she parallels the events of

¹¹⁵ This interview was held on May 21, 2003 in Berlin, Germany, and can be found in the appendix of this study.
¹¹⁶ This definition can be found online at www.iclasses.org/assets/literature/literary_glossary.cfm.
September 11th of 2001 with other major breaks in history that have changed the world so radically that the passing of only a few years or decades yield places unrecognizable. To Liebmann, 9/11 signifies an attack of a liberal and democratic society similar to the aftermath of the 1848 Revolution in Germany, the Nazi-Regime and the Socialist Regime of the GDR. Her fear is that such an attack will, once again, be followed by war, destruction and persecution of the kind evidenced in the area around the Hackescher Markt in Berlin: "Die Folgen eines solchen Krieges sind auf den Fotos in diesem Buch deutlich zu erkennen. Die Verwahrlosung, die Verdunklung, der allgemeine Stillstand – das hat mit einem solchen Krieg zu tun. […] Es lohnt sich, von der Recherche zu erzählen, vom ‘Material’, das ich fand" (SM 10). With Stille Mitte von Berlin, the author wants to document such destruction, not only of the architecture and community but of a whole people that had once populated the area around the Große Hamburger Straße. By presenting us with her material, Liebmann demonstrates the “knowledge” she has gathered in order to raise an awareness of this past and to write against the forgetting that seems to prevail. Ultimately, her hope is that this past will not repeat itself in the present or in the future:

Und nun droht auch Gefahr. Auf meinem Tisch liegt die Ausgabe des SPIEGEL mit der Titelzeile: ‘Rückkehr ins Mittelalter’. Die islamische Terrororganisation Al-Qaida hat dazu aufgerufen, alle Juden und Amerikaner zu töten, als Antwort haben die USA einen weltweiten Krieg gegen den Terrorismus begonnen, und vielleicht breitet sich nun wieder Angst aus in dieser alten Gegend. […] Wieder einmal soll vernichtet werden, gesiegt, abgeräumt, und wenn das geschieht, dann
The area around the Hackescher Markt becomes the trope of world history: the rise of anti-Semitism, the temporary defeat of liberalism and democracy as well as World War II all left their mark on this area and its people; it becomes the symbol for similar developments and threats elsewhere on the globe. The apparent veracity of her text thus seems seminal to her aim to inform of what happened here in the old center of Berlin and thus to prevent such events in the future.118

At a first glance, then, the genre of an essay does seem to fit the purpose as it allows the author to present her “evidentiary material” in a non-fictional way. Yet, the form of an essay calls for a personal point of view, for a close structuring around specific arguments which stands in contrast to a mere reproduction of facts. More than a fictive narrative, which can remain fragmented and open-ended, an essay calls for a pointed conclusion. The material must be arranged to lead to an end. This is clearly more than just a reporting of the research that Liebmann had intended and means that she, too, has chosen and arranged her “facts” carefully to fit her goals. In fact, it turns out that Liebmann herself was aiming for a more artful form than her material might seem to permit, even by her own standards (as expressed earlier in the conversation with Heinrichsdorff). In a later interview she admits: “Natürlich ist auch diese Recherche Kunst,” but adds immediately “die sich jedoch sehr stark an der Realität orientiert” (Interview with Jones). It appears that the author has modified her view on the inability to

118 In this context, photographs – especially of architectural space – are a particularly powerful tool to link the past with the present and the future. They refer both to past actuality and project potential narratives: photographs show what was once there and document the change by comparison with the present. They also point into the future by depicting space that is still available to inhabit in the future.
represent the Jewish genocide through art, but insists that it must be closely based on factual information. The fact, then, that Liebmann did choose a more artful and persuasive format than she advocated opens the door to suspicions about the factuality of *Stille Mitte von Berlin* and raises questions about the notion of truthfulness altogether.

Moving from Liebmann’s extra-textual comments to her text, in the following pages we shall explore where the author positions her work within the parameters of fact and fiction, memory and history. What function do photographs carry within these discourses?

*Stille Mitte von Berlin* repeatedly insists on its documentary nature. The author goes to great lengths to emphasize the apparent factuality of the book: She has inserted a variety of material into her text, ranging from notes from the city’s archive over excerpts from encyclopedias, newspapers or even from her own journal to photographs in the second part of the book. Liebmann uses a variety of techniques in order to draw attention to their ostensible authenticity and validity. For example, she meticulously cites her sources just as a scholar would. For excerpts from newspaper articles she provides the names of the paper, the author and the dates. The entries the author copies from encyclopedias even resemble the original entries visually: The subject heading in bold is followed by a succinct explanation and finishes with the information on the source in italics given in parentheses. The paragraphs are indented and the font is smaller. She even incorporates the same symbols commonly used in encyclopedias: an asterisk for the date of birth and a cross for the date of death. The visual reproduction of such entries thus adds to their apparent veracity. Yet, we will find that Liebmann winds up problematizing every one of these techniques and sources either explicitly or implicitly. With regard to
these encyclopedia entries, for example, we have to ask how a seemingly exact visual reproduction of an entry can possibly guarantee its accuracy. It does not, of course. The blatant visual representation, then, problematizes encyclopedia entries as a source of verification. One could even argue that it mocks any kind of scholarly way of acquiring and representing knowledge. The second part of the chapter will deal in more detail with the academic research methodologies and Liebmann’s take on those.

In general, we can observe that the author employs a variety of visual means to mark the sources she incorporates. There are different fonts and type-setting used for the signs printed on store fronts. In fact, the font of “Gemüse Konserven Kartoffeln” actually resembles that used on the actual sign, as the photographs some sixty pages later verifies (compare SM 6 and 65). Bold print and italics set off quotes from her previous writing as well as the voices of others. Even her own journal entries are now, twenty years after their writing, treated as “authentic historical material.” The author tells us that all excerpts from her journal are written in italics: “Im Folgenden sind alle kursiv gesetzten Texte Stellen aus Tagebuchaufzeichnungen” (14; emphasis Liebmann). She hereby turns herself, her own research as well as the material she generated into a topic of this essay. Liebmann, too, has become part of the history surrounding the Hackescher Markt. We must ask, however, whether such obvious attempts to make her material appear factual and documentary do not create a subtext which questions the author’s technique and ultimately her stated goal. By making fonts, texts and other signs resemble the original visually, she draws even more attention to the fact that they are merely a reproduction and causes wonder why she insists on letting them stand out. That, in turn, seems to harm

119 We can assume that the bold “FRANZ PRETZEL MASCHINEN TREIBRIEMENFABRIK” from page 43 also bears resemblance to the font on the factory wall which Liebmann finds. Alas, there is no image to verify this assumption.
her documentary intent, rather than support it. Rather than asserting her claim for truthfulness, then, it seems more valid to conclude that a more critical reception of this kind of visual reproduction is precisely the author’s intent.

Liebmann also employs linguistic means, specifically Berlin dialect, in order to emphasize the authenticity of her sources. However, she does not do so consistently: Compare, for example, “Zeijen se mal her” and “Ja, waren Juden” (SM 17). Both times the author quotes residents of the Große Hamburger Straße, but only in the first case she uses dialect and italics while she neglects to do so in the second. In other passages, key elements of Berlin dialect are not reproduced. In the quote by a church stoker Liebmann renders a number of characteristics that mark the local patois, such as the ending *i* instead of *s*, the Umlaut *ü* instead of *i* and the *ick* in place of *ich*: “[…] kam der Heizer der Kirche […] und sagte: Die junge Frau dahinten, die friert doch, und wir hätten da noch diesen alte Gerät, also wennsie nüscht dagegen haben, denn würde ick det mal anschließen” (SM 46; italics Liebmann). However, the author fails to reproduce one of the most salient characteristics which even new residents of Berlin easily adapt: the replacement of *g* as *j*.120 Thus, “Jerät” and “dajegen” would be more appropriate than the standard versions of “Gerät” and “dagegen.” As a Berlin native, Liebmann certainly must be aware of this specific dialect feature, as she demonstrates elsewhere in the text: “War beliebt der Gottlieb, bekannt ooch, weil er seine Arbeit jut jemacht hat […]. Jacoby – war Halbjude, is ins Wasser jegangen […]” (SM 14). Once again, instead of increasing the documentary value of her essay, the obvious inconsistencies in her rendering of Berlin dialect features

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120 See the webpage http://lexikon.freenet.de/berlinerisch: “Zugezogene bemerken zuerst den Ersatz von g zu j.”
lessen the authenticating effect and call attention to the problem of truthful representation.

These visual and linguistic techniques testify to the author’s struggle with her desire to ascertain truth but also to her awareness of the elusiveness of her goal. While she does not problematize the inability to represent a true past reality as openly as Sebald and Maron do, she does so implicitly within the text precisely through the features that at a first glance seem to verify her writing. Fiction, the author asserts, would be inappropriate in this book: “Fiktion? Nein, die hat hier gar keinen Platz” (Interview with Susanne Jones). Above all, it is to this end that Liebmann claims to reproduce her researched material, particularly her photos: “Deshalb habe ich ja auch die Photos mit aufgenommen – um ein realistisches Bild zu vermitteln” (Interview with Susanne Jones). In the following we shall see whether, in fact, these frames convey a “realistic image” – and what kind of reality it may refer to – or whether they may serve other functions.

The forty-five frames included in *Stille Mitte von Berlin* depict street corners, individual buildings from different perspectives, courtyards, doors, gates, crumbling facades, and empty spaces, even piles of rubble in the area around the Hackescher Markt. Together, they give an impression of decay in the early eighties in this central part of Berlin that echoes the atmosphere of stagnation and hopelessness described by Liebmann. The photos in *Stille Mitte von Berlin* are not, as in *Pawels Briefe, Die Ausgewanderten* or *Austerlitz*, or even in Liebmann’s other works, integrated within the text, but are added after the text. Therefore, they do not have the function of breaking down the narrative, to establish complex relationships between text and image. However, although, other than

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121 The decision to publish the pictures separately on glossy paper was made by the publisher Nicolaische Verlagsbuchhandlung in order to better preserve the quality (Liebmann in Interview with Jones).
on one occasion, there are no explicit references to these images, there is a clear relationship between the frames at the end of the book and the text. Many of the buildings and streets are directly discussed by Liebmann, such as the Große Hamburger Straße, the produce store, etc. Others, for example those that depict rubble or crumbling facades, reinforce the sense of stand-still Liebmann conjures up. Thus, the photographs in *Stille Mitte von Berlin* indeed verify the text in so far as they document the destruction left behind by war as well as the decay caused by the neglect of East German authorities. We can say that the images fulfill a referential function within the reality of the text. In other words, they visually reflect the reality of the narrative.

