

**Fragmented Memories in the Graphic Novel
Miriam Katin, Bernice Eisenstein, and Miriam Libicki**

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ABSTRACT

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This thesis examines a unique niche of North American art: autobiographical comics by Jewish women. From the perspective of memory studies, the main goal of this research is to present a framework for analyzing graphic novels. Artists Miriam Katin, Bernice Eisenstein, and Miriam Libicki present the spectator/reader with distinct and widely varying possibilities for the graphic medium with their memoirs, *We Are on Our Own*, *I Was a Child of Holocaust Survivors*, and *Jobnik! An American Girl's Adventure's in the Israeli Army*, respectively. Several avenues are explored in relation to these works, including the question of how memory is visualized through text and image, trauma and fragmentation, issues of self-representation, narrativity, and time. At a deeper level, there is also a consideration of the diverse roles and meanings of remembrances in the visual arts. The purpose of this research is not to create an overarching statement about comic books or memory, but rather to unravel their immense complexity and richness using theories from a wide range of disciplines, including memory studies, narratology, Jewish cultural studies, feminist studies, and oral history.

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INTRODUCTION

“I have journeyed back in thought – with thought hopelessly tapering off as I went – to remote regions where I groped for some secret outlet only to discover that the prison of time is spherical and without exits.”¹

What is memory and what does it mean to remember? What are those myriad images, sensations, and flickers of light that meander through our consciousness, reminding us of times long gone? Can we ever truly retain any experience with complete clarity? On the other hand, can the past ever be fully dissociated from the present? Memory is a form of retrospective viewing, a mirror that allows us to look back over our shoulders into the dense mists of the past and, if we are lucky enough, to distill some kind of meaning. The further back in time we travel, the more difficult this mental voyage may become. The fleeting quality of memory – the way it seems to ebb and flow in response to our lived experiences – is one of the mysteries of this phenomenon. If we think back to specific periods in our lives, the ones that are usually out of mind, we realize how difficult it becomes to access remote regions of our past. Whole eras may draw a blank, as if they had been torn out of the fabric of our very thoughts. Memories available to our immediate consciousness may surface one moment only to disappear entirely the next. It requires considerable effort and concentration to maintain a mental hold on our memories – like trying to capture a flock of birds that are flying off in many directions at once. The shifting, elusive quality of remembrances seems to be thwarted, at least momentarily, by

¹ Vladimir Nabokov. *Speak, Memory: An Autobiography Revisited*. New York, NY: Putnam, 1966, p. 10.

the inscription of the past into a representational setting, especially in the form of autobiography.

After attending a trailblazing international exhibition at Toronto's Koffler Gallery Off-Site, titled *Graphic Details: Confessional Comics by Jewish Women*,² and interviewing one of the show's curators, New York journalist Michael Kaminer, I became enthralled with women's autobiographical comics. *Graphic Details* featured the original drawings of artists from Canada, the United States, England, and Israel. The art was organized thematically into four gallery rooms: "Sex and Relationships", "Shit Happens" (otherwise known as the "Embarrassing Moments" room), "Israel and Jewish Identity", and lastly "Oy Gevalt" (a Yiddish expression roughly equivalent to "Oh my God"). Some of the works depict humorous subject matter, such as bodily functions and comical relationships. Others, however, broach serious topics like the Holocaust, war, Israeli politics, and trauma. The exhibition is a unique way of showcasing women's artistic self-representation in the comic book medium.

Rather than writing about the drawings in the exhibition, however, I decided to focus on the printed publications, the actual graphic novels that contain the complete stories of which only a few illustrations were on view. Of the eighteen artists whose original drawings and sketches were on display, three in particular stood out in my mind: Miriam Katin (United States), Bernice Eisenstein (Canada), and Miriam Libicki (Canada). Katin's *We Are on Our Own: A Memoir* is a graphic autobiography that details the artist's childhood during the Second World War, her escape from Hungary, and her

² Open from February 17th, 2011 to April 17, 2011. Michael Kaminer & Sarah Lightman, curators. *Graphic Details: Confessional Comics by Jewish Women*. Koffler Gallery Off-Site, Toronto, 17 Feb. – 17 Apr. 2011 (traveled to: Cartoon Art Museum, San Francisco, 1 Oct. 2010 – 30 Jan. 2011; Yeshiva University Museum, New York, 25 Sept. 2011 – 15 Apr. 2012).

subsequent encounters with these traumatic memories as an adult in New York City. Eisenstein's award-winning *I Was a Child of Holocaust Survivors* explores the Holocaust through the eyes of the artist who, as the child of survivors, navigates the experiences and remembrances of an older generation. Finally, Libicki's *Jobnik!* delves into the artist's experience of army life in Israel and the emergence of contemporary Jewish identity. Much has been written about similar works by Jewish men, such as Art Spiegelman's *Maus* (Pantheon Books, 1986) and Will Eisner's *A Contract with God* (Baronet Books, 1978), but little attention has been given to many of the other artists who create these intricate works of art.

The central purpose of this research is to explore the medium of the graphic novel through the lens of Jewish cultural studies and theories of memory. In their book *The Jewish Graphic Novel: Critical Approaches*, art history professor Samantha Baskind and professor of English and Jewish Studies Ranen-Sherman define the Jewish graphic novel as follows:

“We understand the Jewish graphic novel similarly – as a book-length word-picture narrative by a Jew that explores the Jewish experience ... Indeed, it is the subject, not the style, that distinguishes the Jewish graphic novel from the graphic novel by a non-Jew [and] the genre is uniquely suited to the quintessential narrative themes of the Jewish imagination: mobility, flight, adaptation, transformation, disguise, metamorphosis, and much else.”³

³ Samantha Baskind & Ranen Omer-Sherman, eds. *The Jewish Graphic Novel: Critical Approaches*. New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2008, p. xvii.

These themes are exemplary of this genre, but are certainly not limited to the Jewish experience. I hope to demonstrate how some of the motifs elucidated by Baskind and Omer-Sherman pertain to Katin, Eisenstein, and Libicki since all three artists are Jewish women residing primarily in North America. Each artist represents a period of Jewish North American history. Katin is representative of the first generation of East European Jews who migrated to North America before, during, or after World War II to start a new life on distant shores. Eisenstein's account of her childhood in Canada reflects on Jewish life in North America shortly after the war, and how the Holocaust continued to overshadow their peaceful existence. Finally, Libicki's story – her voyage to Israel and back – exemplifies a more contemporary life narrative in the history of Jewish culture.

The analysis of Katin, Eisenstein, and Libicki's works centers on the question of memory and how it is represented both visually and through narrativity. In order to explore the representation of memory, the graphic memoirs are organized chronologically, from Katin's first-hand account of the Holocaust, to Eisenstein's second-generation reflection on what her parents endured, to Libicki's more current life experience in Israel. In each case, I explore the following concepts: the formal qualities and aesthetic of the work in relation to plot, issues of self-representation from both visual and textual perspectives, the manifestation of time in the graphic novel, and lastly the representation of memory in relation to all of these ideas. Before describing some of the particularities of the medium in question, I would first like to provide a cursory examination of autobiographical memory.

Memory is a rich and complex phenomenon, which many thinkers have tried to define. And yet, easy definition escapes the concept of memory because it encapsulates

so many aspects of Being. It can also be subdivided into various categories: collective, cultural, individual, perceptual, and autobiographical, to name but a few. To complicate matters even further, the field of mnemonics encompasses several areas of current research: neurology, biology, cognitive science, philosophy, cultural studies, history, etc. It is therefore very difficult and well nigh impossible to create a universal statement about memory, owing to its multifacetedness and its mutability from one individual and society to the next. How, then, are we to understand the process of recollection, one that is so intimately linked to selfhood, identity, and the construction of a life story?

In his excellent essay in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, simply titled “Memory”, John Sutton provides an overview of the discourse of contemporary memory theory.⁴ Sutton iterates from the very beginning of his article that we must acknowledge the diversity and immense complexity of the phenomenon known as memory, and avoid formulaic statements that obviate subjective experience. The author notes three basic types of individual memory:

1. ‘Procedural memory’, which is known as ‘habit memory’ in psychology and refers to remembering *how* something is done (e.g., how to ride a bike).
2. ‘Semantic memory’, also known as ‘propositional memory’, it signifies remembering facts and information (such as a date of birth or a moment in history).
3. Finally, there is ‘episodic memory’, which is sometimes referred to as ‘recollective memory’ in the cognitive sciences. This is the most personal form of memory that brings us into direct contact with a past event. Episodic memory is most

⁴ John Sutton. “Memory.” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 3 Feb. 2010, <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/memory/article> [accessed 15 November 2011].

often linked to autobiographical representation, and so this is the form of memory that will be at the heart of the discussion.

Within the field of memory studies, Sutton notes that there is often a divide between advocates of representative realism and those in favor of direct realism. Representative realists believe that it is representations, or traces, that trigger our awareness of past events. In other words, they think that there is always some type of mediation that occurs with the passage of every memory. Direct realists, however, vehemently dispute this idea because they argue that we must have an immediate connection to the past for the purposes of self-awareness and knowledge. If we accept the premise that the memory trace acts as the primary catalyst for recollection (also referred to as the image, cue or impression), then we cut off the individual from his or her past through a veil of representation: “How can memory traces *represent* past events or experiences? How can they have *content*? This is in part a general problem about the meaning of mental representations.”⁵ Nevertheless, representative realists argue that we can still have a sense of a direct relationship to the past because we do not consciously experience any form of mediation. The mind acts as a filter through which all our experiences pass. Overall, however, the question of *how* memory functions in relation to artistic representation in the graphic novel medium is more pertinent to this research than the question of how memory functions internally as a cognitive process.

Applying memory theory to the visual arts will hopefully illuminate some of the questions so far. Is it possible that mediation and representation could expose the inner workings of the mnemonic process? According to anthropology professor Susanne

⁵ John Sutton. “Memory.” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 3 Feb. 2010, <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/memory/article> [accessed 15 November 2011].

Kuchler, “Mnemonic practices are indivisible from the material act of representation.”⁶ If this is the case, then autobiographic storytelling, as exemplified in the unique medium of the graphic novel, would provide an ideal setting for the exploration of episodic memory. Graphic narratives are composed out of panels, punctuated by gaps that are formally known as gutters, and told in sequence. Visual/textual devices often include handwriting, expressive drawing, narrative leaps (either forward or backward), fragments, photographs, historic references, and testimonies. Thus novel-length comic books, such as those by Katin, Eisenstein, and Libicki, exhibit many of the complexities of the *active act of recollection* through visual and verbal language. By spatializing time in the most explicit of terms – clearly delineated panels that neatly divide one moment from the next and an earlier narrative sequence from a later one – graphic novels manifest some of the most intriguing aspects of memory as understood by contemporary thinkers:

“The spatial form of comics is adept at engaging the *subject* of memory and reproducing the *effects* of memory – gaps, fragments, positions, layers, circularities; it recognizes and plays on the notion of memory as located in mind and body and as, perhaps, shiftingly inaccessible and accessible.”⁷

The relationship between episodic memory and comics owes much to the spatial quality of remembrances and the interdependence of time and space. What we recall has a spatial

⁶ Susanne Kuchler and Walter Melion. *Images of Memory: On Remembering and Representation*. Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution, 1991, p. 7.

⁷ Hillary L. Chute. *Graphic Women: Life Narrative & Contemporary Comics*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2010, p. 134.

dimension and a quality that translates well onto the page. Our childhood can be envisioned as a particular space or place that we can re-visit.

As a supplement to a theoretical examination of these graphic memoirs, I also interviewed each artist, a method that is especially relevant in oral history projects. In addition to written documentation about the past, oral historians place an emphasis on testimony, anecdotes, and life story to complement our understanding of a time, place, or event. Interviewing personalizes the analysis of Katin, Eisenstein, and Libicki's works, creating a dialogic 'triangle' between scholar, artist, and artwork. Oral historian and linguist Neal Norrick states that speaking directly to someone who experienced events within a book allows for their voice to carry through: "The oral history interview provides a space for a narrator to construct not only a narrative identity, enmeshed in a family history, and a society, but also an individual identity with a characteristic voice."⁸ My approach consisted in asking the artists to describe their creative process in great detail: what prompted them to work on their graphic novel and the media they used. Afterwards, I asked each artist about specific themes in their graphic memoirs and if any research was involved. For instance, in Libicki's case I asked about her repeated inclusion of news headlines and whether she referred to specific newspapers, blogs, and/or personal journals. Since each work is entirely unique in its visualization of memories, I tailored my questions accordingly. However, all artists were asked about what they remembered most from the time period they wrote about and illustrated.

At this time, it is important to point out that text and image are not so easily differentiated from one another in comic books. Since many of these works are

⁸ Neal R. Norrick. "Talking About Remembering and Forgetfulness in Oral History Interviews." *The Oral History Review*, 32.2 (Summer-Autumn 2005): 6.

handwritten and because writing forms such an integral part of the medium, text is understood to be an extension of other graphic elements and must be treated as such. Although text and image may tell slightly different if not complementary stories, artificial divisions ultimately hinder any in-depth analysis. Legendary cartoonist Will Eisner was careful to state exactly this in his seminal work on the formal aspects of graphic storytelling, *Comics and Sequential Art*: “Lettering, treated ‘graphically’ and in the service of the story, functions as an extension of the imagery. In this context it provides the mood, a narrative bridge, and the implication of sound.”⁹ In other words, we need to look at words not only as textual referents, but as representations in themselves that dynamically interact with their corresponding drawings and/or paintings. Handwriting is also a most intimate mode of communication, a way of individualizing an already personal story. Alterations in handwriting, picture-to-text ratio, and composition all inform and transform the meaning of a scene.

Autobiography publicizes the self, thereby making external what is internal. When we write about our past, we are also at the same time creating a persona that bridges the divides between childhood, adolescence, and adulthood. This persona takes on a life of its own, creating a distance between the author and his/her writing. As memory scholar Robyn Fivush notes in her book *Autobiographical Memory and the Construction of a Narrative*: “We each author our own life story; in constructing and recounting our past, we are simultaneously constructing and reconstructing our selves.”¹⁰ This reconstructed self is intimately linked to the act of representation.

⁹ Will Eisner. *Comics and Sequential Art*. Tamarac, Florida: Poorhouse Press, 1985, p. 10.

¹⁰ Robyn Fivush and Catherine A. Haden, eds. *Autobiographical Memory and the Construction of a Narrative*. Mahwah, New Jersey: L. Erlbaum, 2003, p. 149.

Creating an idealized public self or imago means that every self-characterization, as presented in autobiographical writing and drawing, inevitably creates a kind of double. Is mediation the reason for this? In his essay *Self-Making Narratives*, Jerome Bruner argues: “Autobiography turns even a seasoned writer into a *Doppelgänger* [or double] – and turns its readers into sleuths. How can any version of an autobiography strike a balance between what one actually was and what one might have been?”¹¹ In other words, how can graphic novelists truly give an accurate account of themselves? Autobiographies, be they traditional or graphic, dilute the boundary between fiction and non-fiction because they re-imagine the past while at the same time insisting on historic accuracy and specificity. Each artist makes claims to sincerity and truthfulness in their work, what narratologist Anita Kasabova calls the fiction of “the *remembered* self.”¹² This is much like saying that identity can never be fully articulated; words and images somehow fall short of representing the true self and only produce a believable copy at best. We cannot ignore that every artist must make choices, aesthetic or otherwise: what to include and what to omit from their work. Ultimately, however, an autobiography says much more about who a person is *in the moment* of writing than who they were in the past or might have been. The somewhat prickly issue of the reliability of memories is not intended to denigrate the validity of autobiography because in many ways reality, especially inner reality, is a question of perception.

¹¹ Jerome Bruner. “Self Making Narratives.” In Robyn Fivush and Catherine A. Haden, eds. *Autobiographical Memory and the Construction of a Narrative*. Mahwah, New Jersey: L. Erlbaum, 2003, p. 216.

¹² Anita Kasabova. *On Autobiographical Memory*. Newcastle upon Tyne, UK: Cambridge Publishers, 2009, p. 78.

