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"Memories Seeded in Longings": An Interview with Bernice Eisenstein

Ruth Panofsky

Artist and writer Bernice Eisenstein (1949-) was born in Toronto to Polish Holocaust survivors. Her father, Barek (Beryl or Ben) Eisenstein, was from Miechow and her mother, Regina Oksenhendler, was from Bedzin; both survived Auschwitz. They immigrated to Canada in 1948 and settled in Toronto's Kensington Market neighbourhood, where Ben Eisenstein opened a kosher butcher shop.

Eisenstein holds a degree in English from York University and studied art in Israel and England. She has worked as a freelance editor and illustrator for several publishers and journals, and has reviewed books for *The Globe and Mail*. From October 2014 to February 2015, she was artist-in-residence at the Sarah and Chaim Neuberger Holocaust Education Centre in Toronto. Eisenstein's illustrations have been featured in a variety of Canadian publications, and her artwork has been exhibited in Canada, the United States, and Europe.

Eisenstein is the author of *I Was a Child of Holocaust Survivors* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 2006), a graphic work that received the Helen and Stan Vine Canadian Jewish Book Award in the category of Holocaust memoir. *I Was a Child of Holocaust Survivors* has been translated into ten languages. A second project, *Correspondences* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 2013), is a joint publication with poet Anne Michaels. An accordion-style book, it pairs Eisenstein's twenty-six gouache portraits with Michaels's book-length poem.[1] *Correspondences* also invokes the history and lasting effects of the Holocaust.

Eisenstein is the first Canadian to publish a graphic memoir about her experience as the child of Holocaust survivors. *I Was a Child of Holocaust Survivors* combines narrative and illustrations to convey what it was like growing up in Toronto in the shadow of the Holocaust. It tells the deeply personal story of a daughter enthralled by the legacy of trauma as she struggles to fathom its lasting effects on her parents and their survivor friends. Original in conception and design, Eisenstein's

graphic memoir joins narrative with images, portraits, and panels. The narrative perspective is a blend of the adult and her adolescent and childhood selves, while the illustrations range from bold black-and-white drawings to soft Chagall-like portraits. The result is a work that evokes the feelings of confusion, despair, and heartache that often characterize children of Holocaust survivors, known as the second generation.

The cinematic quality of many of her images and the filmic theme of Eisenstein's memoir — her father loved Westerns and she renders him as a gun-carrying cowboy — distinguish *I Was a Child of Holocaust Survivors* from other graphic memoirs. These key elements gave rise to a short film animation of Eisenstein's memoir, directed by Ann Marie Fleming and released in 2010 by the National Film Board of Canada. It was named one of the Toronto International Film Festival's top ten Canadian films of the year.

Eisenstein's graphic work bears comparison with that of New York-based Miriam Katin. As the story of a daughter who yearns to understand her parents' experience of the Holocaust, for example, *I Was a Child of Holocaust Survivors* brings to mind Katin's graphic memoir *We Are on Our Own*, a remarkable tale of how a mother and her young daughter survived in wartime Hungary. Both works appeared in 2006; significant contributions, they extend the repertoire of graphic works by second-generation writers beyond that of *Maus* by Art Spiegelman, to cite the most famous example. More importantly, the work of Eisenstein and Katin signal the need to attend to the lesser-known graphic narratives of second-generation women and to recognize their pioneering memoirs as central to Holocaust literature.

This interview is based on two extended conversations I had with Eisenstein in Toronto on 15 September and 6 October 2016.

Ruth Panofsky: I'd like to begin with a big question, Bernice. Do you see yourself first as an artist or a writer?

Bernice Eisenstein: The simple answer — an artist. But depending on what I am working on, that can mean using language, words, phrases, or quotes that I need in order to make a work whole. Since making *I Was a*

Child of Holocaust Survivors, I no longer separate my artistic and writerly selves. I now put writing to art, and continue to go back and forth in whatever way gives my work a sense of unity and belonging.

RP: What kind of work have you undertaken in the past, and how does it connect with *I Was a Child of Holocaust Survivors?*

BE: Your question takes me back to when I was a freelancer. I illustrated some articles and wrote the occasional book review, all of which concerned the Holocaust. That work demanded a considered response to the material at hand; inevitably, it was also informed by my personal background. And that connects to *I Was a Child of Holocaust Survivors*, in so far as I had already begun to address and reflect within myself the weight and meaning of my background.

RP: Is this the first time you've written about your family?