Quite fitting with the stated documentary purpose of her book, the author labels all her pictures, at times not only describing what they show but also which perspective is taken. Of the three functions of picture titles identified by Clive Scott, Liebman’s clearly operate as a “point of departure, something minimal and non-interfering, which orientates the spectator and then leave the image to do its work” (47). The titles contain neither explanations nor commentary, as they are given in the preceding text. There, the author also tells the reader where these images come from, who the photographer was and what they were intended for, thus giving them an unequivocally realistic context. The very first sentence provides such information while highlighting the importance of these pictures for the writing of this book: “Die Fotos in diesem Buch entstanden Anfang der achtziger Jahre des vergangenen Jahrhunderts in Ost-Berlin. Sie waren als Material gedacht für ein Buch über die Gegend zwischen Friedrichstrasse und Alexanderplatz” (*SM* 5). By keeping her titles minimal – most times, they only consist of the name of the street photographed – the author, again, creates the impression that they only state the most
essential factual information needed to orientate the reader. However, as was pointed out in the first chapter, any kind of contextualization – even the most minimal captions – do, in fact, interpret the frames. They manipulate their semantic material and shape it into a meaning that is coherent with the text. In this context, it is also significant that the images come after the text. The preceding fifty-four pages provide Liebmann with the opportunity to create a context for these images, to affect their reception. This chapter is also interested in the meanings Liebmann attaches to her images and how she negotiates the frailty of the apparent referentiality.

Originally, the pictures were meant as aides-mémoire, triggers of memory, for the author, similar to the journal she kept of her research. This practice is not uncommon to writers. Walter Benjamin, for instance, advocated this technique in order to ensure that details can be rendered as faithfully as possible. Once the material was gathered, it was to help her in reconstructing the images in her mind so she could write a novel that was closely based on reality, as she had done before: “Etwas Ähnliches habe ich auch schon in dem Buch Berliner Mietshaus (1982) versucht. Mein Ziel war es, so zu schreiben, dass daraus ein Bild entsteht, mit ganz vielen Details” (Interview with Jones). For Liebmann, then, the function of these images seems clear: they are meant to show faithfully what the streets around the Hackescher Markt looked like in the early eighties: “[…] denn sie [die Fotos] zeigen etwas, was es heute so nicht mehr gibt. Die Gegend hier um den Hackeschen Markt sieht ja heute ganz anders aus” (Interview with Jones). Thus, on one level the photographs in Stille Mitte von Berlin are related to the cityscape of the GDR in the early eighties. But the photographs of Berlin’s old center hold another promise: These pictures are to uncover a “hidden truth” in the streets and to conserve their vanished past:
“Sie haben ein Geheimnis, das man entdecken kann” (Interview with Jones). But what hidden truths can these images reveal? Of what nature are those “hidden truths”? What meaning do they take on within the framework of this book? How do they interact with the text and shape our understanding?

We have discussed before that photographs are taken to preserve a specific occasion in our memories (see Sontag 56). Most times, the moment to be preserved is that of the taking: a group picture at a gathering is to document that this event took place with all persons present who were captured on film. A beautiful sunset is preserved before it vanishes just a few minutes later and only the image is there to remind us on what it once looked like. With the pictures included in Stille Mitte von Berlin we have to ask what secret truths the author wants to remember or to remind of. What is their frame of reference?

As mentioned earlier, Liebmann tells us that she took these photographs in the early eighties. Therefore, first and foremost, they serve as reminders of the neglect and decay around the Hackescher Markt and many other older areas of the city. Images of the architecture and cityscape, in turn, trigger memories of her personal life:


Architecture relates to life and its memories in a special way. Particularly photographs of public spaces such as those of the area surrounding the Hackescher Markt, may represent

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122 The German word “erinnern” can have both meanings and thus create a fruitful ambiguity: used reflexively it means to remember, while the non-reflexive form can be used transitive in the sense of “to remind someone of something.”
the kind of “lieux de mémoire” that shape identities (Pierre Nora). Elani Bastéa cites psychological studies when she explains that visual design and spatial locations are remembered by employing the right side of the brain while we remember verbal information with the left side of the brain: “The right side of the brain ‘sees’ space and images, while the left ‘narrates.’ Put in that way, the memory of ‘our own home’ is encoded through the right side of the brain. It is based on personal, lived experience” (9; emphasis Bastéa). Images of houses and streets, then, may evoke the memories of such lived experiences for all those who recognize these spaces or their likes as pertaining to their own past. These photographs, then, may evoke a more immediate and personal contact with the past than a narration of the bygone may be able to.

However, the photographs in Stille Mitte von Berlin are not only about life in the capital of the GDR. The second reference lies in the details many of the images reveal. These emerge only through the description of the text: a sign reading “Gemüse Konserven Kartoffeln” (SM 6); another sign on a façade, almost faded and difficult to decipher: “Bau Klo …” (SM 86); yet a different one we cannot make out at all above the archway leading to a courtyard (SM 85); or the ornate relief above the door of Sophienstrasse 37 (SM 98). All these details are remains from an architecture which did not originate in the construction programs of GDR administration. Liebmann took a closer look at architectural markers that spoke of a different time and different way of life in the Große Hamburger Straße as well as adjacent streets. Perhaps these are the “hidden truths” the author speaks of. Thus, parallel to the text, the photographs in Stille Mitte von Berlin refer to two different time frames: first that of their taking in the early eighties and, second, to that of the architectural origins of these photographed details, which date back
to the turn of the nineteenth century or even before. Another function of the images in *Stille Mitte von Berlin*, therefore, is to visually support – perhaps even to motivate – the time references the author established in her opening frame. They also serve as a justification for her project: these empty streets, the decayed houses, the architectural details from another time are so irrefutably *there* that it seems almost impossible not to remember or investigate this forgotten or repressed past.

Liebmann, however, is too young to relate to lived experience from that time. Photographs of places in Berlin do not conjure up her own memories of the city before 1945. She has to seek other sources of information in order to gain access to this past. One option, of course, would be to consult history books of that time. In her study, Bastéa says that historical memory, or the “memory of our nation,” is encoded through the left side of our brain: “It is a *learned* concept that has been transmitted and reinforced through our education, socialization, media, state rhetoric, and so forth” (9; emphasis Bastéa). The concept of memory of our nation corresponds quite well to Jan and Aleida Assmann’s notion of cultural memory: “Das kulturelle Gedächtnis ist eng mit der Identität einer Gesellschaft oder Nation verknüpft und zeichnet sich durch eine relative Permanenz und Stabilität aus, da es auf eine Vielzahl von Archiven, öffentlichen Ritualen und Gedächtnisorten zurückgreifen kann” (Eigler 43). Along with the advocates for a more personal engagement with the text, however, the author rejects this kind of “learned memory of our nation” precisely because of its rituality and rigidity. For this reason, she returns to the images of these old houses and streets. Accessing the past through lived experience embodied in architecture – or images of it – holds the promise that one can circumvent established narratives about the past and, instead, retrieve the truths hidden in
the streets and houses of Berlin’s old center, a notion which deserves a closer examination in the second part of this chapter.

At the same time, these visual memories must be verbalized in order to gain meaning: “Perhaps a physical (right-brain) memory of place remains dormant in our mind until we can put its significance in words, until we can narrate the ideas that make it meaningful and memorable by employing the left brain” (Bastéa 12). The concept of the visual in need of a narrative in order to become meaningful harkens back to the idea that, lacking an interpretive context, photographs themselves have no meaning (see chapter 1 and Price 1; Hall 152). Liebmann is quite cognizant of this problematic. At the end of her introduction she asks: “Aber was sagt ein Bild darüber? Es lohnt sich, von der Recherche zu erzählen, vom ‘Material’, das ich fand” (SM10). Thus, in order to ascribe meaning to these images, Liebmann has to give them a context, a story – or even two. She is also well aware that the kind of narratives attached to an image determine its meaning and that it can change over time or may differ from viewer to viewer: “Es steckt sehr viel in einer Photographie. Das Schöne an einem Bild ist ja auch, daß man es sich nach einer Zeit immer wieder ansehen und etwas Neues für sich darin finden kann. Das ist ein Grund, warum ich Photos verwende” (Interview with Jones).

Here, Liebmann questions most explicitly the expressiveness of an image and signals the need for an interpretive framework that can give meaning to specific photographs. Indeed, she shows how two very different historical time frames with their respective narratives can be attached to the same images, highlighting different aspects of them. At the same time, these images also stand for the actual streets, buildings and their residents. Just looking at those houses will not likely transfer these “dormant physical
(right-brain) memories” into our conscious memory. Only an engagement of both, right and left brain, visual and narrative memory functions will make images of the past meaningful and memorable in the present and future. The fact that photographs are not as stable and permanent as cultural memory, but that their meaning can, indeed, change makes such dual engagement necessary and productive.