There is also the social aspect of memory to consider: we never remember alone. Every remembrance is linked to a person, place, or time: “memory is actively constructed as a social and cultural practice.”¹³ A successful autobiography includes not only a portrait of the author, but also one of those closest to him/her. We are all shaped and influenced by certain individuals over the course of our lifetime. Therefore, in each of these cases – *We Are on Our Own*, *I Was a Child of Holocaust Survivors*, and *Jobnik!* – the artist depicts friends, colleagues, and family members. It must be said that family, and one’s community in general, occupy a special place within the realm of memory: the shared experiences of the older generation and lessons that impress themselves upon the minds of the young should not be forgotten. The narratives of our ancestors and more specifically, our parents, forever linger at the far recesses of our imagination and shape our interactions with others, whether we choose to learn from them or dismiss them.

Memories somehow transfer from the older to the younger generation. Marianne Hirsch, professor of English and Comparative Literature at Columbia University and professor in the Institute for Research on Women and Gender,¹⁴ best articulated the concept of second-generation memories and coined the concept of postmemory, which she defines as follows:

“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

¹³ Susanne Kuchler and Walter Melion. *Images of Memory: On Remembering and Representation*. Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution, 1991, p. 4.

¹⁴ “Marianne Hirsch.” *Department of English and Comparative Literature: Columbia University*, <http://www.columbia.edu/~mh2349/>.

creation. This is not to say that memory itself is unmediated, but that it is more directly connected to the past. Postmemory characterizes the experience of those who grow up dominated by narratives that preceded their birth, whose own belated stories are evacuated by the stories of the previous generation shaped by traumatic events that can be neither understood nor recreated.”¹⁵

Certainly, the effects of postmemory are most pronounced in the children of immigrants or survivors of war, as is the case of Miriam Katin and Bernice Eisenstein. They both display some of the very interesting and somewhat murky effects of postmemory. In Katin’s case it is only through her mother’s life story that she is able to reconstruct any sense of her early childhood during the Second World War and in communist Hungary. In her graphic novel, Katin depicts herself both as a child and an adult facing the same repeated questions about faith and religion. Eisenstein’s encounter with the concept of postmemory is even more evident: the story is based on her understanding of her parents’ survival of Auschwitz. It is as though the past weighs on the living and continues to haunt them well after those remembered have faded away.

Picture-writing, narrative drawing, visual diaries, graphic narratives, sequential art, and graphic memoirs: all refer to comic books that are intricate novel-length books. Miriam Katin, Bernice Eisenstein, and Miriam Libicki present the reader with a unique way of registering time spatially, and inscribing life story in this medium. Women are some of the main creators of autobiographic comics today, which have contributed to a new form of female self-representation. Before embarking on an analysis of these works,

¹⁵ Marianne Hirsch. *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative and Postmemory*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997, p. 22.

I would like to leave the reader with an eloquent description of the medium by Will Eisner:

“The regimens of art (eg. perspective, symmetry, brush stroke) and the regimens of literature (eg. grammar, plot, syntax) become superimposed upon each other. The reading of the comic book is an act of both aesthetic perception and intellectual pursuit.”¹⁶

Like the gleaming facets of a crystal, each reflecting a prism of light and color in its own way, the graphic novel can be looked at from many different angles, each one producing its own interpretation.

CHAPTER ONE

Miriam Katin and *We Are on Our Own*

From this short overview of the philosophical perspective of memory, I would like to now formally introduce the artist Miriam Katin and her graphic novel *We Are on Our Own* (fig. 1). Miriam Katin was born in Hungary in 1942 and has worked as a graphic artist, cartoonist, illustrator, and designer for many publishers and film companies, including Disney Studios, Drawn & Quarterly, and Ein Gedi Films.¹⁷ She has an extensive portfolio of comic books and children’s books that she has created over the past decades, many of which focus on Jewish identity and culture in Hungary, the United

¹⁶ Will Eisner. *Comics and Sequential Art*. Tamarac, Florida: Poorhouse Press, 1985, p. 8.

¹⁷ Miriam Katin. *Miriam Katin: Stories in Pictures and Words*, 12 Sept. 2011, http://www.miriamkatin.com/?page_id=15, [accessed 16 Jan. 2012].

States, and Israel. After the Hungarian Revolution, the artist immigrated to Israel before finally settling down in New York in the mid 1960s.

Undoubtedly, Katin's graphic memoir *We Are on Our Own* is her most highly acclaimed work. It is roughly 130 pages in length and details Katin and her mother's escape from Hungary in 1944, the year the Nazis began to implement the Final Solution in that country. This work therefore represents some of the earliest memories of the artist's childhood, but interestingly, Katin uses pseudonyms for most of the characters (she calls herself "Lisa Levy" and refers to her mother as "Esther Levy").¹⁸ The artist begins her story in 1944 Budapest, "a city of lights, culture and elegance."¹⁹ Esther Levy's husband is away fighting for the Hungarian army in the war and she has to make a list of all her belongings, which will soon be confiscated by German soldiers. In order to escape the worsening situation and save her child's life, the mother makes a difficult decision. She spends all of her money on fake documents that certify that she is a village peasant traveling with an illegitimate child. Esther burns any personal items that may reveal her Jewish identity and fabricates a story to convince her neighbors that she and her daughter have committed suicide. Mother and child then flee the city for the countryside, hoping to hide out the remainder of the war. Over the course of the book, Katin describes and illustrates many of the perilous journeys the two make to stay one

¹⁸ The artist approached the publisher Drawn & Quarterly in Montreal, which readily accepted the idea. Her mother asked her not to mention any real names for fear of reprisals. With regards to the pseudonyms: "This was upsetting my publishers, but I had no choice. My eighty-nine-year-old mother demanded that I not use our real names in the book." In Samantha Baskind & Ranen Omer-Sherma, eds. *The Jewish Graphic Novel: Critical Approaches*. New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2008, p. 241.

¹⁹ Miriam Katin. *We Are on Our Own*. Montreal: Drawn & Quarterly, 2006, p. 7.

step ahead of the advancing Nazi army. I would like to hone in on the book's pictorial images.

One of the most influential comic book artists and theorists of the past century, Will Eisner is the creator of the terms 'sequential art' and 'graphic novel.' In his book, *Comics and Sequential Art*,²⁰ Eisner describes the language of comics, going into very detailed analyses and examples of essential visual and textual devices that make up this mode of storytelling, such as speed lines, aural cues, panels, background, composition, and speech balloons. Katin's *We Are on Our Own* is composed entirely out of pencil drawings. According to the conventions set out by Eisner, she uses a fairly straightforward layout to frame the story, generally conforming to a four-to-six-panels per page composition. Through both writing and drawing the artist expresses sound, as when warplanes drop bombs on the countryside (fig. 2). Most of the drawings are in black and white, although certain scenes are vividly portrayed in color. Katin represents scenes from her early childhood much like old photographs, but flips back to brightly colored imagery when depicting her adult life in 1960s and 1970s New York, where she is now herself a mother with child. These colorful images not only convey a sense of joyfulness and peace, but they also help to distinguish from the darker more expressionistic past of the war. The visual juxtaposition serves to reinforce the differences between the two periods in the artist's life, but the textual component actually links the two eras. For instance, in the opening frames of the book Katin depicts herself and her mother reading a passage from Genesis (fig. 3).²¹ In a scene much later in the

²⁰ Will Eisner. *Comics and Sequential Art*. Tamarac, Florida: Poorhouse Press, 1985.

²¹ Miriam Katin. *We Are on Our Own*. Montreal: Drawn & Quarterly, 2006, pp. 3-5.

book, she shows herself and her young son reading the very same biblical portion (fig. 4).²²

The story is divided into chapters, which Katin marks with large heavily shaded panels. Towards the beginning of the book, before Lisa and her mother flee Budapest, the palette is subdued. The drawings are mostly rendered in soft grays and the outlines of objects and people are likewise indistinct, giving the sequence an ethereal feel. In an interview with author Samantha Baskind, Katin said of this aesthetic choice: “the past comes to me as black and white and gray.”²³ Figures meander back and forth through each panel, their facial features reduced to simple eyes-nose-mouth compositions. The handwriting is wavering – the lines of the letters seem to shift and zigzag across the panels, but they are carefully contained within clearly defined rectangular text boxes. The writing is in uppercase printed script and remains very similar throughout most of the book. The shading quickly becomes much heavier around page nineteen, when Esther is purchasing fake documents from the black market. In later sequences, where both mother and daughter are fleeing for their lives, the handwriting shifts in character and becomes much more resolute. Simultaneously, the drawing becomes very expressive and sketchy to convey the emotional intensity associated with the unfolding drama. The text boxes in these particular instances stretch and take on irregular shapes, and the lines are gestural, evoking rapid hand motion.

As Esther burns all of her personal belongings to protect both herself and her daughter’s identity, Katin paints a very complex visual portrait (fig. 5). The panel for this

²² Miriam Katin. *We Are on Our Own*. Montreal: Drawn & Quarterly, 2006, p. 101.

²³ Samantha Baskind & Ranen Omer-Sherma, eds. *The Jewish Graphic Novel: Critical Approaches*. New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2008, p. 240.

particular scene takes up an entire page, leading the reader to pause and reflect on the detailed imagery. From multiple vantage points, we see the mother sitting before a fire, the light illuminating her face and the personal letters, photographs, and Hebrew book she holds tentatively in her hands. The scene moves from the top left of the panel, where the viewer looks down at Esther from behind as she throws a sheet into the open fire, to a close-up profile of her gazing solemnly down at a letter and some photographs, to the letter itself scrawled in cursive writing and dated June 12, 1944, down to pages being torn relentlessly from a Hebrew book, to little Lisa peering in from what is presumably an ajar doorway, finally again to the flames themselves, engulfing the final moment of the scene. The play on perspective and repetitive imagery serves to reinforce the importance of the scene and creates a complex narrative that is laced with nostalgia, loss, sadness, and intensity as expressed by the somberness and high contrast of the mark making. As Esther looks down at her irreplaceable belongings, Lisa stands below in her direct line of sight, suggesting the connection between the two figures. When she made this elaborate drawing, Katin said that she did not recall seeing the burning herself, “but I had to think about how it was for [my mother].”²⁴ Although panels tend to represent a single moment in the sequence of a graphic narrative, in this case Katin includes several layers of time within one image. The flames in the bottom right corner mark the point where not only the reader’s eye movement stops, but also where the image and the page end. It is precisely in this place, where everything converges, that Hebrew lettering is clearly visible. The letters *aleph*, *lamed*, *heh*, *yud*, and *mem* go up in flames, spelling out “Elohim” (God), burning along with all other marks of the family’s Jewish past. The

²⁴ Miriam Katin in an interview with the author, January 2012.

significance of burning God is taken up again at the very end of the memoir, when we see Lisa ask: “And what if mommy burned that God after all?”²⁵

The Jewish themes expressed throughout *We Are on Our Own* can be compared and contrasted to other works in the same genre. In *The Jewish Graphic Novel: Critical Approaches*,²⁶ author and contributor Laurence Roth notes an interesting aspect of recent Jewish graphic novels in relation to popular culture: comics about Jewish superheroes are typically marginalized, whereas those about the immigrant experience and the Holocaust are established within the cultural center (*Maus* and *A Contract with God* are prime examples of this phenomenon).²⁷ In other words, graphic novels that reflect on abject Jewish pasts have flourished and are widely read and accepted, while those that envision heroic Jewish futures remain outside the mainstream. For Roth, this marketplace reality reinforces the notion of Jews as a ghostly presence in American society: “The Holocaust in particular has become a favorite American graphic novel ghost story, one that inverts and yet complements superhero comics.”²⁸ Does Katin’s intensely personal childhood memoir truly emphasize the paradigm of the ‘wandering Jew’ as the eternally haunted Other? Roth seems to think so, and even points to her work specifically as an example of this emerging cultural phenomenon. He argues that Katin’s book is a meditation on the death of God: “God himself becomes a ghost inhabiting Katin’s psyche, a troubling

²⁵ Miriam Katin. *We Are on Our Own*. Montreal: Drawn & Quarterly, 2006, p. 122.

²⁶ Laurence Roth. “Contemporary American Jewish Comic Books: Abject Pasts, Heroic Futures.” In *The Jewish Graphic Novel: Critical Approaches*, ed. Samantha Baskind & Ranen Omer-Sherman. New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2008, pp. 3-22.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 3-22.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

memory, as readers see in the colored panels that show Katin with her own child in the 1960s and 1970s.”²⁹ Indeed, it is possible to support this claim if we view God as a childhood memory that the artist continually evokes throughout the book.

The question of faith is one of the main themes of *We Are on Our Own*. The child Lisa, who is representative of Katin, questions the existence of a Supreme Being several times in the book. A pivotal point occurs halfway through the book, when Lisa and her mother flee from a small Hungarian village in the dead of a winter storm (fig. 6), this time with Russian officers at their heels. The little girl discovers that her dog, which she had befriended over the course of their stay, has been shot.³⁰ As Lisa realizes the creature is dead, a caption reads: “The darkness did not help and the light did not help... And then, somehow she knew that God was not the light and God was not the darkness, and not anybody at all. Maybe, God was not...”³¹ The title of her graphic novel itself also suggests a sense of isolation and loss of faith, which is supported by a passage in the concluding sequence of the narrative. Here, Esther reunites with her husband Karoly, thanking God for their fortune in finding each other once more. Karoly retorts that “God has nothing to do with any of this... We are on our own, Esther. That’s all there is.”³² In one of the colorful passages right before this, the adult Lisa appears, explaining to her

²⁹ Laurence Roth. “Contemporary American Jewish Comic Books: Abject Pasts, Heroic Futures.” In *The Jewish Graphic Novel: Critical Approaches*, ed. Samantha Baskind & Ranen Omer-Sherman. New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2008, p. 11.

³⁰ Miriam Katin. *We Are on Our Own*. Montreal: Drawn & Quarterly, 2006, pp. 68-69.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 69.

³² *Ibid.*, pp. 117-118.

child that the Bible is just a story before reflecting on how she her lost faith.³³ The notion of God as a ghostly presence arising out of childhood memory returns to haunt the adult Lisa, but I am still not convinced that this necessarily buttresses Roth's argument about the Jews themselves as haunted Others in American culture. Religious belief is an intensely personal subject, and generalizing Katin's experience as a common element to all Jewish graphic novels would be rather simplistic. This sociological idea would also be a narrow frame to apply to Katin and would detract from the richness and scope of her graphic memoir.

Indeed, there is another perspective that can be applied in addition to the one proposed by Roth. English professor Hillary Chute approaches women's comics through the lens of feminist studies. In *Graphic Women: Life Narrative & Contemporary Comics*,³⁴ Chute states that graphic novels allow women unprecedented means of self-expression and a way to create a metaphorical archive of personal history. For her, works such as Katin's memoir reflect a new mode for women's self-representation and place the reader directly in touch with deeply personal events: "They return to events to literally re-view them, and in so doing, they productively point to the female subject as both an object of looking and a creator of looking and sight."³⁵ Chute focuses quite a bit of attention on narrative voice and how artists choose to express themselves in comic books. Katin represents herself alternately as both a child and as an adult in *We Are on Our Own*. Autobiographical comic books offer a kind of double narration, or double voice, through

³³ Miriam Katin. *We Are on Our Own*. Montreal: Drawn & Quarterly, 2006, p. 84.

³⁴ Hillary L. Chute. *Graphic Women: Life Narrative & Contemporary Comics*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2010.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

both text and image. Often, when the image represented is that of a child, the textual voice is that of an adult, and this is certainly the case in most of Katin's memoir. We see Lisa playing with animals and taking candy from strangers, but we also simultaneously see her mother rejecting the sexual advances of Russian and German soldiers (fig. 7). This temporal layering is unique to the graphic medium, and yet it is also illustrative of the autobiographical genre. As theorists Robyn Fivush and Catherine Haden point out in their book *Autobiographical Memory and the Construction of a Narrative*: "We each author our own life story; in constructing and recounting our past, we are simultaneously constructing and reconstructing our selves."³⁶ We must remember that Katin is re-creating her past and in so doing, presenting a public image of herself and her mother.