BE: In 2003, I wrote an article for the *Canadian Jewish News* about attending the tenth anniversary of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington. That was the first time I wrote about my family, and about being a child of Holocaust survivors. Without knowing it at the time, this piece of writing, about the gathering of survivors and their families in Washington, contained seeds of reflection that germinated when I began my book.

RP: Did you conceive of the graphic memoir as an apt way to explore trauma and its lasting effects? Why did you choose that mode as the best way to tell your story?

BE: Initially, I didn't have a defined conception in mind. Rather, the book unfolded as I worked — it was a process. My book is not a traditional graphic memoir. It's not paneled from beginning to end, although there is a middle section that is fully paneled. It's a book that moves through drawing *and* writing to engage with, and to understand as deeply as possible, the monolith of the Holocaust — my inheritance — especially through the story of my family.

I have to admit that, in talking about the book, there's only one place I return to and that's the difficult labyrinth that held me the whole time I was working. Images and language were the necessary tools I used to find a trail through that maze.

RP: Can you expand on what you mean by "the difficult labyrinth"?

BE: Consider the experience of entering a labyrinth, a maze with numerous paths to choose from, some that lead nowhere; you feel lost at times, yet you know there is no other place to be; you retrace your steps repeatedly, until finally you find the one trail that eventually leads out — that gives you a sense of what I mean.

Through a labyrinth of my own making, I entered another that already existed — the past, the Holocaust. Difficult, yes — how could it be otherwise?

RP: Your work brings to mind Miriam Katin's memoirs. Her first book, *We Are on Our Own*, is paneled, but her second book, *Letting It Go*, is much more free flowing and the writing appears within each image.[2]

BE: It's a matter of instinctively knowing what each book needs, and feeling beholden to the demands of each work.

RP: Was Katin an influence on your work? What about other influences?

BE: *I Was a Child of Holocaust Survivors* and *We Are on Our Own* were published the same year, and that's when I came to know Miriam Katin's work. Artwork from both of our books were featured in two different exhibitions: "Superheroes and Schlemiels:[3] Jews and Comic Art" and "Graphic Details: Confessional Comics by Jewish Women."[4] More recently, I had the great pleasure of meeting Miriam Katin.

With regard to influence, I think in terms of an ever-expanding internal library of writers and artists whose works mean a great deal to me. They are companions who have informed my sensibility. In particular, and for the purposes of our discussion, the writings of Bruno Schulz, Primo Levi, André Schwarz-Bart, W.G. Sebald, and David Grossman. The art of Van Gogh, Max Beckmann, George Grosz, and Saul Steinberg. Charlotte Salomon's *Life? or Theater?: A Song-Play*[5] — Salomon wrote and drew through memory the story of her life and family. And Art Spiegelman's *Maus* had great impact, not only on me; it was groundbreaking in its form.[6] They all have provided an intimate education.

When it came to making my book, I had to go forward to find my own voice, to discover what I needed to write and draw.

RP: How did Art Spiegelman's *Maus* affect you specifically?

BE: I was in awe of *Maus* and deeply moved by the work. I also felt gratitude and a personal kinship with Spiegelman.

RP: What brought you to write *I Was a Child of Holocaust Survivors*? How did the book originate?

BE: It started with a painting of my father, begun a number of years after he had died. I missed him, and it seemed a way to bring him close. My father was a passionate man, and though he was not so expressive through language, all that he felt was vitally present. When you lose a parent, a way of being loved is gone.

While painting, I found myself engaged in a conversation with my father, about our relationship, about his past, of what I knew and what I didn't know. It was at that point that I realized I wanted to write as well, to see where that conversation would lead me.

RP: Where did you go from there?

BE: I did some writing and made more drawings. Then, together with a friend who was a book designer, I produced a small chapbook — a work in progress — something that I could show to publishers. Next came one of those surprising moments, when it felt as if the stars had aligned in my favour. McClelland & Stewart bought the world rights to the book and Ellen Seligman became my editor. It is not easy to talk about the depth of what Ellen and I came to share and experience. Ellen died last year — an inestimable loss to the world of publishing, to writers, and to me, personally.[7]

So, I was given a green light. I had a schedule for production, a deadline, and most importantly, a book to finish. First, another sampler was made for Ellen to take to the London Book Fair. There, she generated international interest — being the rainmaker that she was — and early on the book sold to a few countries.