How different these meanings can be shall be demonstrated with the following example. When I first held the book *Stille Mitte von Berlin* in my hands, I briefly browsed through it. Glancing at the pictures at the end of the book, and without having read her essay, my own memories of life in the GDR (though roughly 100 miles outside of Berlin) were conjured up by these streets and houses which very much resemble the ones I played in. Yet, my recollections were quite different from what I was to read. In the early eighties, I had been in school for just a few years – in fact, I could be the little child on the picture shown on page 91. Still largely unburdened by political consciousness, I experienced the eighties notably differently than the author. My memories have no room for her sense of stagnation or emptiness. What “falls out” of my pictures and other artifacts of that time – and even out of Liebmann’s to some degree – are memories full of life, happiness, embarrassments, or sadness. I find myself in a similar situation to Jana Hensel, author of *Zonenkinder* (2002), who – while rejecting a merely nostalgic attitude – finds it difficult to accept that life in the GDR was “nicht sehr hoch geschätzt” (*SM* 9) and who tries to salvage some of the memories of a past that is quickly vanishing, to demonstrate to herself and to others that the East German past cannot be described as just one great void.
Liebmann, however, offers a different past. The problem here is not that she does that, but that her personal memories are presented as a collective account. She attaches a narrative to her photographs in an attempt to tell how “our life” (SM 9) was in the GDR of the early eighties, without realizing that the collective “we” is inappropriate when referring to memories of the past. Memories are shaped by our individual experiences and certainly, everyone experiences the world differently, yielding different recollections. It is true that one can see the emptiness and decay in the streets around the Hackescher Markt, but one must not forget that every photograph offers only what Sontag calls a “pseudo-presence” while at the same time being a “token of absence” (Sontag 16). That is, a photo only captures what was included in the frame, a particular perspective and only part of the complete reality. Liebmann chose to photograph empty streets because that was the story she wanted to tell in the early eighties (and has, in fact, in her other works), a time when this sense of lifelessness was what she and her friends struggled with on a daily basis. As Clive Scott points out, the photograph “becomes a repository of our desires, sensations, mentalities” (73). Liebmann photographed what she found worth capturing at the time. We will never know what she did not capture because it did not fit her agenda in the eighties. In other words, these pictures of architectural space and cityscape mirror her lived experience and are embedded into her personal memory narrative. The tension between the personal nature of memories attached to the images and the use of the collective “we” remains unresolved within the book. Liebmann’s attempts to attach a story of “our lives,” a unified narrative of life in the GDR, to the photographs she took is equally interpretative and questionable as the historian’s approaches she is so weary of, as we shall see in the next part. Liebmann appears to take
too little into account the very personal nature of her impressions and the very limited perspective the images offer. One could argue, however, that – along with the visual means discussed earlier – this serves as another means to draw attention to the problems and ambiguities of using “documents” to write a collective history of the past.

Thus far we have seen that Liebmann presents her essay *Stille Mitte von Berlin* as a conflict which reflects precisely the current debate of the representation of the Holocaust in literature. The most significant concern revolves around the tension between the desire to find and represent truth – a matter that seems crucial in her attempt to tell about the past in order to avoid a similar future – and the inability to do so. Liebmann employs a variety of material and techniques which reflect this ongoing struggle: The essay form, the use of dialect, the visual marking and scholarly citation of her sources all serve to demonstrate the lure of apparently documentary material while, at the same time, undermining their authenticating and verifying capacities. Photographs are also treated as carriers of a “hidden truth,” while the text makes it clear that they only refer to the reality of the text. By attaching two historical time frames to the photographs, Liebmann draws attention to the fact that the meaning of photographs changes, depending on their context. Just as any narration, they only present a certain angle, a part of reality which can then be manipulated and interpreted in many ways. The tension between photography’s referential qualities and its deceptions mirror the book’s central concern with the truth. In this capacity it stands as a symbol for the quest for truth and the impossibility to achieve that goal.

Photographs of architecture, especially, allow for a discussion of visual memories of lived experience, granting a more immediate and personal engagement. In order to
take on meaning, however, those images must be provided with a narrative. This
discussion, in turn, echos the debate on whether memory or history offers the most
adequate form of access to the past. Liebmann’s books seems to suggest that a
meaningful engagement with the past combines both: a search for facts about the past that
can serve as the parameter – just like a frame – within which personal memories can take
on their meaning and can become productive for the shaping of a future.

**The Path to the Past: Memory, History, and the Archive**

The above discussion shows that Liebmann strives for an interpretive framework that will
give meaning to the images in *Stille Mitte von Berlin*. In her introduction, she determines
this framework by relating the photographs to her research in the eighties as well as to the
resulting “material,” e.g. the pre-1945 past, especially Jewish life in the area. In the
following, I will focus on her research methods as well as on the results and will establish
how they relate to the issues introduced in the first part of this chapter vis-à-vis
photography. I will argue that the images in *Stille Mitte von Berlin* are an expression of
Liebmann’s original desire in the eighties to fill the gaps and find truth, to verify
historical facts and establish a continuous narrative. I will also show, however, that the
author’s understanding of these concepts has evolved over the past two decades. She
realizes that what she found is equally problematic in terms of reliability as well as
completeness, and that her findings are just as prone to manipulation as well as marked
by voids as are the photographs. We will find that, once again, Liebmann’s struggle with
her methodology and with her findings is ultimately a reflection of her quest for truth and understanding and her inability to find both.

In the beginning of this chapter, we have established the stated purpose of this book as an attempt to recapture a forgotten or repressed past in order to gain a better understanding of the present and to avoid the catastrophes of the past in the present and future. In this effort, Liebmann’s research is guided by a desire to fill the voids: empty architectural spaces and facades in the streets around the Hackescher Markt; the GDR present, void of life, resulting in photographs marked by absence. These absences, in turn, echo the gaps in the minds of the people – friends or strangers – the author encounters.

Liebmann portrays life in the GDR as stagnant. The fifty years of darkness she repeatedly refers to (SM 6, 58) are discussed as an absence: absence of light and of life. Paradoxically, the photographs bring this “darkness,” the gaping void, to light (in fact, quite literally, photography means “light-writing”). It is precisely this contrast between the liveliness of those “stranded objects” (see Eric Santner) on facades and her East German present that spurred Liebmann’s curiosity and prompted her to search for further traces of the past:

öffnet, sieht Marmor, Gold und Farbe an den Wänden, Zeitungen auf dem Tresen,
Tische stehen sogar auf dem Trottoir, wo damals nur ein Schutthaufen prangte.
Hätte es 1980 das nette CAFÉ EDWIN und andere solche Cafés schon gegeben,
dann wäre mir eine noch so gut erhaltene alte Schrift wahrscheinlich nicht so
verlockend erschienen, so schön und der Nachfrage wert. (SM 7)

Thus we can say that the presence of such “stranded objects” such as business signs or
ornate decoration, drew the author’s attention to the absences in the present of the
eighties. In a way, these streets, particularly the facades, function as a kind of palimpsest,
“carrying a text erased, or partly erased, underneath an apparent additional text.”123 The
reproduction of these palimpsests from the past in form of photographs within the book
fulfills two purposes: on one hand they reinforce their undeniable material presence and
thus remind of a distant past full of life. At the same time, because of their neglect and
decay these signs point to the absence of that life, due to the persecution and killing of
those who once populated these streets.

The concept of voids is an important one in Stille Mitte von Berlin, as it is in
Maron’s and Sebald’s works. They serve as the motivation for Liebmann’s research in
the eighties as well as for the publication of this essay in 2001. The author wants to find
the “Verbindungsstück” that would bridge the gap between the past and the present.
Liebmann thus joins the other two authors when she implies that history has become
fragmented, lacking connecting elements. Besides the lack of information about the area
around the Hackescher Markt in the eighties as well as the memory gaps of the residents
described in the following pages, Liebmann also exposes the degree to which politics

dictate which events are included in the news and subsequently in history books of a nation. She cites an incidence where the USSR had shot down a civilian South Korean plane. The Soviet news agency TASS called it a “deliberate provocation” (SM 39) while the East German press did not even cover it until three days after the event. When it finally did, significant facts, such as the 269 deaths, were missing: “Nichts über Tote, nur, dass man gezwungen war, in Richtung eines fliegenden Objektes Schüsse abzugeben, worauf das Objekt sich im Dunkeln verloren hätte” (SM 40). Ironically, most people in the GDR were also able to receive West German news, which often gave quite a different account. Thus, East Germans were often acutely aware of the fabricated nature of “truths” transmitted through public media.

However, the author does not only point to the gaps in East German approaches to current events as well as the past. She also exposes the selective consciousness of West Germans at that time. She tells of a West Berlin friend who had finally come to visit after realizing that she only lived half an hour away: “Ihr sei also klar geworden, daß ich ganz in ihrer Nähe bin. Sie leben neben uns und sind gar nicht da. Das sagte sie von uns, kommt dann lange nicht mehr, ein Jahr” (SM 25; emphasis Liebmann). East Germany, the area Liebmann lived in and researched, a big gap, a void to her West German friend, just as any political map at that time would have reinforced. Both examples show how very aware Liebmann was of the unreliability and subjectiveness of public and private discourses and the gaps that always form a part of them.

On several occasions Liebmann laments the forgetting – willful or not – that has taken place in Germany, in the past and the present, which has left the kind of voids she is trying to fill. She refers here to the planned eradication of liberal and democratic
thought in Nazi Germany and the GDR, the past (and present) silence about Jewish life and death in Berlin, particularly around the Hackescher Markt: “Man kann durchaus von fünfzig verdunkelten Jahren reden, begleitet von einem ebenso langen Vergessen und auch Verschweigen” (SM 6). Liebmann describes, for example, the horrifying information she finds about a Jewish boy’s school and the adjacent park, once the location of an elderly home that had served as a gathering locale for the deportation of some 50,000 Jews. Her conversation with the principle in the early eighties leads to frustration and the renewed acknowledgement that even those who are responsible for the education of the young are not interested in learning about and teaching this terrible legacy: “Wir saßen zusammen and guckten aus dem Fenster, guckten auf die Schule, die Turnhalle, den leeren Platz, wo das Altersheim einmal gestanden hatte, wo also etwa fünfzigtausend Menschen in den Tod gegangen waren. Und das war nicht einmal 50 Jahre her, aber wir wussten nichts davon” (SM 56). The prospects are bleak for coming generations if her own generation, above all teachers, do not know what happened just a few decades earlier. How are they to know about National Socialism and the Jewish genocide and based on that knowledge avoid the repetition of similar atrocities?

In the early eighties, the palimpsests of this old quarter in Berlin thus inspired Liebmann to counter such forgetting and to recover the past of the area around the Hackescher Markt, which was affected so enormously by the historical events of the previous 150 years. In the remainder of the chapter we will take a closer look at how Liebmann approaches this past. Where does she situate herself in the current memory-history-archive or fact-fiction debates outlined in the first chapter?
Her first instinct is to recover some of the memories tied to these streets that feature on her photographs. Having been born in 1943, however, she is too young to remember anything about the pre-45 past she is interested in. Not interested in official discourses, the author has to seek out the lived experience of an older generation: she visits the residents of the Grosse Hamburger Strasse in order to gather their recollections of the time prior to the end of World War II.

