

# Transfiguring Life: Images of Continuity Hidden Among the Fragments

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## *1. RECAPTURING HIDDEN FIGURES OF THOUGHT*

“A year from now,” I said, as I handed around the blue looseleaf notebooks, “I will collect these again, but they’ll be filled—with the events of your daily life, sudden encounters with the past, unbidden memories, dreams, angry letters, quatrains, quotations that are part of the world the writer salvages in his notebook, dialogues with God, or with yourselves, grammar exercises, sessions with the dead who continue to speak to you, stories about times of danger, milestones in your life, places of refuge, invocations to the wind, whatever you like . . . Whatever grabs you, puzzles you, aches to get said—let it come into this book. You can always remove it: that’s what makes a looseleaf notebook a license to say whatever you like. At the end of our first year together, when I collect these journals, there’s a good chance you’ll have discovered what you have to say as a writer, as well as your distinct way of saying it.”

There were seven women and a man in the writing workshop at the JASA Astoria Senior Center. During the course of the “journal project,” each one—with an empty book to fill—began to approach the world as a writer: predatory, receptive, curious, curatorial, they sought to find in their everyday lives the raw materials for stories and poems. Because of the keener attention they paid to them, their lives grew richer.

When the year was up, and I was reading through their journals, I made a startling discovery. I had sat through two life reviews without being quite aware of what I was hearing. Week after week, Margaret Friedman and Irene Salamon read their journal entries aloud in the workshop. I felt in their narratives a suggestiveness, an aura, which distinguished them from other—flatter—retellings of

the past. But only in my study, when I reexamined these particular sequences of reminiscences, did I understand their hidden relation to each other and to the life of each writer.

From the journals of Margaret Friedman and Irene Salamon I learned that, although the *concept* of the life review is readily grasped, the life review itself usually eludes us, like shapeshifting Proteus, the Old Man of the Sea who rolls from change to change and thereby slips through the hands of those who try to capture him. By allowing the older people in the workshop to discover their own subjects, in their own forms, I enabled them to reveal what neither they nor I knew when we started out: that the life review doesn't take any form we might have expected. Fragmentary, half-submerged, moving quickly from one disguise to another, the hidden figures of thought whose presence I dimly sensed in the workshop now appeared clearly before me. I was face to face, at last, with living examples of the process that Robert Butler had postulated more than twenty years ago. Here was the heightened awareness of death, and the elegiac feeling-tone; here was the return of repressed memories, associated with conflict and guilt, now recaptured with tremendous sensory vividness; here, finally, was that transfiguring of experience which, like Emily Dickinson's "certain slant of light," leaves "internal difference/Where the meanings are."

We had been fortunate: two of the people in the workshop happened to be undergoing life reviews during the year of our "journal project." And fortunate that we'd been granted enough time for something as slow and intermittent as a profound process of change to run its course. Fortunate, too, that both Margaret Friedman and Irene Salamon were sufficiently open to their experience to allow the life review process to govern their writing. If we had not been favored by these circumstances, we could not have discovered, through our collaboration, how one of the most significant events in late life manifests itself. It is something we almost always miss.

## 2. THE BIRTHDAY GIFT

Here are five entries from the journal of Margaret Friedman:

*February 26, 1979—Piano*

Remember the ads, "They all laughed when I sat down to the piano"? As a child, I took piano lessons. I practiced because my mother naturally reminded me of my responsibility.

I always had one eye on the clock. I would much rather read than play the piano. I've always loved music; while I could recognize someone else's flat notes, I never heard mine.

This morning, it must have been the early part, I dreamed I had been playing the piano beautifully—no errors, timing, everything perfect. I woke up, remembering all the details but I smiled to myself. I go to the piano these days only to dust it.

### *April 4, 1979—An Old Song*

The radio is softly playing “April Showers,” an old song from my childhood. As I sit having my breakfast, I am transported to the apartment we lived in on East 80th Street in Yorkville.