This idea leads to the question of time and how it is represented in Katin's memoir. In his essay, "The Structure of Time in Autobiographical Memory", philosopher John Campbell posits that autobiographical narratives automatically and inevitably assume a linear framework: "[If] the principle of plot construction is given by the conception of the self as a substance, the subject is bound to assign a linear structure to the times remembered."³⁷ It is true that this work's plot moves forward in a very linear conception of time, from little Lisa's life in Budapest to her subsequent escapades through the Hungarian countryside. Katin even starts her narrative with the biblical

³⁶ Robyn Fivush and Catherine A. Haden, eds. *Autobiographical Memory and the Construction of a Narrative*. Mahwah, New Jersey: L. Erlbaum, 2003, p. 149.

³⁷ John Campbell. "The Structure of Time in Autobiographical Memory." *European Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 5, no. 2 (1997), p. 111.

phrase “In the beginning”,³⁸ thereby accentuating a traditional plot structure. Even so, she peppers her narrative with flash forwards to her future life in New York.

For artist Will Eisner, *time* is a structural element that is inseparable from comics, while *timing* is the pace and rhythm of narration. Time is represented through panels, which both frame the action and divide it into sequences that can be easily manipulated:

“The phenomenon of duration and its experience – commonly referred to as ‘time’ – is a dimension integral to sequential art. In the universe of human consciousness time combines with space and sound in a setting of interdependence wherein conceptions, actions, motions and movement have a meaning and are measured by our perception of their relationship to each other.”³⁹

Many panels on a page suggest a compression of time and a desire to move the action forward at a greater pace.⁴⁰ By contrast, a single panel dominating an entire page is intended to hold the reader’s attention and signifies an important moment in the story. To indicate that something has occurred very rapidly, Katin draws ‘speed lines’ (an often-used technique to convey motion) behind warplanes,⁴¹ and allows these planes to break through the panel frame (fig. 8). She also compresses time by drawing numerous small panels to depict the action of rolling a cigarette. In this way, space is symbolic of time in Katin’s graphic novel, with each panel being symbolic of a moment in the story.

³⁸ Miriam Katin. *We Are on Our Own*. Montreal: Drawn & Quarterly, 2006, p. 3.

³⁹ Will Eisner. *Comics and Sequential Art*. Tamarac, Florida: Poorhouse Press, 1985, p. 25.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 30.

⁴¹ Miriam Katin. *We Are on Our Own*. Montreal: Drawn & Quarterly, 2006, p. 49.

So then, how can we connect the past, as represented by the child Lisa in *We Are on Our Own*, to the present day and the artist herself? What is the significance of time in sequential art and why mention it at all? The answer lies in the idea of memory. As I mentioned earlier, episodic memory, or the personal recollection of past events, is often referred to as a form of mental time-travel. In the creation of her graphic memoir, Katin reconstructs and revisits her past. In an interview with author Samantha Baskind, Katin points out that since she was very young in 1944, she could not have a clear recollection of the events described in her memoir. Instead, she relied on her mother's retelling of these wartime stories almost thirty years later.⁴² In a way, *We Are on Our Own* is very much about shared memories between mother and daughter. For some critics, this may bring into question the authenticity of the events Katin evokes with such emotion and in such great detail. But this issue would miss the point of the work entirely, for although autobiographical memory aims to be as emotionally truthful and sincere as possible, authenticity is not the ultimate goal. Memory is a deeply personal experience and, unlike history, it does not require a burden of proof. As memory studies scholar Allan Megill notes in the anthology *The Collective Memory Reader*, "[memory] is an image of the past constructed by a subjectivity in the present. It is by this definition subjective; it may also be irrational and inconsistent."⁴³ Memories are subjective and mutable; in fact, everything we remember changes over time and transforms according to the needs of the present. Moreover, in an interview Katin also pointed out that, to her, she never saw her

⁴² Samantha Baskind & Ranen Omer-Sherman, eds. *The Jewish Graphic Novel: Critical Approaches*. New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2008, p. 237.

⁴³ Allan Megill. "History, Memory, Identity." In *The Collective Memory Reader*, ed. Jeffrey Olick, et al. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011, p. 196.

memories and those of her mother's as separate entities. Rather, she says:

“I don't think you can separate [those memories] at all. At that time, and especially because of the utter closeness, there was nobody else. Me and my mother were like one thing, as a child I probably never was away from her that much because of those times. It was she and me together. It was one unit.”⁴⁴

Interestingly, this statement brings to mind the inherent transmissibility of memory, since the artist views her early childhood as inextricably linked to her mother's.

At the very end of the book, Katin attempts to support her narrative with more widely accepted 'objective' representations of the past. On the final pages of *We Are on Our Own*, she provides the reader with images of old handwritten letters, postcards, and a note explaining how she wrote the story (fig. 9). She says:

“I could somehow imagine the places and the people my mother told me about, but a real sense of myself as a small child and the reality of fear and confusion of those times I could understand only by reading the last few letters and postcards my mother had written to my father.”⁴⁵

On the final page of the memoir she affixes an old photograph of her and her mother taken in 1946. There are many instances where the artist references photography as a source of inspiration. Throughout the book, Katin painstakingly draws old photographs in minute detail, citing them as one of her primary influences: “My visual influences are a

⁴⁴ Miriam Katin in an interview with the author, January 2012.

⁴⁵ Miriam Katin. *We Are on Our Own*. Montreal: Drawn & Quarterly, 2006, p. 125.

number of old photographs that survived the war with my father.”⁴⁶ For instance, she reproduces the shadow of an actual banister that once stood in her childhood home as well as photographs of her father in military uniform (fig. 10 & 11). In the end, photographs emerge as fragments of a past that Katin recreates, acting as traces or cues that connect her to her childhood.

The shifting, living quality of autobiographic memory is directly manifested both visually and textually in the graphic novel. As philosopher Anita Kasabova asks in her book *On Autobiographical Memory*: “Is the narrative merely a manifestation of that event or does it provide the underlying structure of the episodes we recall?”⁴⁷ How is the structure of memory manifested in Katin’s graphic memoir? Many people visualize the distant past in black and white. Katin’s drawings are made up of shades of grey; the shapes are often indistinct, highly expressive, and dark. Her aesthetic here is reminiscent of the renowned 20th century German Expressionist Kathe Kollwitz, especially in its composition and focus on heart-wrenching mother-and-child narratives (fig. 12 & 13). Katin admits to being influenced to a large extent by Kollwitz, as well as preliminary sketches that Daumier and Van Gogh would create as studies for paintings: “Amazingly, as a young art lover and budding artist, Kathe Kollwitz was my favorite.”⁴⁸ Aside from the emotional, expressive quality of her childhood, Katin seems to replicate the sense of cloudiness associated with memories from a faraway time and place. By contrast, the

⁴⁶ Samantha Baskind & Ranen Omer-Sherman, eds. *The Jewish Graphic Novel: Critical Approaches*. New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2008, p. 241.

⁴⁷ Anita Kasabova. *On Autobiographical Memory*. Newcastle upon Tyne, UK: Cambridge Publishers, 2009, p. 77.

⁴⁸ Samantha Baskind & Ranen Omer-Sherman, eds. *The Jewish Graphic Novel: Critical Approaches*. New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2008, p. 241.

drawings illustrating her adult years in New York are brightly lit and the shapes are more distinctly delineated. These scenes emerge as colorful, cheerful counterparts to the darkness of the past (fig. 14). The hues are vibrant and reminiscent of children's books.

The structure itself of the graphic novel mimics the fragmentary nature of episodic memory, so-called because we retrieve the past in segments. Memories are disjointed. This notion of fragmented memories is replicated in the very fabric of the graphic novel, which divides one panel from the next, and one sequence from another. Between each panel is what is formally known as the gutter, a gap in time that the reader fills out to create a coherent narrative. This gap in time correlates to the gap in memory. The past does not emerge in our minds as a continuous film reel; rather, we envision the past similarly to a graphic novel, in specific images, smells, tastes, and sounds.

Psychologists theorize that true episodic memories begin to occur only around the age of 3 or 4, while memory fragments may appear as the earliest guise of memory (some even occurring before the age of 1).⁴⁹ In his essay "Fragment Memories Mark the End of Childhood Amnesia", psychologist Darryl Bruce illustrates the distinction between episodic memories and fragments.⁵⁰ Episodic memory has more of a narrative quality to it, often describing a series of events. Memory fragments, on the other hand, are usually quite brief and involve a few disparate images, sounds, or smells: "Many of them are noncontextualized, stand-alone snippets of the past that are recollections of sensory

⁴⁹ "Although it is difficult to put a specific figure on the age when children acquire a more-or-less fully functioning episodic memory system, a rough rule of thumb is that children younger than 4 years of age do not yet have such a system." Endel Tulving in "Episodic Memory: From Mind to Brain." *Annual Reviews*, 53 (2002): 7. <http://www.hss.caltech.edu/~steve/files/tulving.pdf>

⁵⁰ Darryl Bruce, et al. "Fragment Memories Mark the End of the Childhood Amnesia." *Memory & Cognition*, 33.4 (2005): 567-276, <http://www.cs.toronto.edu/~amber/bruce2005fragment.pdf>

experiences (images of a visual, auditory, olfactory, or other sensory nature), behaviors or actions, or feelings or emotions.”⁵¹ In other words, a memory fragment has little or no storyline or context; it is an isolated remembrance in time. Since Katin was so young at the time of the events described, it would be difficult to achieve a sense of narrative continuity. The artist herself is thankful for this innate ability to forget difficult experiences: “As I was very young, my real memories of that year are very scant. I am grateful for that.”⁵² The few things that she could still remember were, however, very vivid, such as the awareness of overwhelming hunger, happiness at making a new animal friend, or the pleasures of eating chocolate. It is for this reason that, in describing what she remembered most from that time in her life, Katin said: “Memories connected to food or hunger are the most important.”⁵³ Fragments are usually a detail within the larger context of an event memory, rather like a single image in a storybook.

The disjointed quality of Katin’s memoir, which jumps from the distant past of her childhood to her adult life in New York, also reflects the psychological concept of memory fragmentation. This concept was devised specifically in relation to trauma, experiences in our past that we cannot fully assimilate because of their violence and extreme emotions. Whole periods of one’s life may disappear entirely and be suppressed

⁵¹ Darryl Bruce, et al. “Fragment Memories Mark the End of the Childhood Amnesia.” *Memory & Cognition*, 33.4 (2005): 568, <http://www.cs.toronto.edu/~amber/bruce2005fragment.pdf>,

⁵² To elaborate on that point, the artist said: “I only reconstructed the story my mother told me about the sad event with the dog. If I had seen it and absorbed it at the time it must have been terrible. One thing, my mother was always trying to shield me from bad things in life, even bad news, to a fault. Most of these stories she told me only when I was thirty years old.” In Samantha Baskind & Ranen Omer-Sherman, eds. *The Jewish Graphic Novel: Critical Approaches*. New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2008, p. 237.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 242.

for the sake of survival. When asked about how much she was in fact able to recall of the war, Katin said: “It’s interesting because my husband is my age and he remembers so clearly details and other things that were around that time and he didn’t go through any trauma... but I don’t remember that much.”⁵⁴ The suppression of difficult memories happens unconsciously, but that does not mean that glimpses into the past are out of the question. Memory fragmentation leads to bits and pieces – shards of remembrance that are wholly disconnected from anything else – to resurface unexpectedly throughout adulthood. In the artist’s case, these childhood memories were insistently present in her mind: “The stories of my childhood were like a script in my head all the time. I would always think about it, I would remember it, anytime in the day something would happen and bring up these various things. I was living with it.”⁵⁵ Trauma is a perfect example of how the past encroaches on the present even many years into the future. *We Are on Our Own* has demonstrated that the memory process has the potential to be very complex and layered, especially when it comes to creative self-representation in the form of the graphic novel.

⁵⁴ Miriam Katin in an interview with the author, January 2012.

⁵⁵ Miriam Katin in an interview with the author, January 2012.

CHAPTER TWO

Bernice Eisenstein and *I Was a Child of Holocaust Survivors*

Born in Toronto in 1949 to Polish Jews, Bernice Eisenstein has worked as an artist and illustrator for a number of Canadian publications, including *the Globe and Mail*. Much of her career was spent as a freelance editor for major publishing houses. When she was younger, she completed an English Literature degree at York University, before moving to Israel and England, where she spent a number of years. Her first graphic memoir, *I Was a Child of Holocaust Survivors*, has garnered her international recognition (fig. 15). The book was a finalist for the prestigious Trillium Award the very year it was published (in 2006), the first case of a graphic novel being nominated for this distinction.

Eisenstein's *I Was a Child of Holocaust Survivors* is a 200-page long illustrated memoir in which the artist explores her identity in relation to her parents' past. The book opens with a black and white ink wash drawing depicting six famous Jewish thinkers – Bruno Schulz, Hannah Arendt, Elie Wiesel, Primo Levi, and Charlotte Salomon – all seated around a pentagonal table (fig. 16). Speech balloons hover around the figures, displaying well-known sayings and proverbs. An arrow in the center of the table points directly in between Primo Levi and Charlotte Salomon, the former of whom states: “I fear that my language has become inadequate, that you need to speak a different language today.”⁵⁶ Eisenstein's story begins with a childhood memory of her father's burial and how she coped with his sudden passing. The mourning period after her father's death is

⁵⁶ Primo Levi in Bernice Eisenstein. *I Was a Child of Holocaust Survivors*. Toronto, Ontario: McClelland & Stewart, 2006, p. 7.

what she calls “a time when memory can fill the hours of night and day. I dreamed often of my father during that first month after his death.”⁵⁷ Much of the book stresses the tense relationship that Eisenstein had vis-à-vis her father, who was unable to express himself about his past in Auschwitz and remained emotionally distant. She also describes the community of survivors she grew up with in a downtown Toronto area, always feeling separate from their painful history but simultaneously responsible for carrying on their legacy. Before delving into the particulars of the plot and issues of representation, I will examine the overall structure and the text-to-image ratio that makes this work so distinct from others in the same genre.

Like Katin, Eisenstein structures her book in neatly framed chapters, each with a title and story of its own. Unlike Katin, however, she does not conform to a traditional comic book layout, nor does she order her narrative chronologically. Aside from her incorporation of speech balloons and zip lines (the squiggles along a limb that indicate movement), Eisenstein does not follow many established comic book conventions. Instead, *I Was a Child of Holocaust Survivors* functions much like a thematic illustrated novel. The artist relies heavily on text to propel her narrative, fluctuating between a traditional graphic novel aesthetic (fig. 17) – with panels, images, and speech balloons – to an illustrated book format where images simply echo surrounding text (fig. 18). Her imagery consists, then, of illustrations, panels (comic book style), free-floating drawings, and images that interact with the typewritten text. It is important to note the fact that this graphic memoir is typed and not handwritten. There are basically three types of fonts: a standard-looking one called Mrs. Eaves, a cursive type that is italicized, and a playful

⁵⁷ Bernice Eisenstein. *I Was a Child of Holocaust Survivors*. Toronto, Ontario: McClelland & Stewart, 2006, p. 12.

writing that is strongly suggestive of free-flowing handwriting, but was originally designed by contemporary artist Dean Stanton.⁵⁸ The lack of personal handwriting means that the reader approaches this graphic autobiography differently than he/she would otherwise. It creates a sense of distance and gives Eisenstein's memoir more of a literary feel.

In a short film produced by the National Film Board of Canada and directed by Ann Marie Fleming, Eisenstein's novel is retold in animation.⁵⁹ Interestingly, the images gain much more power because they are no longer surrounded by prose. In extensive interviews with the director of the project, the artist discussed her creative process in-depth. She iterates that it was in fact imagery that propelled the book forward, even though the final product relies heavily on text: "I didn't start out making a book... the book began with painting. My father had been dead for a number of years and I wanted to capture an image of him."⁶⁰ Many of the images in the book were the starting point for the finished work. Eisenstein began by making paintings of her father, who had just recently passed away. The black and white pictures are in pen and ink, while the color paintings are in gouache. She then created numerous drawings, paintings and sketches, many of which are included in the memoir. After a while, Eisenstein realized that images could not express everything that she wanted to say about her family, and so she passed on to writing, alternating between the two and then combining them as she went along.

⁵⁸ Bernice Eisenstein. *I Was a Child of Holocaust Survivors*. Toronto, Ontario: McClelland & Stewart, 2006, 192.