At first, Liebmann finds her own longing for a rich and lively history confirmed. The closed shop windows and the faded names had conjured up ideas of diversity, creativity, life and color, the myth of a harmonious past:

Wurde man es aber gewahr, ließ es einen nicht mehr los, diese Vorstellung, das alles könne einmal belebt gewesen sein, kleinteilig und vielfältig bunt. […] Mehr noch als Scherzartikel gefielen mir die alten Bezeichnungen – Milchverkauf & Kolonialwaren zum Beispiel. Steigt da nicht die Erinnerung an einen kleinen Kaufmannsladen auf, wie man ihn einmal hatte oder gerne gehabt hätte, an Kinderspielzeug und heile Welt? (SM 11-12; emphasis Liebmann)

What the old women still living in the Große Hamburger Straße tell her about the time before the end of the war reinforces her sense of a pre-war idyll so different from her GDR-present (which she is obviously critical of herself):

Die jungen Leute von heute tun mir leid. Wir würsten gar nicht, was es alles Schönes auf der Welt gäbe, wie herrlich sie alle früher sich gekleidet und vergnügt hätten und wie phantastisch es in Berlin einmal zugegangen sei, zumal hier, in dieser Gegend.
Das war ja auch mein Gefühl gewesen. Zumal eine gewisse Gemütlichkeit hier, gerade hier in der Großen Hamburger Strasse, noch immer mit Händen zu greifen war.


Liebmann reproduces these comments not without some irony expressed through obvious exaggeration. There seems to be too much nostalgia even for the author, who initially harbored similar expectations. This quote, of course, is a prime example of the kind of “mythic memory” often referred to in current literature on memory. Pierra Nora, for example, defines it as memory that “is life, born by living societies founded in its name. It remains in permanent evolution, open to the dialectic of remembering and forgetting, unconscious of its successive deformations, vulnerable to manipulation and appropriation, susceptible to being long dormant and periodically revived” (285). He highlights the selective quality of mythic memory when he adds that “[m]emory, insofar as it is affective and magical, only accommodates those facts that suit it; it nourishes recollections that may be out of focus or telescopic […]” (285). Nora’s notion of mythic memory also corresponds to Jan and Aleida Assmann’s concept of “communicative memory” which is based on informal exchanges among members of a particular group as
opposed to the “cultural memory” described earlier (see “Gestern im Heute”, A. Assmann’s Erinnerungsräume). It is also interesting to note that Liebmann only speaks about women as her informants, strengthening the notion of mythic memory which is generally gendered as feminine, while history is thought of as the masculine counterpart.

The author finds, however, that this mythic form of highly selective and idealizing memory will not suffice in her quest for the past and for truth. Once she begins to scratch the harmonious surface and asks more daring questions, the residents’ memory fails, prompting the author to direct her research to the city library where she finds the city archive containing address books of Berlin, including those of the Große Hamburger Straße. Spanning the period between 1799 and 1943, the books provide the names and professions of tenants, owners and property managers. Although enthusiastic about her find at first, Liebmann realizes quickly that these facts mean very little if there is no life attached to these names. She returns to the women residents in hopes to elicit further information: “[…] ich wusste mit einem Schlag sehr viel und hätte alle möglichen statistischen Rechenaufgaben damit stellen können, aber ich wollte ja den Anschluss an unsere Zeit und ging daher mit dem letzten Adressbuchauszug zurück in die Straße: 1943. Wieder fragte ich die alten Frauen” (SM 14).

Only when Liebmann brings the data encountered in the archive in contact with the memory of the women does she receive a more detailed and differentiated account of the different lives led in the Große Hamburger Straße. The women recognize the names of people long gone and tell what they know of their fates. Less than idyllic stories of the former neighbors finally begin to surface, for example that of the half-Jew Jacoby:
Jacoby – war Halbjude, is ins Wasser jegangen, aber nach “45 erst, der immer mit seine weißen Handschuhe, ein Pedant war das, angeschwemmt isser am Schiffbauerdamm, kam immer zu mir, ob ich seine weißen Servietten wasche, nachm Krieg. Waschense mal weiße Servietten und nicht wissen, womit, jeden Tag die Servietten und frische Tischtücher. Und eine Wiegschale mit goldenen Gewichten hatte er, die musste auch immer geputzt werden, die Frau hat mir leid getan. (SM 14-15; emphasis Liebmann)

The women of the Große Hamburger Straße offer Liebmann an alternative narrative, quite different from the public commemorations of the GDR or today’s memory discourses which generally discuss Jews as victims. Inspired by the sudden encounter with the names from the address books, the residents are overcome by their memories and begin to open up and talk about all former neighbors indiscriminately. For a moment they forget their hesitations related to the Nazi-era and the persecution of the Jews. Old and underlying stereotypes are exhumed: the rich Jew who, while, after the war, the Germans worried about basic needs such as food and shelter, is concerned about the impeccable cleanliness of his dinner ware and his scale equipped with golden weights. His death is referred to only briefly, in almost trivial terms. Another striking example is the woman in the Mulackstraße, who speaks about her former Jewish neighbors in similar terms as about the resident prostitutes: “Das Wort Mulackstraße war ihr so schrecklich, dass sie jedes Mal uu! rief, bevor sie es aussprach: uu!, weil hier früher die verrufenste Nuttengegend von Berlin war. […] Gefragt hatte ich nach den Prostituierten – uuu!” (SM 20-21, emphasis Liebmann). However, what the author gets are stories about the deportation of the Jewish population in the Mulackstraße – quite to the benefit of this
woman who is able to move into their deserted apartment, where she still resided in the early eighties. She seems to differentiate little between the prostitutes and the Jews: “Wenn die Frau von den Juden erzählte, rief sie auch uuu!” (SM 21). These spontaneous and unself-conscious recollections may, perhaps, better approximate the truth Liebmann is looking for (of course not in their perpetuation of common anti-Semitic stereotypes but by showing that such stereotyping existed and exists today), because they counter, or at least complement, the mythic memory that “accommodates those facts that suit it.” The moment when the women are confronted with bits and pieces from the past, and consequently their own recollections can also resemble the kind of encounters John K. Roth advocates as a way of accessing the past and ensure a remembering. We recall that Roth described such encounters as meetings that “take place by chance, face to face, as conflicts, or as a combination of these elements” (130). They do not happen in general but through particularities of an individual’s experience (131). Although Liebmann sought these women out, certainly, the information she hears comes to her unexpectedly, by chance, face to face and creates conflict as we shall see. These encounters can also be described as a meeting between cultural and communicative memory. Eigler summarizes Assmann’s definition of “cultural memory” as follows: “[D]as kulturelle ‘Speichergedächtnis’ [zeichnet sich] durch einen umfassenden Bestand aus kulturellem Wissen aus, das im Rahmen von unterschiedlichen Kultur- und Bildungsinstitutionen archiviert, erforscht und weitergegeben wird” (Gedächtnis 43). Cultural memory thus forms a framework that can shape communicative recollections, which in turn can also complement the former. Together, they enter into a more productive and dynamic relationship than if they were consulted alone.
However, the flood of memories stops as suddenly as it had set in. The residents become increasingly cautious: “Wozu wollen Sie das denn wissen?” (SM 16). And when Liebmann narrows in on the period of the Nazi regime, the residents become reluctant to talk. They have no interest in digging up this past, even less so to make these memories available to others: “Schließlich war die Geschichte, die es hier in der Gegend zu erforschen gab, auch ihre Geschichte gewesen, sie wussten es. Nur wenige wollten wirklich etwas aufgeschrieben sehen, damit es nicht vergessen wird” (SM 16).

A few more times Liebmann hears stories about Jewish neighbors, about their lives, sometimes about their persecution and deaths, but very soon the doors in the Große Hamburger Straße no longer open. It becomes clear: the people here do not want to be reminded of what they saw and were a part of as bystanders or worse, as participants. Their witnessing of these events, of course, implies their own guilt for not intervening: “Da wagte ich schon mal eine Zwischenfrage – zum Beispiel, ob die Leute schlecht waren zu den Juden, als die den Stern tragen mussten. Ach wo, war die Antwort, aber einmal, da hörte ich auch: Na aber! Na aber! Es folgten Beispiele, die ich lieber nicht gehört hätte, und schließlich wieder die Toten” (SM 22). What happens here can be described as an infiltration of collective memory. According to Jan and Aleida Assmann “collective memory” is strongly influenced by current political interests. It is particularly instrumentalized in that certain aspects of the past are activated in order to serve specific interests or agendas in the present. In this case, the residents’ suspicions are fed by current renewed interest in detailed accounts of the persecution of the Jews. Here, particular aspects of their recollections are not foregrounded but rather deactivated as a result of public collective memory discourses. What they remember communicatively is
inappropriate for the collective memory of the nation. Liebmann thus points to the harmful effects of the institutionalized and instrumentalized mechanism of collective memory because it interacts and ultimately affects other forms of recollection. This conflict and the residents’ and author’s recognition of it can be fruitful since it draws attention to the kinds of things German collective memory likes to include or discard and that the image of the past it disseminates is, in fact, limited and constructed.

Even Liebmann grows weary of the horrible things she hears as well as of the rejection she experiences: “Und daß es gar nicht mehr klappt mit den Verabredungen, und daß mir die Lust darauf vergeht” (SM 20). When she does happen upon more details about the Jewish persecution and deportation in the area around the Hackescher Markt, these encounters become overwhelming, even unbearable, for the author: “Es reichte mir damals langsam” (SM 22). Liebmann cries out for distance: “Abstand stand damals in meinen Notizen, wie wahrt man den Abstand?” (SM 20; emphasis Liebmann). At the same time, regret and uncertainty about her project set in: “Ja, meine nette, gemütliche Gegend war im Handumdrehen zu einem Abgrund an Interessantheit geworden! Hätte ich doch ihre Gemütlichkeit einfach genossen und niemals nachgefragt” (SM 20). In all these comments, Liebmann describes her difficult response to the residents’ memories. On one hand, she must come to terms with the unreliability of these, or any, recollections while, at the same time, she must face the terrible details they expose. Although perhaps more comfortable, to reject them as fabricated would mean to perpetuate the silence surrounding the involvement of the German population in the systematic persecution of the Jews or to fuel revisionist theory. It would mean to ignore continuing, perhaps deeply engrained, anti-Semitic thought that remains outside of most contemporary public (that
is, collective) discourses in Germany. The gathering and transcription of these memories is an important resource which must be negotiated, albeit critically. This process fuels Liebmann’s awareness of the secondary nature of her status. She must try to come to terms with the fact that the memories she uncovers are naturally shaped by belatedness and disconnection. This apparent struggle with these memories is very significant within the contemporary context of Holocaust remembrance. With fewer and fewer witnesses available to tell about the past, a conscientious treatment of all sources becomes more critical than ever. In allowing different forms of memory to enter into dialogue with and to inform each other Liebmann is pointing in one possible direction of dealing with this increasingly distant past.