As clearly as if it were now, I can see the round golden oak table with the high-back chairs, the buffet, Mama's sewing machine by the window, and the player piano; this was our dining room. We had music rolls which were put on a roller which we pumped with our feet and lo and behold! we could listen to opera, the classics, dance to the popular tunes of the day.

My mother and sister would sing and Papa would whistle. They all had pretty good voices but I never felt mine was much good, so I enjoyed listening to them. Those were happy days. What a song can do for your memory!

Fridays, when Mama would be up very early in the morning to prepare the dough for her Friday baking, the dish with the dough was covered with a feather pillow to keep it warm so that it would rise; no steam heat in the apartment in those days, only the warmth and the delicious aroma when my sister and I came home for lunch. As soon as we reached the first floor, we could smell the cake. By mid-afternoon all the neighbors had fresh cake. The machine near the window was covered with plates of goodies as was the buffet. When we came home at three o'clock you could choose coffee cake with chocolate or what we call Danish today with cheese, nuts, apricots, or prune jelly. Nothing but nothing that I eat today tastes half as good as what Mama gave us on Friday afternoon with our milk.

Funny what one song can do to your mind.

***April 20, 1979—Springtime and Lilac Memories***

When I was a little girl, I remember my mother singing a very lovely song in Hungarian about lilacs. She sang it many times and always there seemed to be a gay and happy feeling as she sang and did her chores. I always thought she must love those flowers very much. As I grew up and received an allowance, I always managed to save some money to buy the first lilacs I saw in the spring. I finished high school during the depression, jobs were scarce and pay very low. But even then Mama got the biggest bunch of lilacs as soon as they were in the flower shops.

Walking in New York several days ago, I saw the lilacs, but was sad that I could no longer see the smile on my mother's face when I walked in the door with her favorite flowers.

***May 4, 1979—Reflections***

Springtime means flowers starting to bloom, planting gardens, and cleaning up after the winter.

To a housewife it means opening windows to let the balmy breezes into the house, and starting to clean, a monotonous chore, but one which must be done. As I started my usual spring closet cleaning, I found a lamp with a music box that my mother bought for my daughter when she was three months old, it was her first Chanukah present from grandma and grandpa. I wound up the music box and lo and behold it still played "Who's Afraid of the Big Bad Wolf?"

Tears welled in my eyes. I was sad for a while, but then recalling the many happy memories made me feel good.

This also happens when I bring down the boxes with pictures, it usually takes me half a day longer to get finished, but how good it feels to be able to recall happy and sad incidents and say I am so glad I have been able to get older because unfortunately many of my friends were not lucky enough to reach this age. I stopped what I had been doing and sat down to write how I felt.

***July 7, 1979***

Sitting alone in the apartment, everything is quiet, the radio playing softly. I cannot sleep. It was a good weekend. My

daughter, sister, and brother-in-law came to visit to celebrate my birthday. I was sorry my nephew and his family could not make it.

We had dinner at a Hungarian restaurant in Yorkville and listened to Hungarian gypsy music which we all love.

Suddenly, I recalled the times when we were young and went out to dinner with our parents. Always there were the beautiful haunting strains of the gypsy violin and cymbalo. Just thinking of these days gave me a good warm feeling as if someone had draped a warm shawl around me. Memories are so precious, especially as you grow older and are alone. It seems like yesterday that my mother and I looked at an apartment and when she saw the New York skyline—she always loved New York—said, “This is it, let’s take it.” It was thirty-nine years ago, we were four then, my parents, my husband, and I. Then we were five when our daughter was born. It was a particularly difficult time in my life and yet the happiest when after twelve years and many problems in trying to have a child, I was finally able to. But my mother was very ill and we were told she had only a short time to live.

Mother always said she wanted a granddaughter since my sister had a son, so we were all grateful that she lived to see my daughter.

Shortly after our daughter was born, my parents moved into their own apartment in the same building. My sister and her family were across the street and so my mother’s last days were made easier because we were always near her.

As I sit here alone, I am a little sad because my family all live away from New York, but we get together and see each other frequently. Sometimes it seems we see more of each other than families who live close to each other. And so while at times I am a little lonely, I do not dwell on it too much when I think I am fortunate enough to have a good relationship with them.