⁵⁹ Bernice Eisenstein and Ellen David. *I Was a Child of Holocaust Survivors*. DVD. Directed by Ann Marie Fleming. Toronto, Canada: National Film Board of Canada (NFB), 2010.

⁶⁰ Bernice Eisenstein and Ellen David. *I Was a Child of Holocaust Survivors*. DVD. Directed by Ann Marie Fleming. Toronto, Canada: National Film Board of Canada (NFB), 2010.

Although Eisenstein bends some of the formal rules of sequential art – that of enclosing the narrative within panels and text boxes – overall the imagery still forms an integral component of the storyline. The graphic novel medium is flexible enough to accommodate such creative modifications. As comics scholar Charles Hatfield notes in his book on alternative comics: “Among the popular traditions, none mix text and image more persistently, or diversely, than comics; they make an ideal laboratory for the sustained study of text/image relations.”⁶¹ The imagery is strong enough in Eisenstein’s book to formulate its own story, but certainly there are many ways of looking at text/image relations.

Outside of her unique use of text and imagery, Eisenstein’s visual aesthetic harkens back to early 20th century painters. In one image, she depicts her parents and their siblings dancing in a circle that is reminiscent of Matisse’s *The Dance* (1909). In another picture, Eisenstein portrays her aunt singing atop the roof of a theatre with a fiddler (fig. 19). This drawing, and many others, demonstrates a remarkable affinity to Marc Chagall’s paintings of Jewish Russian villages, especially the ones depicting folk rituals. It is as though the artist sees her early childhood along Spadina Avenue as a mirror image of Chagall’s East European shtetl life.⁶² Some of Eisenstein’s most successful drawings are the portraits she lovingly renders of her family, such as those of her grandparents with their nuanced expression and style of dress (fig. 20 & 21). Their individual personalities really come through in these brightly colored ink drawings. The faces loom large over their small bodies, and both grandparents appear to be on the verge

⁶¹ Charles Hatfield. *Alternative Comics: An Emerging Literature*. Jackson, Mississippi: University of Mississippi Press, 2005, xiii.

⁶² A *shtetl* is Yiddish word meaning “town” that refers to a small town or village with a large Jewish population (usually in Eastern Europe).

of speaking. The grandfather, with his large wire frame glasses, slanted eyes, crooked nose, dark green yarmulke, and oversized ears looks out towards the right side as he reaches for a handkerchief with his right hand. The grandmother gazes blankly out somewhere in the distance, her arms clasped tightly together, her fleshy lips and large expressive eyes sharply contrasting with the myriad folds and creases that line her brow. She sits in a wooden chair and leans against a table laden with sponge cake, tea, and strawberries: the image of an ideal bubby. Both of these family members are surrounded by pastel green auras, a color that evokes a sense of freshness and youth to otherwise very elderly appearing individuals. It is at moments like these that Eisenstein's visual art takes precedence over the written word, communicating much with great economy.

While her portraits of family members are highly individualized renditions that display many idiosyncrasies, Eisenstein's self-representations appear quite differently (fig. 22). She creates a strangely universal-looking public self for the purposes of this autobiography. To re-iterate, autobiography publicizes the self, thereby making external what is internal. When we write about our past, we are also at the same time creating a persona that bridges the divides between childhood, adolescence, and adulthood. In Eisenstein's case, the concept of bridging different periods in one's life is a most apt description, for her self-representation de-stabilizes linear time, meandering back and forth between a child-like appearance and a much older look. In thinking about how to draw herself, the artist said: "I needed something that was strangely ageless."⁶³ By stripping away many facial features and reducing her self-portrait to cartoon-like minimalist features and geometric shapes, Eisenstein makes it intentionally difficult to

⁶³ Bernice Eisenstein and Ellen David. *I Was a Child of Holocaust Survivors*. DVD. Directed by Ann Marie Fleming. Toronto, Canada: National Film Board of Canada (NFB), 2010.

determine the age of her persona. She envisioned her persona with an ageless appearance to demonstrate her personal voyage through memory and her creative process: “How can I have all these different times and ages in memory be fluid?”⁶⁴ The creative process is fluid, and for Eisenstein to depict herself as one specific age would have made her graphic memoir more static. The nonlinear storyline of *I Was a Child of Holocaust Survivors* reflects this creative process, especially because it is structured thematically. The narrative is non-linear, rather each chapter has a title that conveys the subject of that particular section. For instance, there is a chapter on the legacy of the Holocaust called “Without the Holocaust”, and there are several chapters that focus on the artist’s relationships to specific family members, such as “I Was a Grandchild” or “Two Brothers, Two Sisters.” The reader can therefore open up this graphic memoir on any chapter and the story would remain coherent.

Memory is a subject that Eisenstein takes to heart, as we can see from the opening image of the story. Against a deep, inky black background is set a clearly outlined figure, that of a little girl – Eisenstein’s self-portrait – sitting pensively with her right elbow against her left forearm in a pose intentionally parallel to that of French sculptor Rodin’s *The Thinker* (fig. 23 & 24). Above her is a thought bubble inscribed with the following idea: “I am lost in memory. It is not a place that has been mapped, fixed by coordinates of longitude and latitude, whereby I can retrace a step and come to the same place again. Each time is different.”⁶⁵ The little girl contemplates this statement atop a small hill with words scrawled across – words in Yiddish. She later re-appears, in the very same pose,

⁶⁴ Bernice Eisenstein in an interview with the author, February 2012.

⁶⁵ Bernice Eisenstein. *I Was a Child of Holocaust Survivors*. Toronto, Ontario: McClelland & Stewart, 2006, p. 10.

much further in the book (fig. 25). This time, her thought bubble reads: “If only my parents had read books to me when I went to bed...”⁶⁶ And rather than sitting atop a formless mass of Yiddish words, she balances precariously on a stack of holocaust books. From these two images it is clear that Eisenstein stresses the importance of language with regards to re-animating the past. Language has historical implications and is rooted in a particular place and social group. The artist connects to her past through language, and her repetitive use of Yiddish words throughout the book evokes her parents’ East European heritage. In Eisenstein’s case, Yiddish is a memory of a past that has been destroyed and can only be evoked through the repetitive inscription of everyday expressions.

Much of the book is about Eisenstein trying to piece together her parents’ ruptured history. The first segment centers on the artist’s tense relationship with her father, whom she argued with incessantly about everything. She describes her father’s obsessive card playing and his increasingly destructive gambling habits. In the center of two pages is a colorful painting of an impeccably dressed man with thick dark hair and piercing blue eyes (fig. 26). This detailed portrait, both through prose and through actual painting, is powerful and evocative. Eisenstein’s father appears as a powerful figure surrounded by a pale blue aura that gazes out of her book, but not directly at the reader. Little is discovered about his past, ultimately.

In the second half of the book Eisenstein recounts her mother’s past, which is much less fragmented than that of her father’s. Regina Eisenstein had participated in the Archives of the Holocaust Project, an oral history project designed to preserve Holocaust

⁶⁶ Bernice Eisenstein. *I Was a Child of Holocaust Survivors*. Toronto, Ontario: McClelland & Stewart, 2006, p. 88.

survivor testimony for the future. Eisenstein inscribes and transcribes her mother's testimony word for word. This is one of the most heartfelt and evocative sections of the entire book, and there are no illustrations, only dry comfortless black text describing the horrors Regina endured: "I was told to put my left arm out, there is no feeling anymore. And I am tattooed. 54090. My sister is 54091 and my mother, 54092."⁶⁷ Afterwards, the mother tells of the work she was assigned to in the camp: "I was given a striped uniform, red kerchief, and marched off to work in a bloc called 'Canada'. It was my job to sort the heaps of possessions taken from people once they had arrived in the camp."⁶⁸ After going through her mother's difficult testimony, Eisenstein then shifts the tone of the remainder of the chapter. She draws an old photograph that she discovered of her mother in a black and white ink wash. Her mother, aunt, and grandmother sit side by side contentedly, their eyes fixed on a point outside the frame and their Holocaust tattoos clearly visible (fig. 27). An older looking version of Eisenstein's persona stands proudly below this with pencil and paintbrush in hand (fig. 28). A speech bubble declares:

"When I found this photo recently, I couldn't believe it. My mother, grandmother, and aunt posed as I had wanted to draw them – sitting close together, wearing watches, their numbers in a row. After I finished, I briefly saw something I'd never seen in them or never recognized – a kind of innocence, a lightness, as if their arms don't even carry the mark of the past."⁶⁹

⁶⁷ Bernice Eisenstein. *I Was a Child of Holocaust Survivors*. Toronto, Ontario: McClelland & Stewart, 2006, p. 106.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 108.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 113.

In this self-reflexive portrait, the artist represents her creative process and emphasizes her role as mediator of her family's legacy. With her oversized paintbrush, stylus, and pencil in her arms, Eisenstein illuminates the construction of her graphic memoir and points to photography as a source of inspiration for her memoir (much like Katin). Although the darkness of her grandmother, aunt, and mother's wartime experiences has left an indelible mark (literally) on their lives, this image marks a rare instance in Eisenstein's narrative where the past does not seem to negatively encroach on the present. Through this drawing, the artist shows her family transcending the darkness of the past and communicates a lightness of being. Perhaps it is the innocence that she glimpses in her mother that Eisenstein is trying to re-capture. Certainly the attempts to de-dramatize her life story and the Holocaust in particular support this hypothesis.

I Was a Child of Holocaust Survivors is punctuated by a dark sense of humor that is often quite provocative. In the beginning of the book, as she begins to acquaint herself with her family's past, Eisenstein refers to the dizzying and sometimes paralyzing effects of remembering the Holocaust: "The Holocaust is a drug and I have entered an opium den, having been given my first taste for free, innocently, by everyone else... I will discover that there is no end to the dealers I can find for just one more hit, one more entry into a hallucinatory world of ghosts."⁷⁰ Eisenstein does run the risk of trivializing the Holocaust when she compares it to hits of cocaine and describes the emotional cachet of telling others her parents survived Auschwitz. However, she does so with a kind of self-awareness that manifests itself directly in her drawings. For example, the artist depicts

⁷⁰ Bernice Eisenstein. *I Was a Child of Holocaust Survivors*. Toronto, Ontario: McClelland & Stewart, 2006, p. 20.

herself as a child declaring boldly, with one arm raised: “Hey, wait! Which is it? Thou shalt not take its name in vain or not take it into a vein?”⁷¹ Directly opposite on the next page is the biblical figure of Moses hurling a giant stone tablet letter “H” to the ground, as if the Holocaust were a list of commandments to be inscribed on the hearts of all Jews. This kind of playful humor is perhaps shocking or unforeseen in relation to such a grim topic, but it is also a way of desacralizing a serious historical event. Animation and media design expert Miriam Harris notes that humor “is an important tool for integrating the past and keeping the terror of the uncanny at bay; perpetuating the sanctity of the Holocaust maintains the distance of its horror and thereby strengthens the insidious power of the uncanny.”⁷² Just as memory can liberate us from our past, it can also imprison us in a world of ghosts. Remembering a painful period of our collective history can become a kind of self-administered pain that becomes increasingly addictive. Humor is a means of transcending the horrors of the past and taking control over personal pain.

Time fluctuates, bounces, and flickers like the flame of a candle in Eisenstein’s visual diary. The narrative skips back and forth between the artist’s childhood, adolescence, adulthood, and her present day reflections as she writes and draws her memoir. As Eisenstein astutely reflected in a recent interview, “The book is not linear – time is broken down. How do I represent time broken down?”⁷³ The a-temporal quality of

⁷¹ Bernice Eisenstein. *I Was a Child of Holocaust Survivors*. Toronto, Ontario: McClelland & Stewart, 2006, p. 22.

⁷² Miriam Harris. “Releasing the Grip of the Ghostly: Bernice Eisenstein’s *I Was a Child of Holocaust Survivors*. In Samantha Baskind & Ranen Omer-Sherman, eds. *The Jewish Graphic Novel: Critical Approaches*. New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2008, pp. 132.

⁷³ Bernice Eisenstein and Ellen David. *I Was a Child of Holocaust Survivors*. DVD. Directed by Ann Marie Fleming. Toronto, Canada: National Film Board of Canada (NFB), 2010.

the narrative is linked to the way in which Eisenstein approached her graphic memoir in its inception:

“I thought about [my father’s] past, then his experiences in the war... Things just started unfolding, opening up. What I’m really trying to describe in what happened is the process of memory. Many more people started populating my mind and I was having conversations with them. That conversation was painful, soulful, interesting – it wouldn’t let go.”⁷⁴

Some of these conversations Eisenstein describes were with people she had never even known: long lost relatives, family friends, and others who perished in the war. In discarding traditional notions of time, past and present co-exist simultaneously. Eisenstein portrays the dead and those who are still living side by side, with no distinction whatsoever (fig. 29). As a child of Holocaust survivors, she is confronted with a past that she has not lived through personally, but that she experiences indirectly and profoundly through her family’s mourning of absent relatives. This is a key characteristic of post-memory.

Marianne Hirsch described postmemory as a form of second-generation or inherited recollection: “[Postmemory] is a consequence of traumatic recall but (unlike post-traumatic stress disorder) at a generational remove.”⁷⁵ Often, the effects of postmemory are linked to children of immigrants and children of survivors of trauma or

⁷⁴ Bernice Eisenstein and Ellen David. *I Was a Child of Holocaust Survivors*. DVD. Directed by Ann Marie Fleming. Toronto, Canada: National Film Board of Canada (NFB), 2010.

⁷⁵ Marianne Hirsch. “The Generation of Postmemory.” *Poetics Today*, 29.1 (Spring 2008): 106, <http://www.columbia.edu/~mh2349/papers/generation.pdf>

war. The cover of *I Was a Child of Holocaust Survivors* depicts Eisenstein's ageless persona gazing dreamily out to one side. Her shadow is not her own; rather, it is split into two distinct silhouetted figures that emerge behind her. Eisenstein's shadow is that of her parents': "I have inherited the unbearable lightness of being a child of Holocaust survivors. Cursed and blessed. Black, white, and shadowed."⁷⁶ The intense desire to understand her parents' past, the feeling of being blessed to live in a better place and time, and the sense of duty to transmit these difficult memories is what inspired the artist to create her memoir. As anthropologist and memory scholar Marc Augé once said: "The duty of memory is the duty of the descendants, and it has two aspects: remembrance and vigilance."⁷⁷ For Eisenstein, her second-generation memories haunt her and insist on being expressed. For Hirsch, postmemory is intimately linked to photography and she states that this medium has played a crucial role in the transmission of the past.⁷⁸ In her analysis of inherited memory in Art Spiegelman's *Maus*, she focuses steadfastly on three instances of photographic collage in the otherwise famously drawn graphic novel. For Hirsch, these images epitomize the power of the photographic medium to re-animate and

⁷⁶ Bernice Eisenstein. *I Was a Child of Holocaust Survivors*. Toronto, Ontario: McClelland & Stewart, 2006, p. 167.

⁷⁷ Marc Augé in Jeffrey K. Olick, Vered Vinitzky-Seroussi, & Daniel Levy, eds. *The Collective Memory Reader*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2011, p. 473.

⁷⁸ "[The] history of the Holocaust has come down to us, in subsequent generations, through a vast number of photographic images meticulously taken by perpetrators eager to record their actions and also by bystanders and, often clandestinely, by victims. But it is the technology of photography itself, and the belief in reference it engenders, that connects the Holocaust generation to the generation after. Photography's promise to offer an access to the event itself, and its easy assumption of iconic and symbolic power, makes it a uniquely powerful medium for the transmission of events that remain unimaginable. And, of course, the photographic meaning of generation captures something of the sequencing and the loss of sharpness and focus inherent in postmemory." Marianne Hirsch in "The Generation of Postmemory." *Poetics Today*, 29.1 (Spring 2008): 107-108, <http://www.columbia.edu/~mh2349/papers/generation.pdf>

re-embody the past: “In *Maus*, the photograph of mother and son, a postwar image embedded in the inserted ‘Prisoner on the Hell Planet: A Case History,’ anchors and authenticates the work.”⁷⁹ Katin, Eisenstein, and Libicki all make use of photography at some point in their work and these images are not only important referents to past events, but also in some cases catalysts for recollection. However, I would argue against Hirsch that the depth and import of graphic memoirs like *Maus* rest solely on their inclusion of photography. Throughout her essay on Spiegelman’s work, Hirsch ignores how the structure and language of comic books themselves successfully mimic the procedure of memory. Graphic novels, with their dynamic interplay of text and image, are just as effective at transmitting memory as photographs, even if they do so without relying on realistic representation.