Then, for the next year, with full support, I was engaged in an organic process. I closed myself off and stayed within the world I wanted to make sense of — populated by my family, their friends, and ghosts. There were times when I focused on writing, and other times when I focused on painting. There was a fluid rhythm to it all.

RP: Can you describe the process of making *I Was a Child of Holocaust Survivors*?

BE: A guiding principle or — more to the point — the guiding emotions of sorrow, compassion, and love lie underneath and inside the pages of my book. For me, that always meant finding the drawings and words that were honest and true to my feelings and thoughts. That also meant finding my own expressive voice and a tone that was unsentimental.

Once I had created a visual persona for myself, someone who could express the thoughts of an eight-year-old at one point and then of a forty-year-old at another, I was comfortable roaming back and forth in time through the book. In that way, I paired humour and sadness and discovered a self-portrait through which I could balance drawings and words.

RP: Tell me about your visual persona. What are her characteristics and how does she figure in your memoir?

BE: I've always felt the word "homunculus" best fits as a description, meaning a very small human being, fully formed in miniature. The adult within the child and the child within the adult; ironic, playful, philosophical, confused and serious, angry and loving — that's the visual persona that speaks directly from the page.

RP: What are the ethics of telling the story *I Was a Child of Holocaust Survivors*, which is as much your parents' story as your own?

BE: I never thought of my work as autobiography; it is a memoir of a sensibility.

RP: That's such a beautiful phrase. Does it also apply to your other work, aside from your memoir?

BE: I'm sure the idea runs throughout my work.

RP: At the centre of your memoir are your parents, Ben and Regina Eisenstein, whose names and characters you invoke freely. How did your mother respond to your representation of her and your father?

BE: She was remarkable. When I first told her that I was writing about my father, also about our family, about the Holocaust, I asked her to "please trust me." She gave me all the photographs I needed for my work and a copy of the interview she had done for the Film and Video Archive of Holocaust survivor stories, which was initiated by Steven Spielberg's Shoah Foundation.[8]

Every now and then, my mother would ask me how it was going. She'd worry that I was working too hard or not eating enough. And she expressed sadness, saying, "I don't want you to be there." She felt sorry that I had to be in her past. Ironic, isn't it, both of us feeling the same sadness for one another?

I never showed her any drawings or writing until I was finished the book.

RP: And how did she react when the book was published?

BE: She *kvelled*[9] beyond belief. When I gave my mother a copy, she said she now wanted to stay alive longer so she could also feel what it would have meant to my father. And then she gave me a second ring, one that my father had bought for her after the war, when they were in Bergen-Belsen, in the DP [Displaced Persons] camp.[10] Years before, she had given me my father's wedding ring and had told me its story — which formed the first chapter of the book.

RP: Oh, that's amazing.

BE: My mother was incredible at times.

RP: So, she wasn't embarrassed?

BE: No, there was no friction between us after the book came out. Her survivor friends felt that I was speaking for them, even if it wasn't their particular story. They understood the sentiment of the book and my mother took pride in that. She embraced the full soul of what I tried to do.

The book was at her bedside for a long time, but let's not forget that she's also a Jewish mother. She wanted to know, "So, are you making money from this thing?" (*laughs*)

RP: Do you think the story of the daughter of survivors is necessarily different from that of the son of survivors?

BE: That's a difficult question because I never even considered that distinction. Doesn't every artist, male or female, find their own way to express themselves?

It's an ongoing question.

RP: Can you comment on an image or panel in your memoir that, in some way, stands out for you?

BE: There are two pages, an open spread, that I feel achieve a balance, with lightness on one side and darkness on the other, and in their juxtaposition, something else is created.

On one page, I appear in the middle, talking about the Yiddish phrase *oyf simchas*,[11] how it can be used on joyous occasions and also when offering condolence. The top panel depicts a reception line of people at a *bar mitzvah*,[12] all saying *oyf simchas*; in the bottom panel, a line of people repeat the same words at a *shiva*,[13] acknowledging loss and expressing the wish to meet again at better times.

On the opposite page is a drawing of a man. He is standing on a soapbox, speaking into a microphone, saying *oyf simchas*, and behind him are railway tracks leading to Auschwitz — not the place one would expect to hear these words, but in the drawing, they belong.

RP: Your memoir is as much about memory as it is a personal narrative. What is your view of memory and its function in *I Was a Child of Holocaust Survivors*?