This marks an important transition. Originally, it had been Liebmann’s intent to research this area historically. She wanted to find the facts and assemble them into a coherent, well-balanced, objective picture, a chronology of events that would explain how the past has led to the present. These memories were meant to serve as a significant and reliable source to deliver such facts. However, what she finds defies any concept of reliability or balance: “Aber was auch die alten Frauen erzählten oder wie sie es erzählten oder gar nicht mehr erzählten, das machte meine Vorstellung von Ausgewogenheit zunichte” (SM 18). What these women tell her or leave out and how they do so change the course of Liebmann’s research, both in terms of content as well as methodology. More and more Liebmann gets a sense that she cannot discuss the past of the gentile residents of the Große Hamburger Straße in the same terms as that of the Jews. Her focus shifts: the muted accounts of their destruction gain weight with every detail unveiled or disguised until it finally features – contrary to the author’s original intent – at the center
of her research and her later essay. Simultaneously, the increasing weight of her subject evolves into an ever-growing burden: Liebmann must decide how to continue her research, what sources to consult and, ultimately, how to process her material.

First, the author rethinks her methodology: after having abandoned the idea of relying on the memories of the residents, she also realizes that the information she encounters defy the approach of a historian, objective and distanced to her “material.” This leads her not only to question her project but also the very notion of history:


To Liebmann, history becomes a word that stands for distance and indifference, both of which she even discovers in herself: “’Historisch’, das war mir damals ein Wort für Gefühllosigkeit geworden. Ein Wort für Taubheit und Kälte. Ich spürte sie an mir selber bei dieser Recherche. Ich war so kalt wie meine Gegenüber. Ohne diese Kälte hätte ich einen großen Bogen um die Gegend machen müssen” (SM 18). Although Liebmann still struggles to keep her distance from the mythic memories of the residents, she also comes to the realization that a distanced approach is equally inappropriate for the material she finds. These lines bear a striking resemblance to the initial debate of Holocaust representation, where many scholars argue – similar to Liebmann – that a purely fact-driven, objective approach is not desirable – even impossible – for this past. The author thus must find new forms of inquiry and representation.
These realizations lead to serious doubts about her motivations: she had been fascinated by the idea of researching these “authentic” traces. In fact, her original inquiries may have been less motivated by the content of her findings as they were perhaps by the personal implications they would have for Liebmann: Distracted by the sheer wealth of details about the past, she would have no time to ponder the present situation of the eighties. The author describes the struggle of many, including herself, whether to leave the GDR or whether to stay: “Wer sich nicht entschließen konnte, alles einzupacken und einen Antrag auf Ausreise aus der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik zu stellen, der brauchte eine schöne schwere Aufgabe, alle Kräfte bindend und alles andere verdrängend – so eine Aufgabe hatte ich gefunden” (SM 23). It becomes clear to the author, however, that this past is, indeed, “too heavy” to be dealt with from a distance and perhaps only as a “filler.” It pushes beyond the framework allotted to it and becomes all-consuming.

Liebmann gradually recognizes, therefore, that her naïve and overly enthusiastic interest for the past of this area is hardly adequate for the “material” she encounters:

Es war mir geraten worden [einen großen Bogen um die Gegend zu machen], von Anfang an, und ich hatte verwundert gefragt: Wieso? Es sei doch alles so interessant!

War es interessant, dass über zwei Jahre aus allen Richtungen Menschen hierher kamen, mit Kisten und Koffern die Straße entlanggingen zum Getötet-werden? Dass vor dem Altersheim Gaswagen hielten, die von außen wie Möbelwagen aussahen, ihre Abgase aber nach innen leiteten und solange durch Berlin fuhren,
While she is strictly opposed to any fictional or sentimental method of researching and
documenting her findings, Liebmann understands that this history cannot be dealt with in
purely abstract terms. To maintain distance means to perpetuate forgetting. This past
demands a personal engagement. Only through our own engagement – perhaps in the
form of Joseph Roth’s encounters124 – can we attempt to know what happened and thus
defy the forgetting the author condemns. For only if we remember what happened in the
past can we hope to change the future.125

Liebmann makes an interesting distinction between “wissen” and “wirklich
wissen” that warrants clarification. In reference to the deportations of the Jews in Berlin
she says: “Und das war nicht einmal 50 Jahre her, aber wir wussten nichts davon. Wir
wussten es schon, aber es war irgendwie nicht angekommen, es war nicht wirklich
gewusst, dieses Füßegetrappel von fünfzigtausend Menschen” (SM 56-7). To “really
know” seems to be a more physical, more internalized way of knowing. The difference
between “to know” and “to really know” evokes parallels to the difference between
memory and remembrance discussed in the chapter on W.G. Sebald. “To know,” then,
would refer to the intellectual knowledge of learned facts – “the power or process of
reproducing or recalling what has been learned and retained” (Webster’s Third New
International Dictionary on “memory”) – while “to really know” means that this
information is not just entered and stored but that it “arrives”: an engagement with this

124 For a more detailed description of the criteria John K. Roth establishes for his notion of “encounters”
see the discussion in chapter two.
125 See LaCapra’s History and Memory after Auschwitz (1998) for his argument for the relevance of an
emotional engagement and self-implication for transformative politics.
knowledge that leads to an internalization, a comprehension which is not only intellectual but also emotional, one that will affect us in our thinking, feeling and, consequently, in our actions. “To really know,” then, seems to correspond to Sebald’s use of remembrance as defined by Webster’s Third New International Dictionary: the “present consciousness of past experience,” a “bearing in mind.”

At this time, neither memories nor history seem to provide the author with a satisfactory approach to the past. She thus revisits the streets and houses that motivated her inquiry in the first place. This lived space, she hopes, will supply more truthful, personal and detailed information about the past and will fill the gaps left by historical and memory narrative. She returns to the archive, this time to read the files on individual houses: When they were built and torn down (the archive only had files on houses which no longer existed), who acquired or sold these houses and what changes were made. Once again, her enthusiasm for this old and authentic material instantly takes hold of her: “staub und ewig nicht angerührt und alles war echt!” (SM 27). She copies down details of the house’s history: who owned it at what time and what additions were made. She even begins to copy down blueprints, signatures and stamps which to her symbolized a creativity and confidence she missed at that time.

This precise copying of information and visual design very much resembles the act of photographing. Perhaps, if Liebmann had been allowed to bring a camera, she

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126 Friederike Eigler also cites cognitive neurological studies which have established the existence of different, completely separate memory centers and forms which bear striking similarities with the concepts described above:


(Gedächtnis 23)
would have photographed the information, rather than copying it manually. This process, then, exposes the same fascination with the truth value attributed to such putative copies of reality which hold the promise to function as visual evidence.

At this point, one might wonder why the author, so disenchanted with the concept of historical inquiry would return to the archive, once again in search for the “authentic.” The explanation may lie in the fact that Liebmann actually distinguishes between her own methodology and that of a historian. While archival research might suggest the work of a historian in most minds, Liebmann’s concept differs. According to her, the historian learns his or her information from the books, learns the facts by heart, rather than engaging with “authentic material”: “Vielleicht, weil ich kein Historiker war, ich hatte das nicht studieren müssen, nicht mit Prüfungen und dicken Büchern mich gequält” (SM 29). This may appear to be a very narrow understanding of the historian’s work. However, Liebmann’s quote reflects her notion of history as a discipline based on facts gathered in books, detached from the lieux of life. Similar to Nietzsche’s critique of history, in Liebmann’s understanding it also seems to process only the monumental, disregarding localized or personalized histories while being dominated by politics and ideology. This has been a common critique of history since modernity, as Andreas Huyssen points out:

The pressures on the traditional notion of history as objective and distinct from memory are so manifold today that it would be hard to weigh them all in their respective validity. The critique of historiography as a tool of domination and ideology […] the post-Nietzschean attacks on linearity, on causality, and on the myths of origin or telos as articulated in the work of Foucault, Lyotard, and
Derrida; […] – these arguments are too well known to bear repeating here in detail. (Present Pasts 5).

Such a notion of history explains the critique on the historical approach to the Holocaust. If history distances and is informed by notions of linearity and causality, then it would, indeed, seem inappropriate within a context in which personal engagement, fragmentation and lack of comprehension form key aspects. Apparently, to Liebmann the archive is separate from history. In line with a less traditional understanding of the archive, she is looking at it as a way to access the past through avenues less dominated by politics, ideology or identity formation and, instead, based on real traces from the past. Francis X. Blouin points out that “a century ago archives and history occupied the same conceptual and methodological space” but that “[h]istory and archives now occupy very different spaces” (296).

Liebmann puts her hopes into a medium that seems to stand between fallible memory and abstract history. The archive promises to deal with (hi)stories of individual lives, to open up small windows into an everyday past – not through the eyes of today’s manipulated recollections, but based on documents and artifacts from times long gone. Similar to photographs, these documents promise to verify the personal narratives attached to them. Blouin describes the privileged position of the archive as an authority in coming to an understanding of the past: “Refined in the early modern period with the establishment of diplomatics, archives were increasingly regarded as the location of ‘authentic’ records. The idea of authority embedded in the notion of an authentic record privileged the archive as an authoritative source in understanding the past” (296). Nora confirms a similar position of the archive in the present:
No society has ever produced archives as deliberately as our own, not only volume, not only by new technical means of reproduction and preservation, but also by its superstitious esteem, by its veneration of the trace. Even as traditional memory disappears, we feel obliged assiduously to collect remains, testimonies, documents, images, speeches, any visible sign of what has been, as if this burgeoning dossier were to be called upon to furnish some proof to who knows what tribunal history. (290)

For an instant, it appears to the reader that Liebmann may have complete faith in the authority of the archive and in the proof it pledges.