The rupture between the traumatic past of the older generation and the new life of the younger generation creates a fragmentation of time, space, and memory. Past and present are interspersed in Eisenstein’s book because trauma is something that continues to exert such a strong influence. This is precisely why she structured her memoir as she did: “I had no chronology, no laid-out sequence of events, in order for me to hold a newly found fragment and place it where it belonged.”⁸⁰ She attempts to fill this absence and longing with words and pictures. Although Eisenstein inherited her parents’ memories, she describes her utter sense of separation from what they experienced. In a powerful metaphor, she compares herself to “some Jewish Sisyphus, pushing history and memory

⁷⁹ Marianne Hirsch. “The Generation of Postmemory.” *Poetics Today*, 29.1 (Spring 2008): 120, <http://www.columbia.edu/~mh2349/papers/generation.pdf>

⁸⁰ Bernice Eisenstein. *I Was a Child of Holocaust Survivors*. Toronto, Ontario: McClelland & Stewart, 2006, p. 29.

uphill, wondering what I'm supposed to be..."⁸¹ The quality of being forever unable to reconcile her family's history with her present-day life in Canada is deeply related to a sense of being exiled from the past: "This condition of exile from the space of identity, this diasporic experience, is a characteristic aspect of postmemory."⁸² Ultimately, although postmemory affords a glimpse into a previous generation's trauma, it also creates an effect of isolation because these experiences can never be fully assimilated.

At the end of her graphic memoir, Eisenstein realizes that she will never be able to truly understand what her family experienced in Auschwitz. She is figuratively exiled from the land of a past that she does not personally know: "I will never be able to know the truth of what my parents had experienced."⁸³ Perhaps postmemory is the reason for the literary distance the reader feels when engaging with Eisenstein's graphic memoir. As Hirsch insightfully points out, "Postmemory is not identical to memory: it is "post," but at the same time, it approximates memory in its affective force."⁸⁴ Just as the artist is at a generational remove from her parents' traumatic past, so we are at a remove from her childhood memories. The bridge of time is one that cannot be crossed. Ultimately, we are reliant on shadows and indistinct mirror images of the past: traces of bygone eras that come down to us in photographs, objects, and stories.

⁸¹ Bernice Eisenstein. *I Was a Child of Holocaust Survivors*. Toronto, Ontario: McClelland & Stewart, p. 53.

⁸² Marianne Hirsch. *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative and Postmemory*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1997, p. 243.

⁸³ Bernice Eisenstein. *I Was a Child of Holocaust Survivors*. Toronto, Ontario: McClelland & Stewart, 2006, p. 178.

⁸⁴ Marianne Hirsch. "The Generation of Postmemory." *Poetics Today*, 29.1 (Spring 2008): 109, <http://www.columbia.edu/~mh2349/papers/generation.pdf>

CHAPTER THREE

Miriam Libicki and *Jobnik! An American Girl's Adventures in the Israeli Army*

Miriam Katin and Bernice Eisenstein have both provided a sense of how memory is visualized in the graphic novel. Katin's memoir takes place for the most part in Europe during the 1940s, while Eisenstein's work centers on her childhood in Toronto during the 1950s and 1960s. The third graphic memoir I look at does not revolve around the Holocaust, but instead belongs to the newest generation of emerging Jewish culture, one that portrays a young woman's voyage through Israel in the past decade. Vancouver-based artist Miriam Libicki was born in Columbus, Ohio and migrated to Israel when she was nineteen. She volunteered to serve in the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) for a number of years before returning to North America, where she received her Baccalaureate in Fine Arts from the Emily Carr Institute in 2006. After creating a series of short 'zines' (independently small-run comics) based on her diary during her time in the Israeli army, Libicki brought the chapters together and published her story in graphic novel format.⁸⁵ *Jobnik! An American Girl's Adventures in the Israeli Army* (fig. 30) is about a young woman's experience as a medical secretary on an army base during the start of the Second Intifada.

Libicki's memoir opens with a definition of the Israeli term 'jobnik', a derogatory name given to soldiers in the Israeli army with desk jobs. Throughout the book, the artist

⁸⁵ According to the artist, *Jobnik!* zine issues 1 through 6 were published between 2003 and 2007: "Pkida's Paradise" (Issue 1, Nov. 2003), "Hamas" (Issue 1, 2004), "Days of Awe" (Issue 2, Apr. 2005), "The Situation: Part 1" (Issue 3, Jul. 2005), "The Situation: Part 2" (Issue 4, Spring 2006), "Zona" (Issue 5, Summer 2006), and "American Dream" (Issue 6, Summer 2007).

showcases her relentless struggles in her relationships with men, Israeli culture, and her travels back to North America. The storyline is segmented and rather circular – the plot meanders between Libicki’s mundane office duties and her romantic escapades – mirroring the repetitiveness of army life. Although there are flashbacks, the chapters are organized chronologically from start to end, similarly to Katin’s memoir. In an interview with comics scholar Ranen Omer-Sherman, Libicki listed Joe Sacco’s *Palestine* (Fantagraphics, 1996), a graphic report of the Palestinian side of the Arab-Israeli conflict, as one of the catalysts for telling her own story: “It pissed me off a lot, but I knew my view was also too one-sided to contradict him much.”⁸⁶ This one-sided point of view of the conflict – in Libicki’s case, that of Israeli army life – is represented through a first-person narrative that revolves around the artist’s everyday adventures.

Many of Libicki’s drawings are heavily shaded – the shapes of people and objects clearly demarcated against grey or white backgrounds. All of the images are in black and white and were originally drawn in soft graphite pencil on Bristol paper before being digitally modified. *Jobnik!* is populated with a wide cast of short, thick-limbed characters. Nearly every single panel has at least one human figure in it, demonstrating Libicki’s propensity for drawing the human body. One of the artist’s most distinctive qualities is her ability to draw the body – and face in particular – in naturalistic poses, conveying an array of moods and emotions quite successfully: “I took nude drawing classes when I was fifteen, and there are few things I love more than human bodies.”⁸⁷

⁸⁶ Ranen Omer-Sherman. “A Conversation with Miriam Libicki.” In *The Jewish Graphic Novel: Critical Approaches*. Edited by Samantha Baskind & Ranen Omer-Sherman. New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2008, p. 244.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 246.

Libicki lists her major artistic influences as Will Eisner, Dave Sim, Terry Moore, and Phoebe Gloeckner: “Gloeckner’s books are, in my opinion, the pinnacle of women’s memoir comics”⁸⁸ Gloeckner’s own confessional style comics can easily be compared to Libicki’s, especially in how they both boldly represent sexual exploits. There is a very visceral, intimate quality to Libicki’s mark making. Her hand is clearly visible and gives the work a sketchy, highly textured appearance.

The use of text is also quite dynamic in the artist’s work. For the most part, imagery dominates the textual component of *Jobnik!*, although in certain particular cases the reverse is true, such as when Libicki pastes excerpts from news reports into the background. The handwriting is clear and in lower case script. When it is placed against a dark background it is written in white in an amorphous grey bubble meant to connote the protagonist’s unspoken thoughts (all in uppercase). Otherwise the text is mostly written in standard oval-shaped speech balloons. The panel shape and configuration vary greatly in Libicki’s graphic novel. She uses panels unconventionally and in irregular compositions.

Libicki’s representation of the human body is stylized in the way that most comic book drawings are. Most of her characters are bulky and cartoonish, their features magnified or caricatured for visual effect. They are highly individualized and have a realist quality to them at the same time, but Libicki reserves the photorealist scenes for skilled renditions of news photographs. When the Palestinian uprising first begins, for instance, the artist draws a series of highly detailed and emotional snapshots. One shows

⁸⁸ Ranen Omer-Sherman. “A Conversation with Miriam Libicki.” In *The Jewish Graphic Novel: Critical Approaches*. Edited by Samantha Baskind & Ranen Omer-Sherman. New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2008, p. 251.

a dozen or more Israeli security forces holding back a group of Palestinians who struggle and disappear into the bottom of the narrow panel (fig. 31). The news bite reads: “Four Palestinians are killed and some 200 wounded by security forces, while 29 Israeli policemen are lightly wounded...”⁸⁹ Even if she echoes the text visually, the imagery is not mere illustration. The overlaying of handwritten text, as well as the shape and drawing style all affect and transform the meaning of the scene. As comic book artist Will Eisner notes: “A narrow panel evokes the feeling of being hemmed in – confinement, whereas a wide panel suggests plenty of space in which to move – or escape. These are deep seated primitive feeling and work when used properly.”⁹⁰ Libicki’s panel evokes that sense of being trapped that goes along with her perception of the conflict. In the comic book, the artist can select and magnify a feeling or idea by making these kinds of stylistic choices.

Since the artist’s own self-representation figures so prominently in much of the graphic memoir, it is important to examine it as well. Libicki’s persona is a wide-eyed young woman who naively and often to her own detriment follows along with whatever her peers wish to do. Many of the illustrations depict the sexual exploits that Libicki, as a medical secretary, undergoes in the heavily masculine army culture (fig. 32).⁹¹ Despite these character flaws or perhaps because of them, Libicki’s persona is very likeable,

⁸⁹ Miriam Libicki. *Jobnik! An American Girl’s Adventures in the Israeli Army*. Coquitlam, British Columbia: Real Gone Girl Studios, 2008, p. 37.

⁹⁰ Will Eisner. *Comics and Sequential Art*. Tamarac, Florida: Poorhouse Press, 1985, p. 89.

⁹¹ “Maybe it was the fact that, in most units in the IDF, the boys far outnumber the girls, or maybe it is the hypermasculine IDF culture.” Miriam Libicki speaking in Ranen Omer-Sherman. “A Conversation with Miriam Libicki.” In *The Jewish Graphic Novel: Critical Approaches*. Edited by Samantha Baskind & Ranen Omer-Sherman. New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2008, p. 246.

displaying an innocence and adventurousness that give the work an aura of sincerity. Importantly, Libicki distinguishes between herself and her self-representation, or comic persona. In her essay “Jewish Memoir Goes, Pow! Zap! Oy!”, a short story told in comic form, Libicki says: “Comics Miriam is passive and lumpish.”⁹² Comics Miriam also engages in several acts for which she is later embarrassed, most of them sexual in nature. Libicki believes it is necessary to display one’s shame in a successful graphic memoir: “Shame, and certain acts widely recognized as shameful, need to take place onscreen to establish the protagonist as both grimly human and trustworthy.”⁹³ She speaks of her persona as if it were another person, a double that is not reflective of her true self. As I said in the introduction, creating an idealized public self, or imago, means that every self-characterization, as presented in autobiographical writing and drawing, inevitably creates a kind of double. This begs the question: Can an autobiographical persona ever truly communicate the self? To a certain degree, the answer is yes. The self is a life story that is complex and multifaceted, much like the comics medium, but it is only possible to communicate a certain amount of information in any artistic project. Some things are inevitably omitted or left behind. Ultimately, however, the articulation of the self through autobiographical self-representation allows the artist to create and establish a more coherent sense of identity. Noted comic book scholar Charles Hatfield thinks this is one of the main purposes of this genre of graphic novel: “Objectification of the self, through visual representation, may actually enable the autobiographer to articulate and uphold his

⁹² Miriam Libicki. “Jewish Graphic Memoir Goes Pow! Zap! Oy!” In *The Jewish Graphic Novel: Critical Approaches*. Edited by Samantha Baskind & Ranen Omer-Sherman. New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2008, p. 264.

⁹³ Ibid., p. 267.

or her own sense of identity.”⁹⁴ Comics *Miriam* is one aspect of the artist’s identity, but she is not representative of the artist as whole.

Libicki’s memoir focuses on her life in Israel and her movement through the world. She travels to her army base in Southern Israel, her home in Jerusalem, a concert in Toronto, and New York City. Much of the narrative shows the artist’s voyages on buses and at bus stations. At one point Libicki’s persona thinks: “Bus junction. Bus junction. My *life* is a bus junction.”⁹⁵ In her interview with Omer-Sherman she describes this endless kind of roaming as a form of rootlessness: “Canada is very comfortable, and I do feel ‘in exile’ – from both Jerusalem and Ohio.”⁹⁶ The sense of displacement or difference that arises out of migrating to a new country is manifested in how Libicki differentiates between Hebrew and English in *Jobnik!*. English speech is bracketed within balloons to indicate that the characters are not speaking the dominant language of Israel. Although this is a formal device, it also suggests a kind of double-consciousness associated with migration. There are numerous translations of typical Israeli expressions scattered throughout the narrative as well. Libicki even provides a useful glossary of terms at the end of the book for readers curious to know more.

The importance of migration and place are directly reflected in a series of drawings towards the middle of the second chapter (fig. 33). The artist depicts herself

⁹⁴ Charles Hatfield. *Alternative Comics: An Emerging Literature*. Jackson, Mississippi: University of Mississippi Press, 2005, p. 115.

⁹⁵ Miriam Libicki. *Jobnik! An American Girl’s Adventures in the Israeli Army*. Coquitlam, British Columbia: Real Gone Girl Studios, 2008, p. 144.

⁹⁶ Ranen Omer-Sherman. “A Conversation with Miriam Libicki.” In *The Jewish Graphic Novel: Critical Approaches*. Edited by Samantha Baskind & Ranen Omer-Sherman. New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2008, p. 249.

walking outside one night on her base and looking up at the stars: numerous six-pointed stars hang overhead. As she gazes up at the spectacle of the starry night sky, wide-mouthed and intent, she experiences an overwhelming sense of anxiety and dislocation: “That’s not possible. Those can’t be all the stars. I bet they’re – no. Dear god, where am I?”⁹⁷ The myriad lights hanging in the sky are suddenly transformed into giant warplanes, all drawn in vector-like patterns that take up the majority of the next page. Libicki’s persona is dwarfed in comparison as she stands below contemplating it all. This image is repeated in a slightly different way on the cover of the actual graphic novel, a bright watercolor painting of the same landscape. In this image we see young Miriam walking in the vast expanse of a desert, her head turned back to look at a row of silhouetted fighter jets. Once again, the sky has countless white stars, some of which have morphed into warplanes that are set in strange circular formations. The sky here is a deep violet blue; the stars, white, and the rest of the image is painted in rich earthy browns.

These drawings and paintings were inspired, visually-speaking, by a biblical illustration from the beginning of the 20th century by Art Nouveau artist Ephraim Moses Lilien (1874-1925), who created many works centered on Jewish themes and who helped to establish the first art school in Israel, Bezalel.⁹⁸ In Lilien’s print, titled *The Covenant of Abraham* (1908), he depicts an aged Abraham clutching his chest as he looks up the stars (fig. 34). The image is a reference to a portion in the Book of Genesis, where God takes Abraham outside and says: “Gaze, now, toward the Heavens, and count the stars if you

⁹⁷ Miriam Libicki. *Jobnik! An American Girl’s Adventures in the Israeli Army*. Coquitlam, British Columbia: Real Gone Girl Studios, 2008, pp. 44-45.

⁹⁸ Israel Museum, Jerusalem. “Ephraim Moses Lilien.” *Information Center for Israeli Art*, 1995-2012, <http://www.imj.org.il/artcenter/default.asp?artist=280739> [accessed 5 Mar., 2012].

are able to count them!’ And He said to him, ‘So shall your offspring be!’⁹⁹ In Libicki’s illustration, she represents herself in the place of the patriarch. When asked about what this picture meant to her, Libicki thoughtfully replied that it was a memory close to her heart that she had tried to depict on several occasions:

“It was the first time I remember looking up, at nighttime, on my base. I grew up in the suburbs of Ohio, where there was always atmospheric light. On that base in the middle of the Negev, there was zero. Or clouds either. There were easily ten times more stars visible than I’d ever seen before.”¹⁰⁰

Having never witnessed so many stars before, the experience came to symbolize an almost mystical experience akin to Abraham’s divine revelation. Libicki then unconsciously associated the bright lights with a military procession of sublime magnitude: a parade of thousands of fighter jets. The overwhelming anxiety and fear was intimately linked to the escalating conflict between Israelis and Palestinians, one that seemed to have no end in sight: “Seeing all those stars was not only surreal, it was terrifying and paranoia-inducing. I remember having the explicit thought: ‘Those can’t all be stars. They must be fighter jets flying over to the territories.’”¹⁰¹ The image is very powerful and haunting because it expresses that sense of foreboding and mystery so clearly. Since it is also the cover picture (and the only one in color at that), it becomes symbolic of Libicki’s entire experience.