BE: The book engages with the process of memory, i.e., when the linear chronology of time shifts and changes and you enter internal time in memory (see Figure 1). That was the space that held me and I remained there while working. All my imaginings and inner conversations came from that space.

We learn from memory and carry it back into our present. At the same time, imparting my sense of deepest regard for the past — which I knew could not be changed — was essential.

Looking back, I see the kind of embrace I wanted to give my parents and their friends, all survivors with whom I had grown up. In the end, I think I was able to convey to my parents the sorrow I felt for their losses, which were also mine. A strange and belated *shiva* call, and an obligation fulfilled.

RP: That view comes out of a very loving place.

BE: My memories were seeded in longings. They formed my core, but my parents' love was strong and present. That made all the difference through difficult moments.

RP: For all the trauma you record in your memoir, you link memory back to that primal experience of being loved.

BE: I guess I'm lucky then.

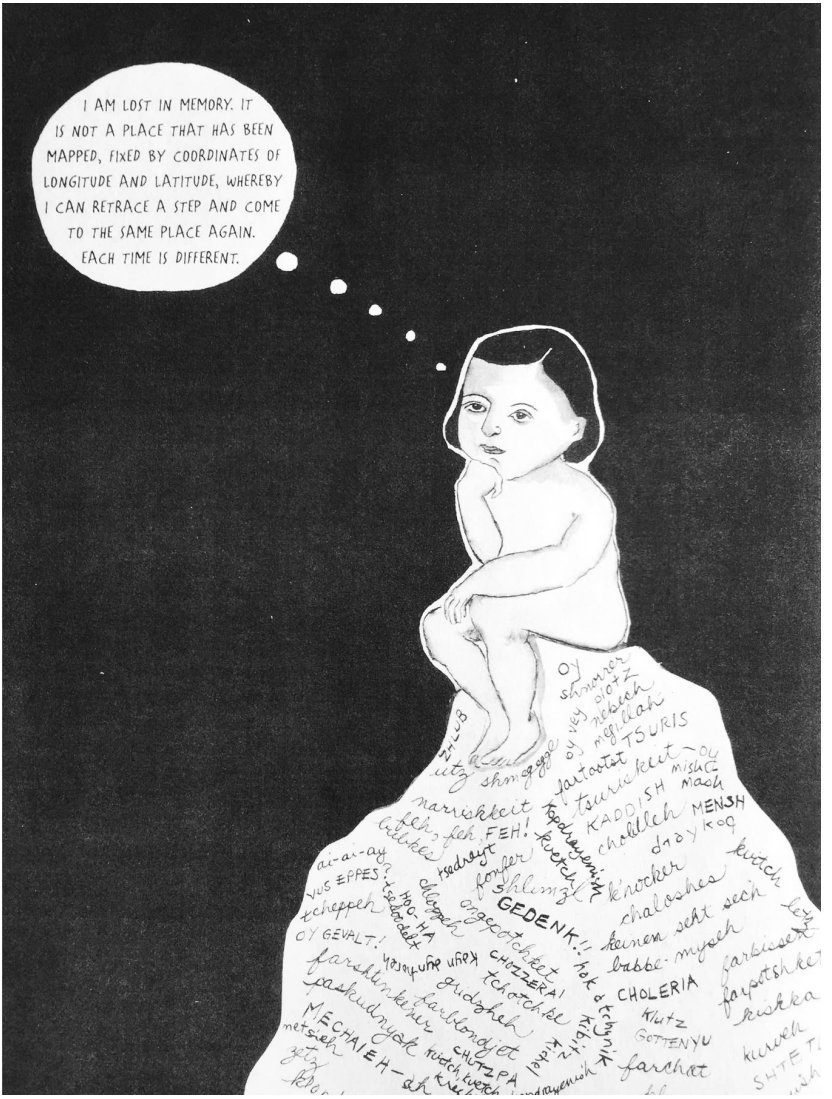

Figure 1: From Bernice Eisenstein, *I Was a Child of Holocaust Survivors* (McClelland & Stewart, 2006); reprinted with permission of the author.

RP: How did the film adaptation of your memoir come to be?

BE: I certainly never imagined the possibility of a film. Gerry Flahive, a senior producer at the NFB [the National Film Board of Canada], approached my publisher. He said he wanted to option the

book to make an animated short, and a meeting was set up. It was a good moment — the book was having some prominence.