In this context, the author’s preoccupation with artifactual details can also be easily accounted for: As explained earlier, architectural peculiarities were the very motivation for her research; pictures were taken to capture these details and to aid in their narrative reproduction; in the archive, the author faithfully copies not only verbal information but also other designs. Through these details, Liebmann tries to get access to the everyday history of individual lives. She hopes that, by piecing these undeniably authentic artifacts together, she will create a more complete and realistic image of the past, one that is neither manipulated by the selectiveness of memory nor of historical discourses. By turning to the archive, then, the author hopes to escape the monumentalism and objectification of history while maintaining strong roots in the reality of lived life.

Once again, however, the book describes the disappointing experiences of the author. The information Liebmann finds prompts her to visit other archives, such as the church archive of Sophienkirche. Here she hopes to find the answer to questions
regarding the role of Franz Pretzel, the factory owner and resident of the Große Hamburger Straße, in the growing anti-Semitic sentiment of the late 19th century. After all, these streets surrounding the Hackescher Markt gave rise to a major anti-Semitic movement that evolved from a key conservative turn in parts of the protestant church in Berlin. Liebmann suspects that scandals surrounding the clergy of Sophienkirche as well as public figures such as Pretzel, who had quickly risen to become a member of the church council, were at the center of the advance of anti-Semitic thought that erupted into the so-called Berlin movement (see SM 50).

Yet, every time she tries to get to the core of events, attempts to trace the development of anti-Semitism in this particular area, the church records fail her. They obviously have been tampered with: “Immer bei Pretzel beginnt Schmiererei im Protokollbuch steht in meinen Aufzeichnungen, und noch jetzt bin ich hilflos mit all den Notizen aus den lückenhaften Protokollbüchern des Parochialvereins, des Gemeindekirchenrates und den Zeitungsauschnitten” (SM 47; emphasis Liebmann). The author is puzzled as well as frustrated by these gaps that keep her from reaching the goal of understanding how the Jews had become the target of genocide:

Warum fehlte so viel? Warum wurde gefälscht und abgeschnitten? Warum kannte niemand die Geschichte? Warum wussten wir so wenig? Warum fehlten die Archive, die Bücher, oder sie waren durcheinander, oder man durfte sie gar nicht lesen, nicht kennen? Und immer kamen neue Bereiche des Verbotenen und Ausgelöschten dazu, dafür sorgte nun die DDR. (SM 53)

Liebmann learns that even archival records, the sources she deemed to be true and authentic, are altered in order to erase information that does not fit desired historical
narratives. Her quest for truth is, once again, frustrated. None of her sources, not the memories of witnesses, historical accounts, the photographs of streets and homes or the archival records reveal to her what she is looking for: an understanding of the German past, exemplified by the history of one particular Berlin neighborhood.

The realization of the fallibility of the archive is only consequential. If history is a construct shaped by national and institutional self-perception, the archive must be affected as well. After all, someone must maintain and fund the archive that is to authenticate historical discourse: the government, the city of Berlin or the church community of the Sophienkirche. Thus, some of the same questions that have been posed with regard to history, apply to the archive in a similar fashion: “What is in the archive? How did it get there? By what political and cultural constructs were the records assembled and presented? What, then, is the authority of the records in validating a historical understanding? What is not there? What is the authority of the absence in affirming broad cultural realities?” (Blouin 297). These questions bear striking similarities to those posed by Liebmann in the previous quote. Hence, as Blouin points out, while removed from explicit historiographical frameworks, the archive in its selection, organization, and presentation may implicitly reinforce certain cultural and political constructs, which, in shaping the content of the record, also shape how we come to know the past. Very importantly, within the framework of Liebmann’s book as well as this study, this understanding of the archive very much resembles modern understanding of photography: both are deemed to provide authentic proof of past events. At the same time, because both are prone to selection and organization processes, they, too, are used to construct a narrative about the past that, in turn, shapes how we come to know it.
When Liebmann asks those same questions, she addresses the obliteration through institutional practices that inform the content and organization of the archive not only in the Nazi era. Instead, she also reveals that the extinction of Jewish life and thought did not only begin with their physical persecution, but much earlier with the oppression and obliteration of liberalism, which was closely associated with Jewish thought, and that this extinction was continued throughout the time of the GDR, despite the GDR’s proud claim to deal with the anti-Semitic past adequately: “Eine völlig Auslöschung hatte stattgefunden, und sie war immer noch im Gange” (SM 53).

Apparently, the author also still believes that at the time of her writing in 2001 there are absences in the history of Berlin that cover up traces of anti-Semitism. She considers Franz Pretzel, for example, a key figure of the Berlin movement, the “Verbindungsstück” (link) that she was looking for. Liebmann is, therefore, astonished when she is unable to find him in the latest edition of the encyclopedia “Brockhaus” (1996), where she had been able to look up the Berlin movement, the Deutschsoziale Reformpartei and the Jew Aaron Bernstein. Her surprise, of course, is in itself rather surprising as this gap is yet another example of history failing her: encyclopedias rely on the information found and compiled by the historian and are therefore just as unreliable. We have also seen in the first part of this chapter that Liebmann visually problematizes the truthfulness of encyclopedia entries.

At the same time, Liebmann shows us that events or people of the past which are absent or misrepresented in memories, in the archive or in history books might still be present elsewhere:
Im Lexikon also nichts über Pretzel, obwohl er in dem altbekannten Kampf “Links” gegen “Rechts” in der Gegend um den Hackeschen Markt einmal als ein General aufgetreten ist und Terrain erobert hatte. Und doch ist er anwesend – in seinen Fabrikbauten, in den Mietshäusern von Sophien, 1903 und 1905 gebaut, ihrem schönen Eingang mit dem schmiedeeisernen Tor und in der Frage, die sich mir stellte: Wie kam es, dass solch ein Hass in der Gegend tobte, und warum?

(SM 51)

This is where the photographs of streets and houses around the Hackescher Markt take on their most significant meaning. They counter absences by providing the presence of traces that have been lost or suppressed in the memories, archives and historical narratives: remnants of Jewish life and death, traces of growing and remaining anti-Semitism, the guilt of perpetrators and bystanders, that have been eradicated, erased from the memories of those still alive (communicative memory), from public discourse of the past (collective memory), and from archival resources (cultural memory). Indeed, photographs can do even more: They can give evidence of such deliberate forgetting or neglect as has taken place around the Hackescher Markt. The images in Stille Mitte von Berlin clearly attest to that. They also demonstrate the importance of questioning any narrative or discourse, any form of representation. Instead, they show that it might be more productive to put to these different forms into dialogue with each other.

The absence these photographs signal is twofold: Not only do they show traces of an unspeakable history as well as testify to the forgetting and the neglect that came afterwards. But as images they also stand in stark contrast to the area around the Hackescher Markt of our time: while it is, once again, a bustling business area lined with
cafés and little shops, it also harbors a terrible loss: “Danach kam wieder Beleuchtung auf, Neubau und eine Menge anderer Cafés. Auch kamen die Juden zurück und die Kapitalisten und die Demokratie und die jüdische Schule wurde wieder eine jüdische Schule, aber nun mit sehr, sehr wenigen Schülern und einem sehr, sehr hohen Zaun” (SM 58). Not only are there significantly fewer students attending the school in Sophienstrasse, but the innocence with which they can do so is also lost. In order to be able to carry out such every day activities as going to school, these children must be separated from the rest of Berlin’s population, protected by a very high fence. People, however, seem hardly aware of this loss. In fact, new attacks seem the order of the day, even requiring police presence at the school (SM 58). Once again deliberate amnesia and neglect? Hardly. The living space around the Hackescher Markt, the cozy streets and cafés, has been redecorated. Barely any architectural palimpsests of the kind Liebmann found in the early eighties reveal a hidden secret, urging to investigate and find out more about the vanishing past. The pictures of their store fronts, their names on walls or next to an old door bell may be all the evidence that is left of the lives lived in the Hamburger Strasse and surrounding streets.

Instead, these reminders of “lived experience” that allow us to connect with the events tied to these places, have made way for new, redecorated facades. Memory is shifted elsewhere – to sites specifically conceptualized for such purpose: museums, monuments and public commemorations of the Holocaust. As has been pointed out before, these institutionalized forms of memory, however, do not make for true remembrance. Once the traces have vanished from our living space, witnesses are no longer among us, how can encounters with the Holocaust still occur? Liebmann presents
the photographs along with the narrative of conflict as one such site of a possible meeting with the past.

In conclusion, we find that *Stille Mitte von Berlin* is another addition to the vast and growing body of literary works that try to come to terms with the legacy – its remembrance and forgetting – of National Socialism and, specifically, the Holocaust. It exhibits many of the debates surrounding the memory and the representation of the horrors and the gaps left behind, namely the discussions on fact and fiction as well as on memory, history and the archive. Most importantly, Liebmann is interested in adequate forms of coming to know the bygone and representing her material.

Liebmann’s stated original intent is to merely report her research in the eighties as well as to document the unsettling results she encountered. Truthfulness is a central concern in all her writing. However, *Stille Mitte von Berlin* is as much an effort to offer a factual account of the past as it is a problematization of not being able to do so. The author uses a variety of means traditionally understood as authenticating devices – the essay-genre, the use and visual marking of dialect, the visual resemblance of signs – not to document her writing but to point to the impossibility to write truth. While at a first glance these techniques seem to ensure a more truthful appearance, ultimately they raise serious questions of representation that mirror the debate on the representation of the Holocaust. However, the impossibility to attain this goal does not lead Liebmann to abandon her quest for factuality. Rather, facts must enter into dialogue with more personal forms of recollection in order to make for a productive engagement with the past that employs the mind and heart alike.
Photographs take on particular importance within this context. Despite the fact that the pictures mainly show buildings and streets, these images are highly personal as they conjure up memories of a stagnant life in the GDR as well as deep conflicts about the purpose and the results of her research. More than tools of verification, then, they turn into palimpsests of the past that trigger a more immediate and personal way of remembering than, for example, a narration of the past can. Photographs provide opportunities for the kind of personal and conflictous encounters Roth advocates: “Fact-to-face meetings, at least of the kind I have in mind, are sustained, thorough, and profound. They encourage study and invite reflection. They change one’s life” (131). Instead of being a trace, an evidence of a reality, photographs have gathered truth into themselves. Instead of being aides-mémoire, they have become memories themselves. Because multiple narratives can be attached to them, they highlight the multiplicity of memory, as Nora tells us: “there are as many memories as there are groups, that memory is by nature multiple and yet specific; collective, plural, and yet individual” (285-6). As a result, they also draw attention to the constructedness of meaning attached to such images.