⁹⁹ *The Stone Edition Tanach*. Edited by Rabbi Nosson Scherman. Brooklyn, New York: Mesorah Publications, 1998, p. 31.

¹⁰⁰ Miriam Libicki in an interview with the author, February 2012.

¹⁰¹ Miriam Libicki in an interview with the author, February 2012.

Time is fairly linear in the narrative progression of *Jobnik!*. Libicki dates her sequences much like a diary in order to give the reader a sense of movement. For this reason, the book reads both as a travelogue and as a visual diary. Libicki infuses her panels with a sense of simultaneity and weighty duration. For example, on page seventeen (fig. 35), she depicts one large panel that is actually divided into several moments. Her persona walks along the pavement carrying a heavy bag of papers over her shoulders. To her right is a soldier smoking a cigarette, his gun lying on the bench beside him, who engages Libicki in small talk. On the bottom right of the page, in a section of the image that could be read as another panel (but one that is not clearly divided from the whole image), we see the two conversing amicably. Interestingly, Libicki overlays her drawing of the soldier and depicts him in two separate positions at once – one of him actively engaged with the artist, and the other of him looking down with his eyes closed - mimicking the quick pace of everyday conversation and communicating the character's mannerisms in one stroke.

Another interesting use of time occurs in a sequence a few pages ahead, when Libicki is burning classified IDF documents in a large furnace (fig. 36). We see here the same image from multiple vantage points, the whole scene enclosed within a series of squares that are demarcated by tone (some are darker than others). In one shot, the artist demonstrates an entire day's work, centered on the image of a white, burning-hot sun in the middle of it all. She stretches the traditional concept of the comic book panel and uses the entire page, in fact, as one large meta-panel. In images such as these, it becomes clear that the use of time is very creative and potentially limitless, depending on the artist's perception and aesthetic to achieve its effect.

Memory is expressed differently in *Jobnik!* than it is in either Katin or Eisenstein's works. Much of this stems from the fact that the artist's memories are from a much more current life experience. Libicki wrote her memoir based on what she could remember, but some of the story was taken from old journals, photographs, and newspaper headlines. These news bites are quoted directly from the *Jerusalem Post* and *Ha'aretz* newspaper archives (two major English news sources in the country). When asked about her creative process in an email interview, Libicki described it as follows:

“From those resources, the news bites and the big messy pile of memories, I write an outline (on a square-ruled legal pad, usually taking up two pages) which breaks the story into weeks, dates & events. Once the outline is done, I read it through and draw brackets to break it down into pages. Once that is done, I write a page-by-page script on the following pages of the legal pad.”¹⁰²

This breaking down of the past into segments is noticeable in the very way that her memoir is structured. There are two narrative lines in Libicki's memoir: that of her own personal experiences as a secretary in the army, and the ongoing Second Intifada. They coalesce and sometimes coincide but never seem to fully meet. Even the different shapes used to convey speech as opposed to news suggest a disjointed perception of reality.

The rather choppy flow of the narrative in *Jobnik!* – the way it moves from one scene to another with no real connection between events except for temporal progression – is linked to the artist's experience of army life. The zines in the *Jobnik!* series are shorter publications that each represent a chapter in the artist's journey as an army

¹⁰² Miriam Libicki in an interview with the author, February 2012.

secretary. Unlike the full-length graphic novel, the drawings here are starker, perhaps because the shading is less nuanced. There are important sequences in these short publications that pertain very directly to the interpretation of the main work and the role of the media with regards to memory. In Issue 8, which was published in 2010, Libicki presents the reader with a vivid flashback of her basic training in the IDF before she was assigned to her position as medical secretary. To illustrate the endless repetition of army exercises and monotony of everyday life on a base, she draws on one page the same panel three times to symbolize three days (fig. 37). These three panels show her military superior holding up the curtain of the tent her and her colleagues sleep in, and yelling at all the soldiers to be ready in fifteen minutes. The lapse in time here displays the sameness and continuity of army life.

Another aspect of the artist's perception of reality arises out of the fragmentation of space, time, and narrative. This fracture is particularly evident in relation to Libicki's portrayal of the media, which occupies an important space in her story. Scott McCloud, comics artist and theorist, discusses the idea of gaps in his seminal book *Understanding Comics*, where he posits that our lived reality is based on the perception of bits and pieces of information: "All of us perceive the world as a whole through the experience of our senses. Yet our senses can only reveal a world that is fragmented and incomplete... Our perception of 'reality' is an act of faith, based on mere fragments."¹⁰³ As her persona undergoes various adventures on a daily basis, news reports hover consistently overhead in jagged-edged bubbles that actively encroach on comics Miriam's personal space. Current events not only intrude on daily life, they are also visually juxtaposed throughout

¹⁰³ Scott McCloud. *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*. New York, NY: HarperPerennial, 1994, p. 62.

the book to indicate their effect on the narrator. One perfect example of this phenomenon occurs towards the middle of the book when comics Miriam sits down to read a newspaper (fig. 38). The letters, all neatly typed in newsprint style, act as a background that seems to overwhelm and almost swallow the young woman. The text takes on a kind of chaotic order that engulfs everything and is purposely difficult for the reader to properly assimilate, mimicking the traumatic effects that the continuing violence is having on Libicki. Some of the words are obscured by the protagonist, while others are cut off by the edges of panels and a lone speech balloon at the very end of the page. The act of reading and understanding comics is intimately linked to the way in which we perceive only parts of reality but are still able to formulate a complete mental picture. Formally speaking, the act of osmosis that occurs when we join two or more disparate elements to create a whole is what McCloud calls *closure*. Closure is something that we accomplish on a daily basis, and it is directly linked to our stored experiences of the world. Comic books in turn make visible this process in their visual language: “Comics panels fracture both time and space, offering a jagged, staccato rhythm of unconnected moments. But closure allows us to connect these moments and mentally construct a continuous, unified reality.”¹⁰⁴ In other words, the act of closure is closely related to the process of memory and of storytelling.

Closure becomes more difficult when the enormity of the events surrounding us cannot be fully articulated. Interestingly, Libicki reacts to the constant barrage of news with a kind of numbness and dissociation that becomes increasingly evident as the story progresses. On page 85 she draws four panels (fig. 39), each with a large television

¹⁰⁴ Scott McCloud. *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*. New York, NY: HarperPerennial, 1994, p. 67.

screen in the center against dark backgrounds. The top panel shows the television facing straight out at the reader. As panels move towards the bottom of the page, they turn slowly to the right until we finally see the artist's persona staring blankly at the screen. In tiny white letters she writes: "I can't feel anything. I can't feel a thing."¹⁰⁵ This sense of being unable to emotionally connect to the events around her because of the flooding of information is particularly well discussed in Issue 9, where Miriam is already halfway through her service and has just been promoted to the rank of corporal. She is then sent to 'relax' with a quarter of her base at an amusement park in Ashkelon. On the bus there a news caption reads:

"The new Israelis don't want to know what is going on. They don't listen to the news. 'I stopped reading the paper' is a common new Israeli expression. Retreating into an intensely self-absorbed and narrowly concerned world, these new Israelis consider life wonderful as long as you and your loved ones are not victims of the reality that you flee, as long as you survive every day without being hurt in a terrorist act."¹⁰⁶

At the same time, we see Libicki's comic self going on a 'vacation' and relaxing by a pool with other soldiers. An amusement park – a fenced-in conglomeration of rides and attractions – is an artificial environment that is intended to simulate childhood. Even the name of the place - 'Luna Park' – is evocative of the kind of escapism Libicki describes

¹⁰⁵ Miriam Libicki. *Jobnik! An American Girl's Adventures in the Israeli Army*. Coquitlam, British Columbia: Real Gone Girl Studios, 2008, p. 85.

¹⁰⁶ Miriam Libicki. *Jobnik! Support Our Troops*, Issue 9. Coquitlam, British Columbia: Real Gone Girl Studios, 2011, p. 19.

that comes as a reaction to war and violence. She and her compatriots visit Luna (the Moon) and enjoy getting drunk on the beach, sunbathing, and attending a foam party (fig. 40). When asked about how the media affected her memories of this time in her life, Libicki stated: “If the violence never ends, and you feel powerless to stop it, why not write navel-gazing novels or go to a rave on the beach ... after all?”¹⁰⁷ Media saturation colors the artist’s understanding of the past and completely alters her perspective of her life experiences. Libicki focuses intensely on herself and her personal relationships throughout most of her graphic memoir and demonstrates this kind of reaction to recent trauma, although *Jobnik!* is much more than simply a ‘navel-gazing’ exercise, as she so aptly put it.

In “The Edge of Memory: Literary Innovation and Childhood Trauma,” Susan Rubin Suleiman, a professor of comparative literature, examines testimony and autobiography in relation to trauma, especially as these relate to child Holocaust survivors. She argues that children’s existence during the Holocaust was fractured because they had to hide their identity at such a young age. This fragmented sense of self, Suleiman continues, translates directly into the ways in which these individuals have represented themselves in the autobiographic genre. However, Suleiman also notes that this splitting of the self is not limited to the Holocaust but can also include other encounters with war and violence. The author also lays out an interesting concept in relation to traumatic memory, the idea of ‘saying while not saying’: “I propose to call the paradoxical figure of affirmation and denial, of saying and not saying, by its rhetorical

¹⁰⁷ Miriam Libicki in an interview with the author, February 2012.

name: preterition.”¹⁰⁸ In other words, preterition emerges as an after-effect of trauma, making it impossible for the individual to articulate the enormity of the event they have experienced. The splitting of the self that characterizes preterition, which affirms reality while at the same time suspending it, manifests itself in the way *Jobnik!* is divided between two distinct narratives: that of Libicki’s personal relationships and the everyday monotony of secretary tasks, *and* the insistent hovering presence of news media describing in shocking detail the unfurling conflict and violence.

Nowhere is this disjuncture seen more clearly than in the beginning of the third chapter of *Jobnik!* in a centerfold where the artist depicts herself staring into a television screen with a fellow soldier (fig. 41). The drawing is heavily shaded, while the screen is blindingly bright and almost white. A stylized caption written in font that is intentionally reminiscent of horror films reads “The Situation.” The chapter opens with the following disclaimer:

The terror attacks and the horrible stories and pictures from the Palestinian side have been so constant in the last few weeks that they almost fade into the background. I hear how many killed, I am sad for a second, then I go numb again. On the news, they call it ‘the current situation,’ or just ‘The Situation.’”¹⁰⁹

The news report then proceeds to describe in gruesome detail a British photographer’s eyewitness account of the lynching of two Israeli soldiers: “The lower part of his body

¹⁰⁸ Susan Rubin Suleiman. “The Edge of Memory: Literary Innovation and Childhood Trauma.” In *The Future of Memory*. Edited by Richar Crownshaw, Jane Kilby, and Anthony Rowland. New York, NY: Berghahn Books, 2010, p. 101.

¹⁰⁹ Miriam Libicki. *Jobnik! An American Girl’s Adventures in the Israeli Army*. Coquitlam, British Columbia: Real Gone Girl Studios, 2008, p. 52.

was on fire, and the upper part had been shot at, and the head beaten so badly that it was a pulp, like red jelly.”¹¹⁰ Comics Miriam sits hunched over on a sofa, her arms crossed, beside Asher (one of the men she later develops a relationship with) as they listen to the witness’s horrific account. On the wall behind them is a poster of Michelangelo’s *Creation of Adam* (ca. 1511). Like a terribly absurd soap opera, the jagged-edged news bubbles continue with their relentless description of bloody murder as the young man next to Miriam places his hand on her thigh. The juxtaposition between the shocking violence on the television and Asher’s sexual advance is incredibly jarring.

The traumatic violence of war shown throughout Libicki’s series illustrates how coping with a painful reality can manifest itself in a graphic memoir.¹¹¹ As Suleiman points out, “preterition simply keeps repeating that it is impossible to say what must be said, that there will never be a language adequate to express the enormity of the event.”¹¹² Libicki was in the center of the conflict as it erupted and unfolded. Although her witnessing of the events she describes is in many ways mediated by news reports and live coverage, these events nonetheless exert a profound influence on her life. *Jobnik!* is a poignant statement that questions the effects of endless violence and war that we witness so often, on a daily basis even, through our news media outlets.

¹¹⁰ Miriam Libicki. *Jobnik! An American Girl’s Adventures in the Israeli Army*. Coquitlam, British Columbia: Real Gone Girl Studios, 2008, p. 52.

¹¹¹ “I could identify even at the time this anxiety flattening into numbness, which became indistinguishable from clinical depression.” Miriam Libicki in an interview with the author, February 2012.

¹¹² Susan Rubin Suleiman. “The Edge of Memory: Literary Innovation and Childhood Trauma.” In *The Future of Memory*. Edited by Richar Crownshaw, Jane Kilby, and Anthony Rowland. New York, NY: Berghahn Books, 2010, p. 104.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

What is memory and what does it mean to remember? Through their work, Miriam Katin, Bernice Eisenstein, and Miriam Libicki have demonstrated that there is no simple answer to this question. In fact, each person's encounter with their past is unique and evolves according to the needs of the present, just as each artist visualizes memory and reality in a completely different way. The narrative structures of *We Are on Our Own*, *I Was a Child of Holocaust Survivors*, and *Jobnik!* correlate directly to the artists' creative conception of time and the past. Katin's book is composed in a mostly linear fashion, beginning with her peaceful upbringing in Budapest that is then shattered by war, a sudden escape to the countryside, and ending with her being reunited with her father. This overarching storyline is fragmented in the sense that it is interrupted several times by jarring colorful flash forwards into the future, where the artist depicts her family and their peaceful life in New York. Eisenstein's memoir, on the other hand, is structured thematically: each chapter reflects on a different aspect of the artist's family or her childhood along Spadina avenue. Time is re-conceptualized as a highly malleable and fluid realm that has no specific order. The past coexists with the present and continues to overshadow her life in Canada. With regards to structure and time, Libicki's memoir is similar to Katin's in that it also proceeds chronologically, functioning much like a visual diary. However, her storyline is disjointed in another way, specifically in how she juxtaposes her personal relationships against the escalating Arab-Israeli conflict. The pervasive all-encompassing presence of news media colors and shapes her understanding of her lived reality.

Memory is part and parcel of the Jewish tradition; it is even seen as a moral imperative. In the introduction to their book, *Autobiographical Memory and the Construction of a Narrative*, Robyn Fivush and Catherine Haden declare that the construction of life narratives is influenced primarily by cultural understandings of self. In other words, they maintain that autobiographical memory is formed through social interaction: “If narratives are a critical link between memory and self, then it becomes apparent that the roles of language and social interaction are paramount.”¹¹³ Reminiscing is a means of presenting ourselves to others and demarcating our identities.¹¹⁴ Ultimately, being a Jew navigating the landscape and adventures of modern life influences memory and therefore artistic production. We cannot fully divorce ourselves from our upbringing and culture, even if we may choose to stand in opposition to our family’s past. Omer Ranen-Sherman and Samantha Baskind laid out specific narrative themes with regards to the Jewish graphic novel – mobility, flight, adaptation, transformation, disguise, and metamorphosis – as I discussed briefly in the introduction.¹¹⁵ Katin, Eisenstein, and Libicki’s stories are all told from a first-person autobiographical perspective, and all include Jewish themes. Katin and Libicki’s memoirs include references to the Book of Genesis as well as Jewish prayers and Hebrew writing. Eisenstein’s memoir depicts Jewish family traditions like Bar Mitzvahs, Yahrzeits (funeral anniversaries), and Sabbath dinners.

¹¹³ Robyn Fivush and Catherine A. Haden, eds. *Autobiographical Memory and the Construction of a Narrative*. Mahwah, New Jersey: L. Erlbaum, 2003, p. viii.