It must have been 2008 when Gerry Flahive and I met. I was very comfortable with the way Gerry talked; he was sensitive to the full narrative of the book. I have great respect for the NFB and, after thinking about it for a while, it felt right to go ahead with the project. I knew that I would be involved with the film as it progressed, that my response to its development would be part of the process.

RP: Did you work with the director, Ann Marie Fleming?[14]

BE: Yes, we talked and met a few times. I liked her. And after she had developed the script, a few more drawings were needed for the animators to work with, to fill in some spots in the narrative. So I made ten new drawings for the animation.

RP: Did she tell you what you needed to draw?

BE: She told me *where* she needed drawings. I loved getting the chance to do more drawings, but it raised an interesting issue for me. I had thought I had completed all the drawings I had wanted for the book, and here I was being asked to draw for a different reason, i.e., to animate my words. Combining images and words for the medium of film added a new layer to my work.

There was one new image I drew where I'm lying on Freud's couch, holding a cigar in one hand (see Figure 2). As puffs of smoke ascend overhead, I'm saying to Freud, "My parents were in Auschwitz." I hadn't thought of drawing that image for the book, but it felt just right for the film. It also kept to the same tone of the book.

RP: Are you pleased with the film adaptation?

BE: Yes, I am. It's a hard thing to look at your own work that way. It's like holding the book up to a mirror and seeing its reflection. But I think the film flows; in terms of both image and dialogue, it moves wonderfully. Yes, I'm grateful for the film.

RP: You're the narrator of the film . . .

BE: I had to audition for the part, and I won the role of "me." I beat out professional actors! (*laughs*) The truth is, I think an actor would have *performed* as narrator. I'm not sure anybody else would have spoken in the same unmodulated voice that is so critical to the work. So, yes, it

Figure 2: From *I Was a Child of Holocaust Survivors* (dir. Ann Marie Fleming, National Film Board, 2010); reprinted with permission of Bernice Eisenstein.

made sense to have me do the voiceover. It also helped me get over my insecurities, since I'm not a performer.

RP: That's your real voice, your embodied voice as narrator. How do you think your speaking voice affects the film's content? Does your real voice lend authority and authenticity to the film?

BE: I almost want to add a third question. Is that the same voice that I heard in my head when I wrote the book?

RP: Is it?

BE: It's not identical, but it is similar to the unsentimental pitch and tone of the internal voice in the book. So I feel my entry into film, as the narrator of my story, is a fitting one.

RP: So you had a consistent sense of voice that you carried from the book to the film?

BE: Absolutely. Once the book was published, I moved out of the private and intimate space I had lived in for some time. I began to do some public readings and soon worked out the matter of voice. I knew the beat and pace of my own words. They didn't need anything more; they didn't need a lilt, for example. So the tone was already in place for the film, where I could step into the dialogue and read with a level voice. If that sounds simple, it's only because what was most difficult had been resolved earlier.

RP: Can you tell me a bit about your current projects?

BE: Well, I exhibited an installation called "Genizot: Repositories of Memory" at the ROM [the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto] a couple of years ago.[15] And, most recently, that body of work was part of an exhibition in San Francisco at the Contemporary Jewish Museum.[16]

The work is about collective memory, its preservation and where it is stored — in relation to the lives of others, in books, in totemic objects. The installation is comprised of ten portraits surrounding a vitrine, encasing a number of found and made objects, all of which relate to the transmission of memory.

Lately, I've been making palimpsests from existing old books. I paint and write over the pages. I've just finished one in response to French novelist Patrick Modiano's *Dora Bruder*,[17] his book about a Jewish girl who disappears in Paris during the Occupation.

And I've started doing cartoons of Donald Trump — because I have to. A piece of paper is a good place for anger and concern.

RP: In what ways do you see your own work as a palimpsest? Do you think this is characteristic of artistic/literary responses to the Holocaust?

BE: In relation to history, Holocaust literature, and memory, a palimpsest can have a broad reach. For the historian, the writer, and the artist, there is always an underlying text — a detail reused, a new layer added. Whatever appears on the surface retains what is underneath, in one form or another.

RP: Do you still respond to the Holocaust as an addiction, as you call it in *I Was a Child of Holocaust Survivors*? What did you hope to achieve in writing this book?

BE: I have an ongoing relationship with the Holocaust. Doing the book was necessary for me, but it was never about believing that I would end up finding a safe or unwavering distance from the Holocaust. I don't think that's possible, nor should we want that to be the case. I'm older, and now both my parents are gone. Our living witnesses are diminishing in number — how well have we learned from their memories?