“Remember”: with this word of exhortation, Margaret begins to write of a dream in which she hears the echo of an oft-repeated command: “Practice!” The dream only half-conceals the harshness of her mother’s demand upon her. “Practice! Practice!” That was the common battle cry of East European Jewish mothers who wanted

their children to march up mountains of respectability and culture, foot soldiers in the ranks led by Heifetz and Elman. Writing of it more than fifty years later, Margaret accepts her mother's claims upon her as natural: she "naturally reminded me of my responsibility." Musical accomplishment has been turned into a normal developmental task, and the child fails. It is a failure both of talent and of will. Of the two hidden charges against her, the badness of her will appears graver than her lack of talent. She kept time, but in the wrong way: not with her fingers on the keyboard, but with her eye on the clock. She preferred reading, a manly activity in traditional Jewish households; little girls who read too much were warned they would end up as old maids. This "bad girl's" lack of musical ability was suspiciously selective: flat notes in general she could recognize; deafness descended upon her only while she was playing the piano.

In the dream, Margaret fulfills her mother's—and her own—wish: she puts on a beautiful performance, "no errors, timing, everything perfect." Upon waking up, she remembers everything, "but I smiled to myself." That apparently illogical "but" is the only acknowledgment of the pain that otherwise makes no noise in this dream of a beautiful concert. And yet the final image sounds a disturbing note: in actuality she goes to the piano not to play it, but to dust it.

Mother, music, and dust appear to be the key images in this passage; each is associated with the master-image of the piano over which Margaret finally gains mastery. But the passage implicitly contains a criticism of this all-too-easy triumph: this is the sort of "beautiful" thing that immediately turns to dust. The dream represents and conceals the resurgence of an unresolved conflict. We may, at this point, guess that Margaret's mother has returned to "remind" her of her "responsibility"; that what she may finally be saying is: "Remember me!" But this is conjecture; the outlines of the conflict are still hidden.

Nearly a month later, in early April, "April Showers" plays upon Margaret's strongly visual imagination and "transport[s]" her to the family dining room in Yorkville. Her imagination moves quickly past the table and the chairs—common things, but Margaret *sees* them, makes them grand and particular—to Mama's sewing machine, a piece of furniture whose symbolic and cultural value in immigrant households rivaled that of the piano; then, landing in front of the player piano, Margaret's daydream becomes populated, becomes charged with a scene that must have been repeated count-

less times. "Lo and behold," she bursts out, insisting upon the magical power of music—and memory—to bring things to life.

The family used to listen to music together around the player piano. (If she had learned to play properly, would they have had to resort to this automation, programmed by "music rolls"?) Margaret remembers that the members of her family used to sing or whistle in unison with the music—all except her. She never felt that her voice was good enough to join in. Does she feel excluded, black-sheepish? "Those were happy days," she declares. Memory has performed one of its kind offices: whatever pain or conflict she may have felt are purged by the sensation of being reunited with her family, brought together by music.

Margaret's daydream, having coiled itself around the player piano, now makes a marvelous leap to "Fridays" and the "dough of [her mother's] Friday baking" which was "covered by a feather pillow to keep it warm so that it would rise." The aroma and variety of her mother's cakes rise like a rich sensuous legacy in Margaret's imagination; and this evokes her abiding, passionate love: "Nothing but nothing that I eat today tastes half so good as what Mama gave us on Friday afternoon with our milk." Even now, she sees her mother as an abundant giver of milk.

In this passage, Margaret lingers awhile over all that her mother gave her, represents it in a kind of Keatsian rapture, and reveals that it far surpasses everything she has tasted since. Her loss, the impress of it on her prose, is beginning to be felt. Indirectly, writing about this unbidden memory places before Margaret the question which the dream-passage hid from view. Having been given so rich a life by her mother, what did she give in return?