¹¹⁴ Robyn Fivush and Catherine A. Haden, eds. *Autobiographical Memory and the Construction of a Narrative*. Mahwah, New Jersey: L. Erlbaum, 2003.

¹¹⁵ Samantha Baskind & Ranen Omer-Sherman, eds. *The Jewish Graphic Novel: Critical Approaches*. New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2008, p. xvii.

The issue of trauma is one that re-surfaces consistently in all three graphic memoirs. Feminist scholar Hillary Chute notes that “[the] stories to which women’s graphic narrative is dedicated are often traumatic: the cross-discursive form of comics is apt for expressing that difficult register, which is central to its importance as an innovative genre of life writing.”¹¹⁶ Certainly this theme is clearly visible in Katin’s first-hand account of survival amid the war and her harrowing escape through the Hungarian countryside with her mother. The inherited remembrances of the previous generation haunt Eisenstein, who reflects on her mother’s testimony in the concentration camps, as well as on her father’s silence regarding his time in Auschwitz. As the youngest of the three artists, Libicki represents a more contemporary experience of Jewish culture, notably one that is not fixated on a traumatic past. However, the escalating war and everyday subjection to the ongoing violence in themselves become a new kind of trauma that cannot be assimilated in the same way as Katin and Eisenstein because of their immediacy. Libicki’s memories of the Second Intifada, which she experiences both through the news media and as someone living in Israel, are still fresh in her mind. There is a kind of distance that occurs with time that allows one to reflect differently on the self and life story. In many ways, Katin, Eisenstein, and Libicki’s works together encapsulate the dynamic evolution of Jewish life over the past century in North America.

Another interesting motif that connects these three works, and that also belongs to the sphere of Jewish graphic novel as defined by Omer-Sherman and Baskind, is that of mobility. The theme of migration emerges in Katin, Eisenstein, and Libicki’s memoirs. All three artists develop the theme of the diasporic journey, which according to Sociology

¹¹⁶ Hillary L. Chute. *Graphic Women: Life Narrative & Contemporary Comics*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2010, p. 2.

professor Avtar Brah, “are essentially about settling down, about putting roots ‘elsewhere.’”¹¹⁷ In her book, *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities*, Brah discusses the concept of diaspora and diaspora space and how the notion of home is implicit in the idea of mobility and migration. Katin settles in New York, Eisenstein in Toronto (through her parents’ diasporic journey), and Libicki in Israel.¹¹⁸ Interestingly, all three artists also demonstrate Brah’s concept of home: “[Autobiographical] accounts demonstrate how the same geographical and psychic space comes to articulate different ‘histories’ and how ‘home’ can simultaneously be a place of safety and of terror.”¹¹⁹ For Katin, Budapest is “a city of lights, culture and elegance,”¹²⁰ while at the same time being a site that she has to flee in order to survive. For Eisenstein, the ‘home’ she can never return to, but nevertheless revisits through her family’s cultural heritage, is that of Eastern Europe. Finally, for Libicki, the ‘home’ that she makes her own in Israel is disrupted by the fear of ongoing terrorist attacks. These graphic memoirs illustrate the often ambiguous and contradictory associations of migratory experiences: that they are sometimes traumatic and sudden, but also that they may lead to a fresh start in a new land.¹²¹

¹¹⁷ Avtar Brah. “Diaspora, Border and Transnational Identities.” In *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities*. New York: Routledge, 1996, p. 182.

¹¹⁸ Libicki did move back to North America and currently lives in Vancouver. However, in *Jobnik!* she represented her journey to the Middle East.

¹¹⁹ Avtar Brah. “Diaspora, Border and Transnational Identities.” In *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities*. New York: Routledge, 1996, p. 180.

¹²⁰ Miriam Katin. *We Are on Our Own*. Montreal: Drawn & Quarterly, 2006, p. 7.

¹²¹ As Brah states: “The word diaspora often invokes the imagery of traumas of separation and dislocation, and this is certainly a very important aspect of the migratory experience. But diasporas are also potentially the sites of hope and new beginnings. They are contested cultural

In the end, autobiography is not only a way for us to reflect on our life stories, but also a way for us to extend our memories and recover a sense of the past. The parameters and structures of writing, and language in particular are necessary, but may not truly convey the complexities of a human being. Is language an ideal vehicle for the expression of identity? As former English professor Susanna Egan articulates in her book, *Burdens of Proof*: “Can a text refer precisely to an author outside the text, or does the language of the text produce the autobiographer, who as a living person has in effect been replaced by the text?”¹²² Miriam Katin, Bernice Eisenstein, and Miriam Libicki’s autobiographical graphic novels have demonstrated the incredible elasticity of a medium that is really beginning to blossom. Combining text and image – language and art – to both visually and textually represent one’s life story presents us with a dynamic way to access the past. As Libicki says in her essay on graphic memoirs: “Comics often make use of surrealism and symbolism, which are much harder to pull off in autobiography told straight.”¹²³ It is perhaps the surrealist quality of these graphic memoirs that so successfully captures the essence of how we envision the past, which arises not only in everyday lived realities, but also in our dreams, hopes, and imagination. The comic book medium acts as a witness to personal history; it becomes a metaphor for memory and remembering. Memory studies

and political terrains where individual and collective memories collide, reassemble and reconfigure.” In Avtar Brah. “Diaspora, Border and Transnational Identities.” In *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities*. New York: Routledge, 1996, p. 193.

¹²² Susanna Egan. “Doubting Thomas: The Implications of Imposture in Autobiography.” In *Burdens of Proof: Faith, Doubt, and Identity in Autobiography*. Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2011, p. 5.

¹²³ Miriam Libicki. “Jewish Graphic Memoir Goes Pow! Zap! Oy!” In *The Jewish Graphic Novel: Critical Approaches*. Edited by Samantha Baskind & Ranen Omer-Sherman. New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2008, p. 262.

theorist Jeffrey K. Olick sums it up quite nicely: “How is the self of yesterday connected to the self of today and of tomorrow? Only by memory.”¹²⁴ Likewise, *We Are on Our Own, I Was a Child of Holocaust Survivors*, and *Jobnik!* are connected as stories by the long winding thread of memory, which, according to Walter Benjamin, “supplies the net which all stories together form in the end.”¹²⁵ Our awareness of the past is intimately linked to our understanding of the world, the ever-elusive present, and what may happen down the road. It is through our knowledge of the past that we build our future.

¹²⁴ Jeffrey K. Olick; Vered Vinitzky-Seroussi; Daniel Levy, eds. *The Collective Memory Reader*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011, p. 177.

¹²⁵ Benjamin, Walter. “The Storyteller: Reflections on the Works of Nikolai Leskov.” Translated by Harry Zohn. *Chicago Review*, 16.1 (Winter-Spring 1963): 92.

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FIGURES

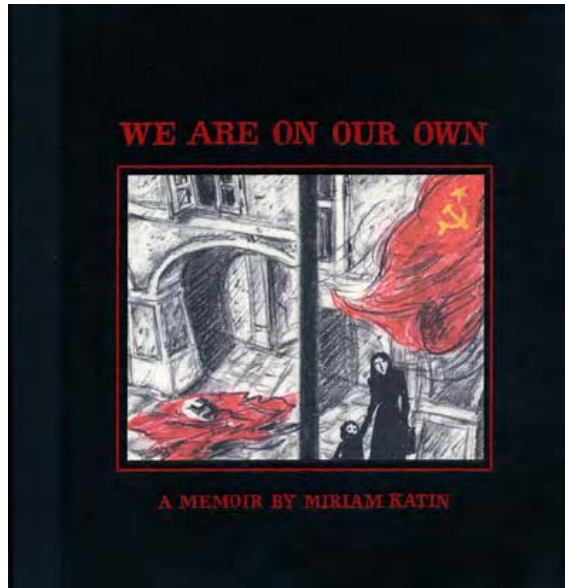


Figure 1. Miriam Katin. *We Are on Our Own*. Montreal: Drawn & Quarterly, 2006, cover image.



Figure 2. Miriam Katin. *We Are on Our Own*. Montreal: Drawn & Quarterly, 2006, p. 49.

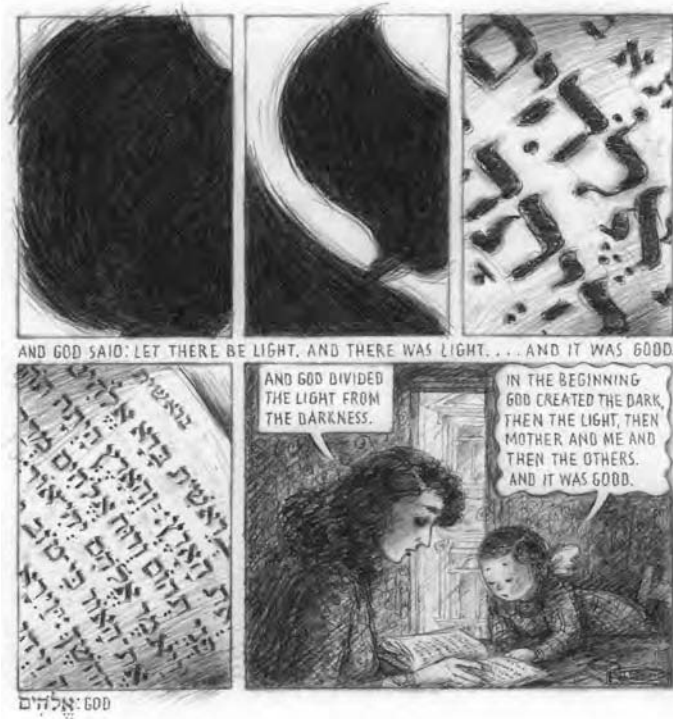


Figure 3. Miriam Katin. *We Are on Our Own*. Montreal: Drawn & Quarterly, 2006, p. 4.



Figure 4. Miriam Katin. *We Are on Our Own*. Montreal: Drawn & Quarterly, 2006, p. 101.

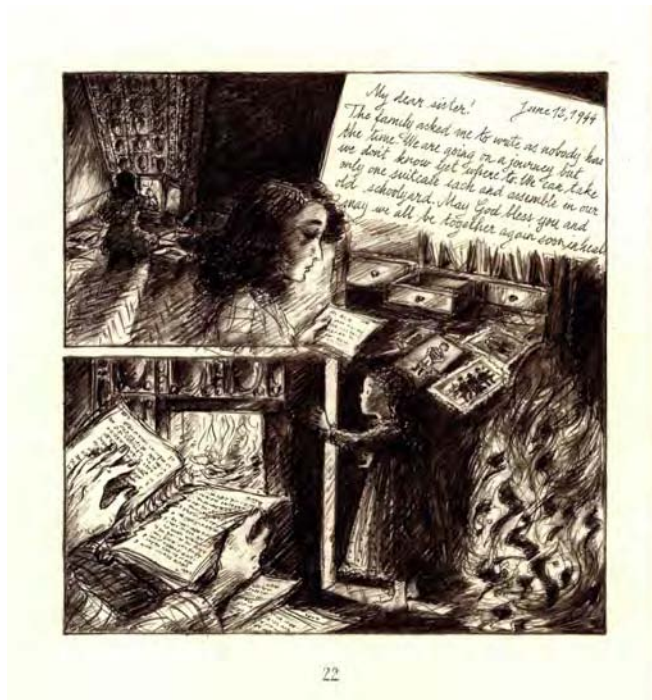


Figure 5. Miriam Katin. *We Are on Our Own*. Montreal: Drawn & Quarterly, 2006, p. 22.



Figure 6. Miriam Katin. *We Are on Our Own*. Montreal: Drawn & Quarterly, 2006, p. 69.



Figure 7. Miriam Katin. *We Are on Our Own*. Montreal: Drawn & Quarterly, 2006, p. 41.



Figure 8. Miriam Katin. *We Are on Our Own*. Montreal: Drawn & Quarterly, 2006, p. 49.



Figure 9. Miriam Katin. *We Are on Our Own*. Montreal: Drawn & Quarterly, 2006, p. 129.

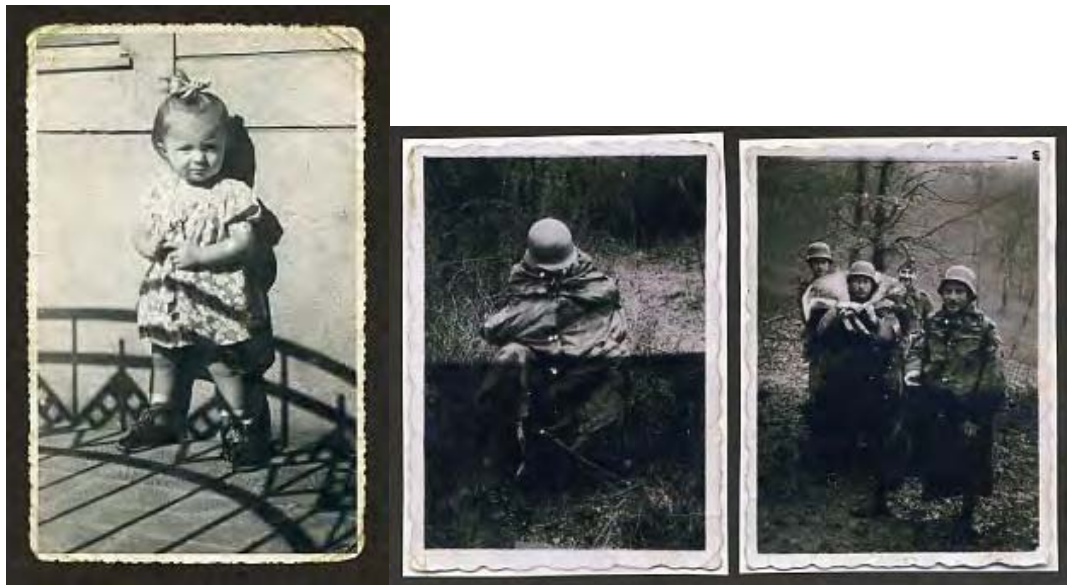


Figure 10. Miriam Katin as a young child and her father in soldier uniform. Photographs courtesy of the artist.



Figure 11. Miriam Katin. *We Are on Our Own*. Montreal: Drawn & Quarterly, 2006, 12.



Figure 12. Miriam Katin. *We Are on Our Own*. Montreal: Drawn & Quarterly, 2006, 50.



Figure 13. Kathe Kollwitz, *Mother with Child* (1933), Photo courtesy of Wikipaintings.



Figure 14. Miriam Katin. *We Are on Our Own*. Montreal: Drawn & Quarterly, 2006, p. 63.

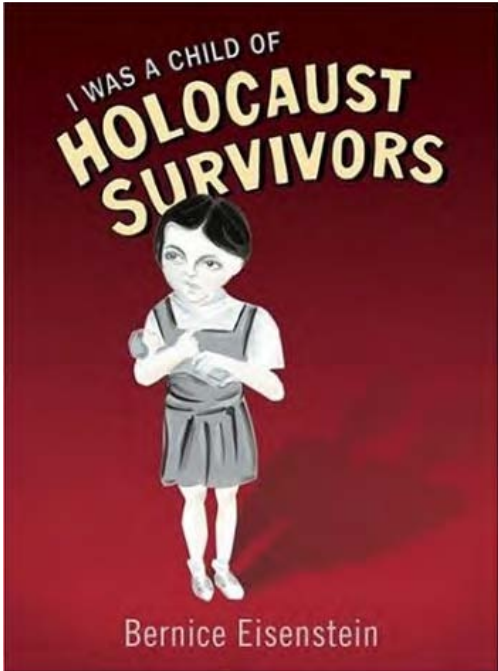


Figure 15. Bernice Eisenstein. *I Was a Child of Holocaust Survivors*. Toronto, Ontario: McClelland & Stewart, 2006, cover image.



Figure 16. Bernice Eisenstein. *I Was a Child of Holocaust Survivors*. Toronto, Ontario: McClelland & Stewart, 2006, p. 7.



Figure 17. Bernice Eisenstein. *I Was a Child of Holocaust Survivors*. Toronto, Ontario: McClelland & Stewart, 2006, p. 80.



Figure 18. Bernice Eisenstein. *I Was a Child of Holocaust Survivors*. Toronto, Ontario: McClelland & Stewart, 2006, p. 39.