Liebmann says that she wants to recapture the past tied to these images. Stille Mitte von Berlin, however, does not – cannot – offer a chronology of events that makes sense in lieu of the present. Instead, it presents a commentary on her struggle to find the truth about the past – personal and detailed, yet reliable. No matter which method or source she follows – personal, mythic memories of the residents, historical narratives or archival files – she continues to find gaps – voluntary or involuntary forgetting or erasure of information. Especially the archive, in which she initially places so much confidence,
turns out to pose similar problems to those associated with photography: both contain selected and especially organized information about the bygone that tell us less about the past itself than about how we have come to know it and how that is influenced by the persons or institutions creating and maintaining photographs as well as archives.

The struggle to come to terms with the unreliability of all sources, the lack of any direct access to the bygone that will allow a true and realistic representation, is ultimately the most significant aspect of this book. As so many authors who did not witness the events they write about, Liebmann must find and negotiate the sources from earlier times. Her painful awareness that she will never be able to find the truth about the past, much less be able to comprehend, is manifest in her mistrust of historical information found in encyclopedias, of archival records and the memories of witnesses. Instead, she develops a radical awareness of the belatedness of her search and of the secondary nature of her status. Liebmann performs in her text what anyone approaching the past must face: no matter how one goes about it, the dealing with the past will always involve a conflict that cannot be resolved but must, nevertheless, be continued. Perhaps the “truth” Liebmann aims to impart on the reader – implicitly – is that there is no truth that can be found in old streets and houses or even archives; that, in order to approach the past, we must seek it out through a number of different avenues and media.

Although Liebmann never quite acknowledges this explicitly, such understanding ultimately echoes the demand posed by many contemporary scholars on Holocaust literature that the representation of the past can only occur in form of an unresolved conflict. That, in turn, may be the best way to keep memories and the process of deep and engaged remembering alive. “Good memory,” as Roth points out, goes beyond those
essential qualities [of recalling details with candor, documenting what is recalled] too. It involves questions not only about what we remember but also about how we remember, what we do with what we remember” (135).

Most importantly, Liebmann’s essay centers around the questions of truth and documentation: how and where can the truth about the past be found? How do we negotiate sources and how can the complex findings be represented. Stille Mitte von Berlin proposes two overarching ideas. Firstly, that the search for the truth is important – though ultimately unattainable – and that facts can serve as useful parameters in which personal memories may become productive for a personal engagement. Secondly, that there may not be one path into the past, but that a combination of all – memory (in all its different forms), history, and the archive – may ultimately be most productive because it does not allow any one of these to become more dominant and, therefore, limit our access to the past. Such approach also raises awareness of the constructedness of any form of representation and calls for a critical negotiation of sources while acknowledging that we must continue to seek and engage with information about the past.
Conclusion

In conclusion, we can say that Maron, Sebald, and Liebmann are aware of the problems associated with the search for and representation of the reality of the Holocaust past. While they problematize the issues in different ways, each author addresses the most important mandates proposed by current scholarship on the Holocaust, such as close historical linkages, personal engagement and implication, a representation of breaks and discontinuities as well as the avoidance of harmonizing narratives leading to closure. Because photography epitomizes these concerns, it contributes to such projects in a particularly fruitful and meaningful way.

This study has shown that the affirmation of truthfulness is of central concern to Maron, Sebald, and Liebmann. All three authors feel the need to make it clear that they did not write pure fiction, that the lives they conjured up did, in fact, exist. However, there are differences in the degree to which they claim factuality. While Maron and Liebmann seem to have a stronger urge to ascertain that their narratives are, indeed, based on the facts they found, Sebald takes a much more experimental approach. The inability to find absolute truth is a troubling conclusion of their efforts for the women writers. Sebald, on the other hand, openly problematizes the notion of truthfulness from the very beginning. In fact, he seems quite cognizant of the productive insecurities which the inability to separate between reality and fiction can impart on the reader. In his works *Die Ausgewanderten* and *Austerlitz*, he strives to produce such insecurities in order to achieve a deep personal engagement with the text.
Photographs are particularly useful for a discussion of truthfulness and the value of apparently authentic documents for an inquiry into the past. Accordingly, all three authors evoke the documentary qualities of photographic images to different degrees – with Maron and Liebmann expressing the strongest desire for reliance on their authenticating force. However, Maron, Sebald, and Liebmann also deliberately call into question photography’s ostensible referentiality and draw attention to its deceptive nature. Sebald takes this technique the farthest by problematizing most openly the manipulation of images within the narrative and by denying a form of conventional references (such as captions). Photographs thus provide these authors with an opportunity to shed light on the constructed and mediated character of all forms of representation, even the most referential one. As a result, the reader becomes insecure and troubled as he is no longer able to distinguish between fact and fiction or to fix meaning. Unable to resolve the conflict posed by the paradoxical and unstable medium of photography and its even more unsettling treatment in the text, the reader must continue to negotiate the questions these authors and other Holocaust writers and scholars also continue to struggle with: How to access and represent a past that defies language and comprehension and becomes more distant with each day that passes.

None of the photographs in *Pawels Briefe, Die Ausgewanderten, Austerlitz*, or *Stille Mitte von Berlin* are horror pictures per se, that is, they do not display the atrocities committed by the Nazis directly. Therefore, they do not have the distancing effect which scholars such as Zelizer, Sontag and J. Hirsch attribute to horror images. Instead, especially the family photographs of *Pawels Briefe, Die Ausgewanderten and Austerlitz* serve to bridge the gap between the viewers who are personally connected to the event
and person(s) photographed – such as the authors or other voices in the books – and those who are not. Based on its conventionality and the ability to elicit identification, the family photo can trigger a strong emotional response. Through the practice of looking at family photographs, through the “familial look,” the grief over the loss of the family members displayed extends to reader. Consequently, through the familial look family photographs can evoke the horrors of the Jewish genocide more forcefully than images of atrocities and violence can.

Photography also offers other qualities that seem particularly suited for the representation of a past that is marked by breaks, fragmentation and voids. By presenting the reader with visual presences, Maron and Sebald, in particular, draw attention to the absences left behind by the Jewish genocide. These can be images of persons whose lives have abruptly been ended or shattered. Buildings, land- and cityscapes as well as tombstones that have been destroyed and neglected either during the war or as part of the persecution of the Jewish people also signal absences. Other sites have been replaced by modern constructions which no longer remind of the lives that once inhabited this space. With regard to the representation of an event that is deemed unspeakable, photographs can also point very powerfully to the absence of language. Instead of perpetuating silence, however, these frames can offer a visual presence that conveys something about the past of which language may be incapable.

At the same time, images gain their force not just from their content but from the surrounding narrative as well. In fact, without such contextualization, images themselves have no meaning. The way in which the author integrates these frames into his narratives ultimately determines their meaning and their effect. Maron, Sebald, and Liebmann have
situated their photographs within the context of the persecution of the Jews as well as the subsequent forgetting or repression of the events of the Nazi period in both parts of Germany. Both, Maron and Liebmann, have attached yet another timeframe: Their lives in the former GDR, while Liebmann goes even further back to the nineteenth century, the time of the German Revolution of 1848, the German unification of 1871, and the Jewish emancipation.

Since so much information about what really happened to individual lives during the 1930s and 1940s is unavailable to the authors they must decide how to negotiate the gaps in their own narratives. Here the approaches differ. While Liebmann describes her irritation and frustration with the gaps she encounters in her sources, she does not intend to venture into fiction. Maron and Sebald, however, decide to allow their imagination to fill in where historical facts fail them. Maron does so because she cannot know the desired details of her grandfather’s everyday life while Sebald does not believe in a separation between fact and fiction. For this reason, Sebald, in contrast to Maron, does not even attempt to mark the areas in which his imagination has taken over. While Maron tries to distinguish clearly between what she believes to know (from her documents, other sources or even her own memories) and what she imagines, Sebald aims for a merging of both. His interviews support this claim and even add to the resulting confusion and unsettlement. Neither Maron nor Sebald, however, erase their retrospective and constructive approach. Instead, by drawing attention to the fictive nature of their stories, both create phantoms which point to the painful absences and gaps in their works and in the lives of their characters. At the same time, the authors demonstrate the kind of
personal investment needed to make historical documents and artifacts relevant to us today.

This is a concept that features in all four works: details, be they facts about individual lives, architectural particularities or details in the photographic print, are of little use if we do not engage with these remnants from the past. All three authors advocate a deeper and more personal engagement with documents and (arti)facts. Instead of “knowing” about the past, we should “really know,” that is, let these facts enter our minds, hearts, and – above all – our consciousness. Only then can true remembrance – versus a mere recalling of facts (memory) – take place. Such a “true remembrance” involves an active and ongoing engagement with the researched information and will affect our actions in the future. All three authors perform such an engagement with the information they uncover within the text and demonstrate the profound and lasting effect of details from the past, not because their factuality has been established but because they have entered our consciousness, perhaps precisely because such security has been denied.

Because of the photographic image’s inability to narrate itself, it shifts attention from narrative to questions of narratability. Both of these characteristics can be very useful devices in order to raise a certain textural awareness in the reader and break passive perceptive modes. Maron, Sebald, and Liebmann foreground their difficulties of the second generation writers to approach this horrible past, which they did not personally experience. Consequently, all four texts expose and even perform the authors’ struggles with their sources, with their own desires, perceptions and personal memories and ultimately with the question of how to represent the Holocaust in literature without
allowing a voyeuristic, superficial, sentimentalizing, sensationalizing or distancing treatment.