The entry of April 26th answers: lilacs! This is the turning point. It begins with music, which in each of these passages is the Proustian object that leads her back to her mother. In the first passage, all we know of the music is that it is beautiful and perfect; in the second, we hear of operas, the classics, popular tunes. With each entry, the music becomes more specific and more specifically associated with her mother. Here, her mother is singing "a lovely song in Hungarian about lilacs"; and, like lilacs themselves, the song imparts a "happy feeling" to what otherwise might be drab: her mother's doing chores about the house. Now Margaret recaptures the intense happiness she felt as a little girl around her mother, and she feels her generous love overflow in the present as it did in the past. At all times she has brought her mother bouquets of the flower

she loved; she does so now by remembering that as a little girl, receiving an allowance, and as a young woman, earning her first salary, she gave her mother "the first" and "biggest bunch" of lilacs that she saw each spring.

Having felt her old happy love for her mother and remembered her loyal spring gift, she makes contact with her grief. The note of sadness has at last entered in. For Margaret, too,

April is the cruelest month, breeding  
Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing  
Memory and desire

But now the desire to please her mother only distresses her; it's too late for that. Yes, she gave lilacs. Was that enough? Even if they sufficed to repay her mother, to make good the debt, she will nonetheless never again see "the smile on her mother's face when I walk in the door with her favorite flowers." Margaret is no longer smiling, as in the first passage, or in a high state of pleasure, as in the second, after she has tasted her mother's pastries again and been warmed by her mother's sensuous largess. The happiness she associates with her mother's song is gone; she's left with her love, her guilt, and her grief. The loss is, once again, real for her.

The catharsis comes two weeks later while she's engaged in a "monotonous chore" herself. Here, too, housework is charged with meaning; Margaret herself insists on it. To a housewife, she tells us, spring "means flowers starting to bloom . . . it means opening windows to let the balmy breezes into the house." And Margaret, too practiced a lover of language not to use the word wittingly, knows that "balm" is a fragrant thing that has medicinal value, like the memory of lilacs or Hungarian pastries. Spring also "means . . . cleaning up after the winter," which is not quite the same thing as doing a spring cleaning: it tells us that winter has made a mess of things, perhaps by covering them with forgetfulness. For Margaret, cleaning winter's mess specifically means opening her closets and reexamining their contents: "when I bring down the boxes of pictures, it usually takes me half a day longer to get finished, but how good it feels to be able to recall happy and sad incidents." This is a purposeful seeking of reminiscences, or rather objects that will stimulate reminiscence. She handles what she hasn't looked at or touched in a year's time: it is like the anniversary of a death or other landmark event when one rearranges one's memories.



Now she comes upon "a lamp with a music box" that her mother gave to her infant daughter. She winds it up; it plays an old nursery song that scoffs at the fear of death; and again the magic words that announce a sudden apparition spring to her lips: "lo and behold," the nursery song summons her tears. Margaret opens herself fully now to the sorrow towards which she has been moving closer and closer: the death of her mother. Amid images of blossoming, of opening things, she cries. After mourning for her mother anew, she can once again accept things as they are.

Nearly four months after playing the piano in a dream, Margaret comes to the heart of the conflict, and resolves it—for the time being. The death of her mother, like her own birthday, comes round once a year; its anniversary may well have evoked a renewal of grief work. There is a sense of rightness, of completeness, in her thinking of her mother's deathday after celebrating her birthday: the mind moves naturally among natural pairs of opposites. Then, too, Margaret associates her birthday with one or two other things that carry her, in her reverie, to her mother's last days. Her birthday is a time when the scattered members of her family come together. But what is reconstituted, finally, is the scene in the family dining room: Margaret has chosen a restaurant in Yorkville where she and those to whom she is closest can listen to "the Hungarian gypsy music we all love." She recalls dinners out with her parents. The "beautiful haunting strains of the gypsy violin and cymbalo" are the leitmotif which announces the rearrival of her mother. But now, when she comes in, Margaret can work more consciously with the question her mother's reemergence puts to her. For it is her birthday, the day that explicitly raises the theme of gifts; it is a time when we are fully entitled to the gifts we receive, not because we merit them, but because we are alive. For Margaret, *birthday* becomes a configuration of images that calls up the question of what she received from her mother and that simultaneously suggests the terms of her answer to it. Now, at last, she is able to repossess her memory of the real and tremendous gift she gave to her mother, one that was far more acceptable than her annual bunch of lilacs or the perfect rendition of a piece of music. And this gift was made in time! Finally, there were "no errors," the "timing" and "everything" were "perfect." After twelve years of being unable to conceive, Margaret gave birth to a healthy baby. She gave her dying mother what she wanted—a granddaughter; and so she made a gift of life in return. "We were all grateful that she lived to see my daughter." Even here, as she