Figure 19. Bernice Eisenstein. *I Was a Child of Holocaust Survivors*. Toronto, Ontario: McClelland & Stewart, 2006, p. 138.

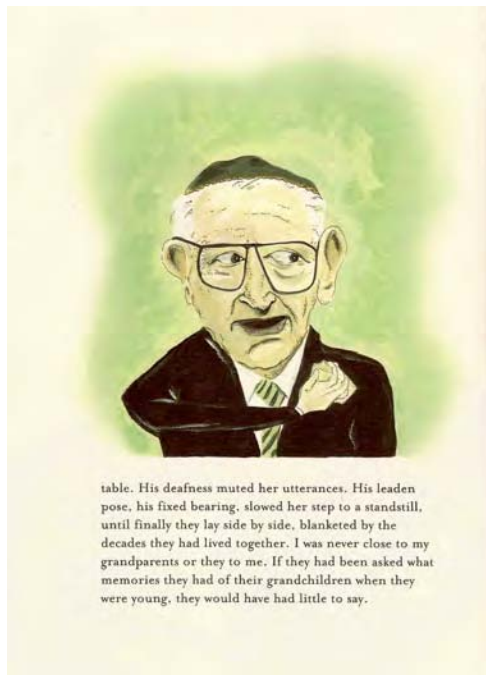


Figure 20. Bernice Eisenstein. *I Was a Child of Holocaust Survivors*. Toronto, Ontario: McClelland & Stewart, 2006, p. 118.

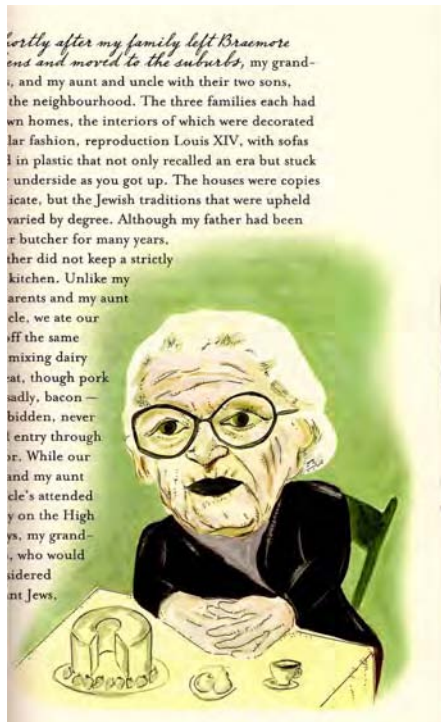


Figure 21. Bernice Eisenstein. *I Was a Child of Holocaust Survivors*. Toronto, Ontario: McClelland & Stewart, 2006, p. 119.



Figure 22. Bernice Eisenstein. *I Was a Child of Holocaust Survivors*. Toronto, Ontario: McClelland & Stewart, 2006, p. 70.



Figure 23. Bernice Eisenstein. *I Was a Child of Holocaust Survivors*. Toronto, Ontario: McClelland & Stewart, 2006, p. 10.

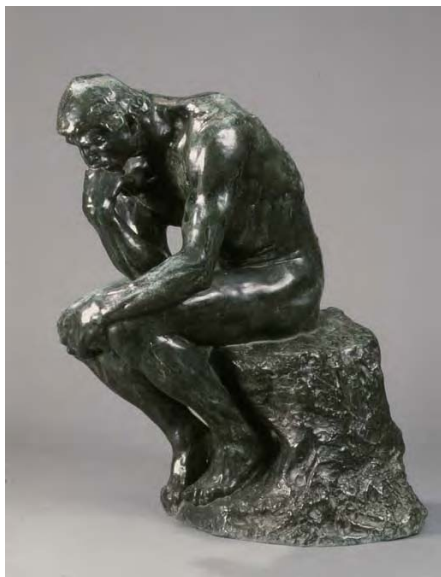


Figure 24. Auguste Rodin. *The Thinker* (1880), Photo courtesy of the Art Gallery of Ontario.



Figure 25. Bernice Eisenstein. *I Was a Child of Holocaust Survivors*. Toronto, Ontario: McClelland & Stewart, 2006, p. 88.

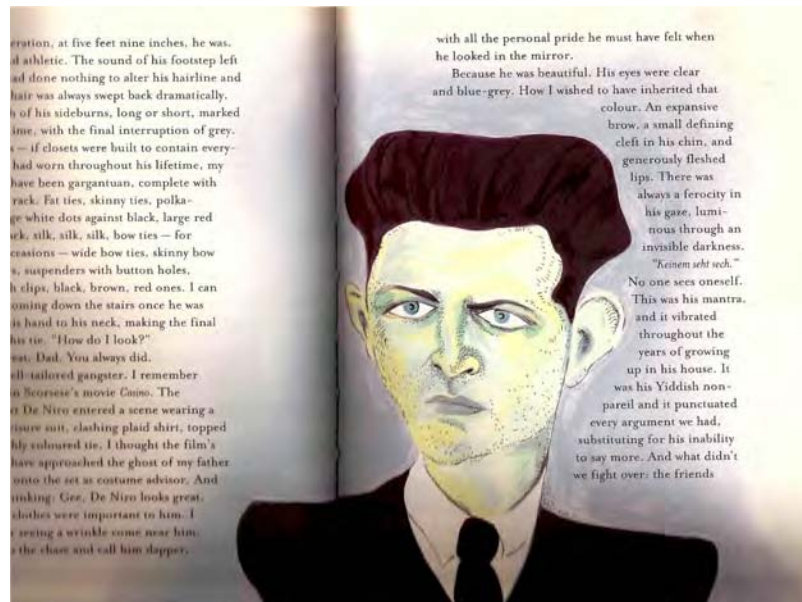


Figure 26. Bernice Eisenstein. *I Was a Child of Holocaust Survivors*. Toronto, Ontario: McClelland & Stewart, 2006, p. 30-31.



Figure 27. Bernice Eisenstein. *I Was a Child of Holocaust Survivors*. Toronto, Ontario: McClelland & Stewart, 2006, p. 112.



Figure 28. Bernice Eisenstein. *I Was a Child of Holocaust Survivors*. Toronto, Ontario: McClelland & Stewart, 2006, p. 113.



Figure 29. Bernice Eisenstein. *I Was a Child of Holocaust Survivors*. Toronto, Ontario: McClelland & Stewart, 2006, p. 168.

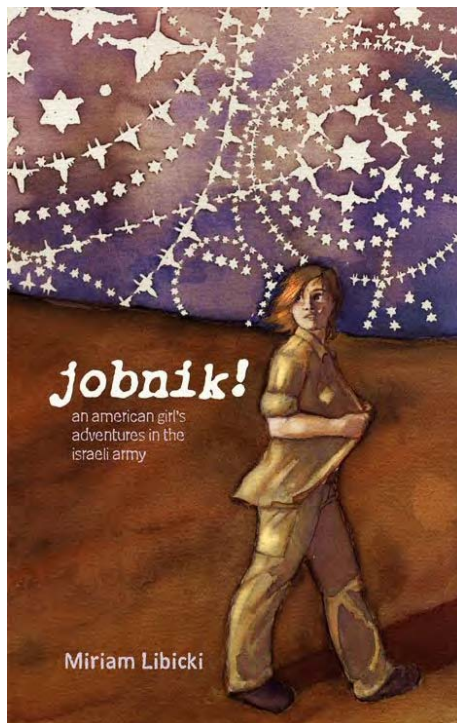


Figure 30. Miriam Libicki. *Jobnik! An American Girl's Adventures in the Israeli Army*. Coquitlam, British Columbia: Real Gone Girl Studios, 2008, cover image.



Figure 31. Miriam Libicki. *Jobnik! An American Girl's Adventures in the Israeli Army*. Coquitlam, British Columbia: Real Gone Girl Studios, 2008, p. 37.

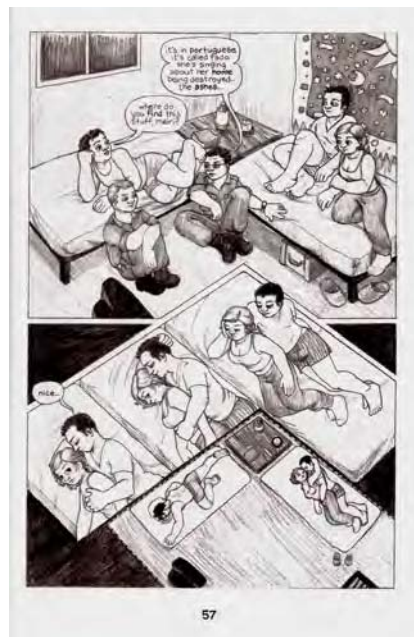


Figure 32. Miriam Libicki. *Jobnik! An American Girl's Adventures in the Israeli Army*. Coquitlam, British Columbia: Real Gone Girl Studios, 2008, p. 57.

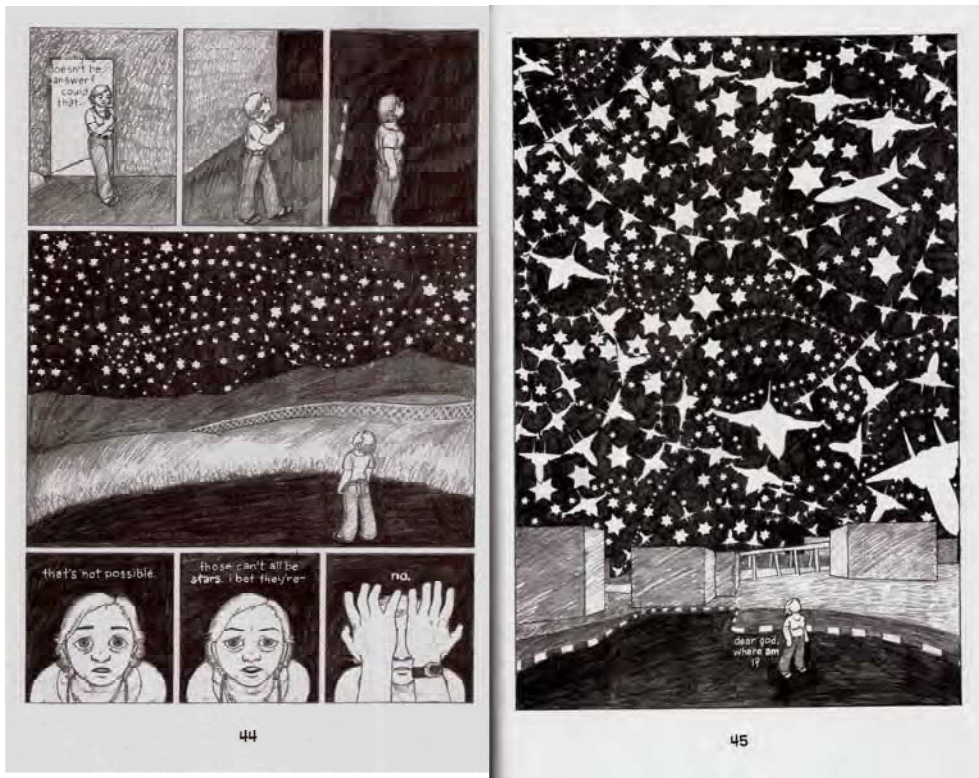


Figure 33. Miriam Libicki. *Jobnik! An American Girl's Adventures in the Israeli Army*. Coquitlam, British Columbia: Real Gone Girl Studios, 2008, pp. 44-45.

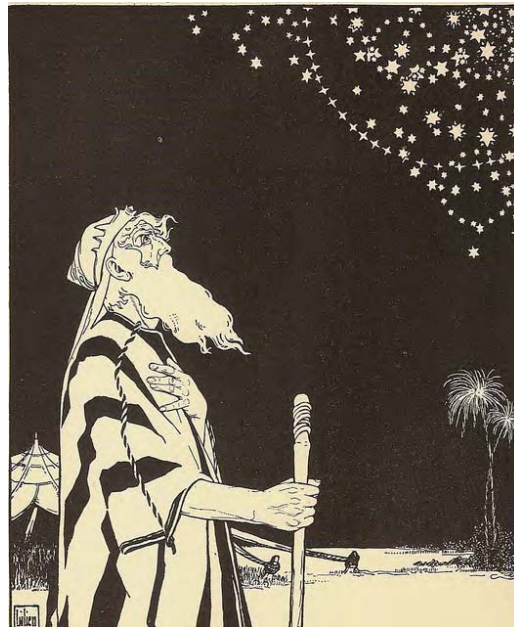


Figure 34. Ephraim Moses Lilien, *The Covenant of Abraham* (1908), Photo courtesy of Blue Beat 1.



Figure 35. Miriam Libicki. *Jobnik! An American Girl's Adventures in the Israeli Army*. Coquitlam, British Columbia: Real Gone Girl Studios, 2008, p. 17.

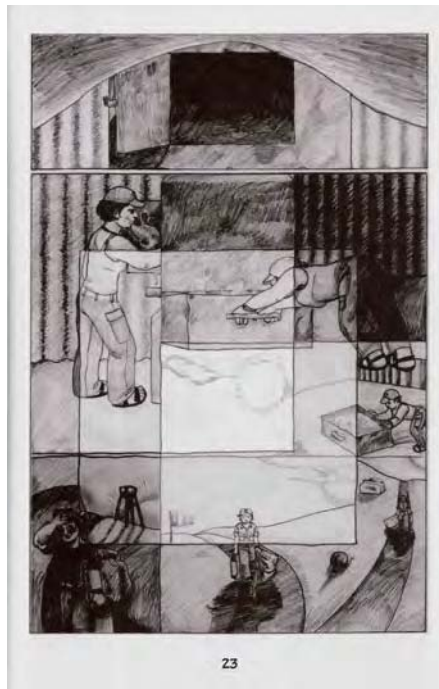


Figure 36. Miriam Libicki. *Jobnik! An American Girl's Adventures in the Israeli Army*. Coquitlam, British Columbia: Real Gone Girl Studios, 2008, p. 23.



Figure 37. Miriam Libicki. *Jobnik! Twelve Little Girls in Two Straight Lines*, Issue 8. Coquitlam, British Columbia: Real Gone Girl Studios, 2010, p. 14.



Figure 38. Miriam Libicki. *Jobnik! An American Girl's Adventures in the Israeli Army*. Coquitlam, British Columbia: Real Gone Girl Studios, 2008, p. 63.



Figure 39. Miriam Libicki. *Jobnik! An American Girl's Adventures in the Israeli Army*. Coquitlam, British Columbia: Real Gone Girl Studios, 2008, p. 85.



Figure 40. Miriam Libicki. *Jobnik! Support Our Troops*, Issue 9. Coquitlam, British Columbia: Real Gone Girl Studios, 2011, p. 20.

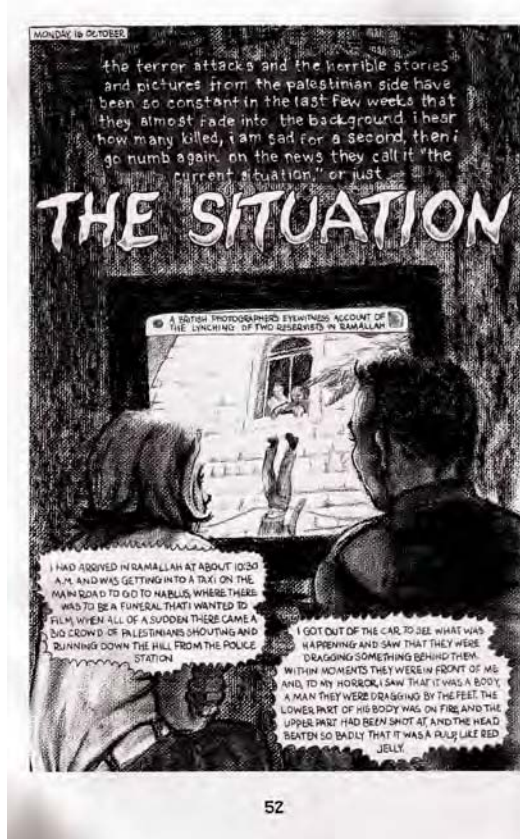


Figure 41. Miriam Libicki. *Jobnik! An American Girl's Adventures in the Israeli Army*. Coquitlam, British Columbia: Real Gone Girl Studios, 2008, pp. 52-53.