As part of this struggle, all three authors negotiate different forms of inquiry into the past. On one hand, they all do – as the discussion of photographs and documents has shown – look at history to provide them with a factual framework. All three emphasize the importance of research in archives and libraries as well as through travel and harbor some need to verify and document their findings. However, every author also problematizes the gaps in history as well as in the archive, the selection and manipulation processes that inform both methods of inquiry. While Maron and Liebmann initially hope for a chronological narrative of historical and personal events that will bestow meaning on their pasts and presents, Sebald never even entertains such expectations. He is very much aware that linear chronologies of history are equally constructed as the memory of self or of the nation. Maron and Liebmann also come to this conclusion but it appears as if they reach it though their work on *Pawels Briefe* and *Stille Mitte von Berlin*. While Sebald’s approach – though very subtle – uses his insights to play with the readers expectations, Maron and Liebmann seem frustrated by their findings.

All three authors, then, provide some kind of meta-narrative in which they draw attention to the constructedness of memory and to its mediated nature. Above all, Maron and Liebmann discuss different forms of memory that mirror current classifications by Jan and Aleida Assmann as well as Ute Frevert as collective, cultural and communicative (with the first two corresponding to Nora’s concept of “history” and the last to his “mythic memories”). While all feel the need to lend a voice to the communicative memories of their sources, each author problematizes them in different ways. In *Die
Ausgewanderten and Austerlitz Sebald highlights the mediated nature of such recollections. Nevertheless, they function as one of the most critical and touching elements of his prose. Maron and Liebmann expound the problems of the constructedness of mythic forms of memory and feel the need to weigh these against other forms of recollection or inquiry. All three authors, however, see the need for mythic memories to be heard and passed on precisely because they convey the experiences of individual lives and, therefore, elude public and institutionalized forms of memory and commemoration. Contrary to the distancing effect of historical narratives, personal recollections allow the reader to relate to these individual experiences on a personal level and to implicate him-or herself into the events. We have already pointed out the powerful function of photography in this context.

Photography also relates not only to conscious recall but especially to its unconscious counterpart. Both, Maron and Sebald, allude to the parallels of trauma and photography. The concept is most developed in Austerlitz, where the paralleling of the two ways of capturing the past serves multiple functions. It allows Sebald to portray his characters as psychologically severely damaged by the Holocaust, and as haunted by the visual recurrences of fragments from the past. Photographs enable Sebald and Maron to tell stories in a non-linear fashion, with flashbacks, dreams and hallucinations, defying continuity, harmonization as well as a closing. Just as photographic images will always stand outside of narrative, traumatic memories can never be fully integrated into conscious memory without losing its force of precision.

Finally, Maron, Sebald and Liebmann use photographs and the meta-narrative on memory and representation in order to problematize their projects of writing literature
about the Holocaust. Each book presents a complex, self-reflexive, non-linear and ever-questioning work that expounds the problems of representing the truth in chronological historical narratives. Thus, they have created alternative narratives that resist passive modes of reception as well as the instrumentalization of the past. To different degrees Maron, Sebald, and Liebmann put into dialogue different sources and approaches in order to elicit deep personal and ongoing engagement with the past, with questions of remembrance of the Holocaust today and in the future.
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Appendix

21. 05. 2003, 18.00
In the Restaurant “Hackescher Hof”
Berlin

Interview with Irina Liebmann

SJ: Frau Liebmann, Sie sind studierte Sinologin und Kulturwissenschaftlerin. Wie sind Sie zum Schreiben gekommen? Welche Themen bewegen Sie?


IL: Ist das tatsächlich so? Na ja, vielleicht muss man erstmal eine Entwicklung
durchlaufen, muss etwas werden, egal was. Man muss einfach auf diese Zeit zurückschauen können. Und dann ist es natürlich so, dass die Leute, die sich daran erinnern können, weil sie dabei waren, weniger werden. Da ist vielleicht einfach ein größeres Bedürfnis, diesen Erinnerungen einen Raum zu geben.

SJ: Sie schreiben an einer Stelle (18), dass es Ihnen peinlich gewesen wäre, wenn es in diesem Buch nur um jüdische Schicksale gegangen wäre. Liegt das daran, dass die Aufarbeitung der jüdischen Vergangenheit in Deutschland momentan zu einem Modethema geworden scheint, oder gibt es andere Gründe?


diese furchtbare Zeit endlich von den Deutschen “bewältigt,” also verarbeitet, und in die Geschichtsschreibung integriert werden kann?


SJ: Sie betreiben eine andere Art der Geschichtserkundung, die historisch etablierte Fakten nur als Eckpfeiler benutzt, um sich den persönlichen Lebensgeschichten einzelner Individuen zu nähern, die weder zur Erinnerung weitergegeben, noch durch Denkmäler verewigt wurden. Was erhoffen Sie sich von dieser Art des Aufspürens?

SJ: Kann Literatur dazu beitragen, die Vergangenheit zu bewahren? Wie kann sie das?

IL: Ja natürlich kann sie das. Das habe ich mit dem Buch *Stille Mitte in Berlin* ja auch versucht.

SJ: Welche Wirkung haben Photographien auf Sie persönlich? Was fasziniert Sie an dem Medium?

IL: Sie haben ein Geheimnis, das man entdecken kann. Und sie sind sehr genau, mit viel Detail.

SJ: Sie setzen Ihrem Text am Ende der Einführung eine zentrale Frage voran: „Aber was sagt ein Bild darüber.“ Was für eine Aussagekraft hat ein Photo?

IL: Das kann ich so nicht sagen. Ich weiß nicht, was für eine Aussagekraft ein Photo

SJ: Was hat Sie dazu bewogen, Photographien in Ihr Buch aufzunehmen? Welches Ziel verfolgen Sie damit? Welche Funktion haben Photographien in Ihrem Werk?


SJ: Warum haben Sie sich dazu entschlossen, die Photos nicht – wie in Letzten Sommer in Deutschland (1997) – in den Text zu integrieren, sondern ihnen einen eigenen Teil zu widmen?

Geht es Ihnen u.a. auch darum, mit den Photos die Wahrhaftigkeit Ihres Erzählstoffes zu bekräftigen? Das Bild als Dokumentation des Wortes, sozusagen?


SJ: *Sehen Sie Gemeinsamkeiten zwischen dem Photographieren und dem Schreiben?*


SJ: *Stammen alle Photographien in Stille Mitte von Ihnen?*

IL: Ja, die habe alle ich gemacht.

SJ: *Haben Sie dem Leser eine Auswahl der damaligen Aufnahmen zusammengestellt? Wenn ja, welche Kriterien waren Ihnen dabei wichtig?*

IL: Ich hatte natürlich viel mehr Aufnahmen gemacht. Ich habe die ausgewählt, die qualitativ gut waren. Einige hatten ja schon sehr gelitten und man hätte im Buch nicht mehr viel erkennen können. Deshalb mußten auch die im Buch noch einmal aufgebessert (z.B. die Farbe noch etwas belebt) werden.

SJ: *Sind Ihre Photos ausschließlich Mittel der Dokumentation oder spielen für Sie auch künstlerische/ästhetische Aspekte eine Rolle?*

IL: Natürlich spielen für mich auch künstlerische Aspekte eine Rolle. Ich mache
eigentlich nur Bilder, die mir gefallen. Auch die Photos in Stille Mitte finde ich wirklich schön – z. B. die Komposition, die Perspektive, oder meinen Sie nicht?

SJ: *Benutzen Sie lieber Schwarzweiß- oder Farbfilm?*


Für **Letzten Sommer in Deutschland** habe ich eine alte amerikanische Polaroid mit Schwarzweißfilm benutzt. Die Qualität der Photos ist zwar nicht so gut – sicher merkt man das – doch irgendwie gefallen sie mir. Ich weiß nicht, was Sie darüber denken . . . . Professionelle Photographen vermeiden ja allgemein die Farbphotographie – wohl wegen der Flachheit. Schwarz-Weiβ-Photos wirken ja ganz anders, auch künstlerischer.
SJ: *Entwickeln Sie selbst?*

IL: Nein, das kann ich nicht. Ich gebe den Film einfach beim Photographen ab.

SJ: *Verschiedene Autoren (z.B. W. G. Sebald, Wilhelm Genazino oder Monika Maron) meinen, dass die Faszination, die eine Photographie auf den Betrachter ausübt, mit ihrem Alter steigt. Gilt das auch für Sie?*

IL: Ja, bei mir ist das auch so.

SJ: *Womit erklären Sie das Phänomen? Was macht diese zunehmende (formale und inhaltliche) Qualität aus?*

IL: Das liegt sicher daran, dass es die Dinge von damals einfach nicht mehr gibt. Die Gebäude stehen nicht mehr, die Menschen leben oft nicht mehr oder haben sich zumindest verändert. Da ist es doch faszinierend, ein Bild in der Hand zu halten, das beweist, dass etwas einmal so gewesen ist, wie es heute nicht mehr ist. Und dann kann man es sich ganz genau anschauen; genauer, als man den Moment damals hätte erleben können. Außerdem waren Photos damals auch etwas Besonderes. Es wurde nicht so viel photographiert, wie heute. Heutzutage wird alles und jeder photographiert, um Glück, Besitz und Frohsinn zu dokumentieren. Da hat man Stapel voller Photos und die verlieren damit einfach an Wert. Ich hatte deshalb eine ganze Zeit lang keine Bilder mehr gemacht, was mir dann auch
vorgeworfen wurde. Damals war eine Photographie ein Ereignis. All die Erwartung spiegelt sich in den Gesichtern wieder. Es ist einfach sehr interessant, sich solche Photos anzuschauen. Und gerade weil sich so viel verändert, wird auch eine Photographie interessanter, je älter sie ist.

SJ: Der Untertitel von *Stille Mitte* lautet „Eine Recherche rund um den Hackeschen Markt.“ Von dieser wollen Sie dann, so schreiben Sie in der Einführung, erzählen. Welchem Genre steht dieses Buch am nächsten?

IL: Ich weiß nicht. Sie sind doch die Literaturwissenschaftlerin. Was würden Sie sagen?


IL: Ja, dem würde ich zustimmen.


SJ: *Ist Stille Mitte ausschließlich Essay und Bericht oder gibt es auch Fiktion?*


SJ: *Andere Autoren, wie z.B. Sebald oder Maron, haben ja auch tatsächliche Ereignisse, Dokumente und Photographien als Ausgangspunkt genommen und haben Lücken mit Spekulationen, wie es gewesen sein könnte, gefüllt.*

IL: Nein, das ist nicht mein Ziel.

SJ: *Ich danke Ihnen für dieses Interview.*
IL: Gern.

Susanne Lenné Jones