remembers herself as the successful giver, Margaret's thought is of the gratitude she feels.

Between February 27th and July 7th, Margaret has attempted to make restitution—to justify—all that she's been given, and to make peace with her mother's death. Implicit in this sequence of passages is not only the guilt that often afflicts a child at the death of a parent, but also a more specific guilt: Margaret followed more in her father's footsteps, particularly as a young woman. She was a "reader"; she was political, disputatious—qualities that he fostered in her. (She has frequently spoken and written about the way he encouraged her to become an independent, outspoken woman.) Now, she has made the balance right. She has paid homage to her mother's enduring influence not only by keeping the piano with her, even though she cannot play it, but more authentically by her passionate love of music. On the night of her birthday, she has touched on and reintegrated all the elements of her conflict. She has come back into possession of her knowledge that her mother's gift of life was gratuitous, requiring no return gift; that her mother's gift involved not only life but the foundation of a good life, a "fortunate" life filled with "good relationships" and with the kind of richness for which lilacs and gypsy music may stand as the emblems; that even if no return gift was required—for life itself there can be no sufficient repayment—she has nonetheless felt called upon to make one; and she did: she adequately returned her mother's gift by carrying it on and giving birth to a daughter. And because she did, and now reclaims the experience, she can live with her loss and the burden of her gratitude.

She is also better prepared to face what awaits her: for the figure of her mother has a double-aspect and is as much a figure of death as a giver of life. Her birthday is also a day of judgment on which she addresses not only the question of what she gave to her mother but also the question of what meaning she gave to her life. Her mourning, in short, is also a life review.

This may seem paradoxical. The goal of mourning is to restore our sense of innocence and to renew our capacity to be life-glad, so that our involvement with the living takes precedence over our involvement with the dead. The goal of the life review is to prepare us to face death through a reevaluation of our lives, particularly of guilt-laden experiences, and through the discovery of a redemptive "metaphor of self" that is both an emblem of the meaning of our lives and a plausible legacy.

In late life, these two processes are increasingly interwoven:

mourning becomes part of the life review process; the life review becomes part of the process of mourning. For Margaret, or any vigorous older person, the goal towards which each process leads is impossible to attain, unacceptable, and unreal. Mourning can no longer achieve its goal of separating the mourner, as if by a river of forgetfulness, from the great company of the dead; the life review cannot readily help one take leave of the living—not yet. As the two processes become less distinguished by differences of goal, their central similarity becomes apparent: both mourning and the life review make use of recurring reminiscences to manifest and affirm the experience of continuity.

### 3. *THE VICTIM-SOLDIER*

There is some controversy about whether the life review is ‘universal’ and ‘normative,’ as Robert Butler maintains, or whether it is a pathological use of reminiscence made by compulsive people who have been evaluating their experience in a judgmental and obsessive way all their lives. I am of Butler’s party, and think that doubt as to the normative character of the life review has arisen in part because we have not had clear descriptions of what actual life reviews look like.

It doesn’t help matters that the life review process involves a gradual bringing to light of unconscious or subconscious material: it is therefore by its very nature a hidden process which may assume myriad forms. The life reviews of most older people are not composed of an orderly progression of memories, organized into a coherent narrative. Nor do they remain confined with the boundaries of a recognizable form, such as the journal entry or brief first-person narrative. Life reviews are largely quiltwork affairs, a matter of bits and pieces all stitched together according to a not very readily visible pattern. Or, to use another metaphor, life reviews are dispersed among a great variety of scattered fragments: it is difficult to collect all the pieces of reverie, fantasy and lyric outburst, storytelling and contemplation, and to reconstitute the whole rare am-phora they compose.