I remember when I was in Berlin, for the launch of the German translation. I chose to read a section from the chapter on the Holocaust as an addiction. Afterwards, an elderly woman in the audience said she

didn't understand what I meant by addiction and asked for an explanation. First, I suggested that addiction was a metaphor and that my writing was an extended piece of imagining, like a jazz riff with *chutzpah*[18] . . . I was trying to be clever, but I was actually hedging and I could see that my answer left her even more confused. Finally, I responded with a question — "Don't you want to be a better person?" — and she let out a sigh. "Ah, now I understand," she said.

As I said, it's an ongoing relationship.

Notes

[1] *Correspondences* features Eisenstein's portraits of Paul Celan, Joseph Schmidt, Rose Ausländer, Fernando Pessoa, Fred Wander, Charlotte Delbo, André Schwarz-Bart, Primo Levi, Debora Vogel, Bruno Schulz, Franz Kafka, Anna Akhmatova, Albert Einstein, Tereska, Osip Mandelstam, Isaiah Michaels, Itsik Manger, W.G. Sebald, Nadezhda Mandelstam, Jean Améry, Etty Hillesum, Albert Camus, Helen Keller, S.Y. Agnon, Charlotte Salomon, and Nelly Sachs.

[2] See Miriam Katin, *We Are on Our Own* (Montreal: Drawn & Quarterly, 2006) and *Letting It Go* (Montreal: Drawn & Quarterly, 2013).

[3] A *schlemiel* (Yiddish) is an unlucky person.

[4] "Superheroes and Schlemiels: Jews and Comic Art" was a co-production of the Jewish museums in Paris and Amsterdam, Musée d´art et d´histoire du Judaïsme, and Joods Historisch Museum. The exhibition opened in Paris and Amsterdam in 2007 and 2008, respectively, and later travelled to the Jewish museums in Melbourne, Berlin, and Stockholm. See also Sarah Lightman, ed., *Graphic Details: Jewish Women's Confessional Comics in Essays and Interviews* (Jefferson: McFarland, 2014).

[5] See Charlotte Salomon, *Life? or Theatre?* (London: Duckworth, 2017). *Leben? oder Theater?: Ein Singspiel* was a series of 784 autobiographical gouache paintings produced between 1941 and 1943 in the south of France, where Salomon was in hiding from the Nazis.

[6] See Art Spiegelman, *Maus I: A Survivor's Tale. My Father Bleeds History* (New York: Pantheon, 1986) and *Maus II: A Survivor's Tale. And Here My Troubles Began* (New York: Pantheon, 1991).

[7] Ellen Seligman was one of Canada's most influential editors. Born and raised in New York, she moved to Toronto in 1976 and spent her career at McClelland & Stewart where she worked with renowned writers such as Margaret Atwood, Leonard Cohen, Rohinton Mistry, Michael Ondaatje, and Jane Urquhart. Seligman died on 25 March 2016.

[8] See the Steven Spielberg Film and Video Archive, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Washington, DC; and the Visual History Archive, The Institute for Visual History and Education, USC Shoah Foundation.

[9] To *kvell* (Yiddish) is to feel extraordinary pride.

[10] Bergen-Belsen was the largest displaced persons camp. The only all-Jewish DP camp, it was in operation from July 1945 to August 1951.

[11] The phrase *oyf simchas* (Yiddish) translates to "we should only meet on happy occasions."

[12] A *bar mitzvah* (Hebrew, literally "son of the commandment") is the religious initiation ceremony of a Jewish boy who has reached the age of 13.

[13] *Shiva* (Hebrew, literally "seven") refers to the seven-day mourning period, immediately following a funeral, for first-degree relatives.

[14] See *I Was a Child of Holocaust Survivors*, dir. Ann Marie Fleming, National Film Board of Canada, 2010; now available on YouTube.

[15] "Genizot: Repositories of Memory," Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto, 18 October 2014 to 8 February 2015. A *genizah* (Hebrew; plural *genizot*) is a temporary repository in a synagogue or Jewish cemetery for worn-out Hebrew-language books and papers on religious subjects awaiting proper burial.

[16] "From Generation to Generation: Inherited Memory and Contemporary Art," Contemporary Jewish Museum, San Francisco, 25 November 2016 to 2 April 2017.

[17] See Patrick Modiano, *Dora Bruder* (Paris: Gallimard, 1997).

[18] *Chutzpah* (Yiddish) means audacity.