If life reviews are hidden, fragmentary, and assume many forms, how can we tell when we have come across one?

I would answer: we can discern the life review process in action when we find, amid fragments of reminiscence, a recurring configuration of images that manifests a question and a partial answer to it.

This description implies that the repetition of the configuration of

images is the result of a normative problem-solving process, not of a pathological process such as obsessive rumination. Each recurrence may be seen as another attempt to answer the question which the life review manifests and addresses; the process is of necessity repeated until the pieces of the configuration have been put together in a new way, one that provides illumination, wholeness, and harmony.

Irene Salamon's first attempt to review her life in writing clearly exemplifies the proposed description. This life review consists of five apparently unrelated pieces, written over a five-month period. When one reads them closely, it becomes evident that the aim of transforming the figure of the victim into the figure of the soldier governs both her unconscious and her conscious productions, and that the recurring configuration of the victim and the soldier is connected to a search for meaning. The following pieces are presented in the order in which Irene Salamon wrote them:

### *December 18, 1978—A Walk*

The wind howls. I put my scarf over my head and ears, make big steps in my lined boots and march. And to my mind comes another march thirty-two years ago, without warm scarves or lined boots and with a growling stomach. I think back and I wonder: How much can one human endure? It is not a pleasant memory, but now I still enjoy walking in the crisp, fresh air.

### *January, 1979—A Dream*

The rucksack on my back is so heavy. I am very tired, hungry, and thirsty, but I push on, right foot, left foot, I have to reach the top before it gets too dark to see. Every minute feels like an hour. I am weary to the bones. Five more steps and I am there. Four, three, two—I woke up with a scream all prepared, the final step was into nothingness. My heart was pounding and every bone hurts.

### *Meaning Of Our Generation*

I was born shortly before the First World War. For the first four years of my life, my father meant only a picture of a soldier on the dresser. As a teenager in Germany even before

the Hitler years, we were growing up with fear and hate and could not understand why. And then we were displaced persons, from riches to rags. There was no loyalty or meaning in our lives. In the DP Camps, we clung to each other, but friendship could not bloom—today you were here, tomorrow gone.

We married in 1948 and came to America. My three children were born here and we tried to live a normal family life. Our nerves were bad and our faith in people was not very strong. The first real joy we experienced was in May, 1948 when the State of Israel became a reality. In order to become a citizen my nephew had to join the war in Korea. As my son Mark grew up there was Vietnam! We did not want him to run away from our adopted country, so he made the decision to join. Do I have to tell you how many sleepless nights and worries we had? Thank G-d, after four years he joined us again—unscathed!

Now that the children are on their own and we retired, we are thankful for every day and enjoy it to the fullest. What meaning our life had—I cannot answer.

### ***I, Judith of Bethulia***

I, Judith, was an only child. My father raised me as if I were a son. I can do anything around the many acres of our rich soil. I keep the books, I tend to the house. But now there is a war with the Assyrians and I am not allowed to fight. Everybody says I am beautiful, so I will use my beauty and brains to help win this war. Holofernes, the Assyrian general, is attracted to me. I will invite him to my home outside Bethulia.

After three nights I was able to cut off his head with his own sword. History will show that this war was won by me, a patriotic woman.

### ***May, 1979—Remembering***

I had a date with my daughter to go to Lincoln Center to hear *Carmen*. I was pleasantly surprised, how nice she did her long hair and she had a very nice dress on, really looked good. Usually she loves pants. My mind wandered back many years ago: I must have been three or four years old, my older brother was two years older. One evening we wondered why mother

closed the door on us. We pestered her and when she finally opened it, our eyes grew big with excitement. Here she was in a gown, her hair done up beautifully and her jewelry shone! The radio was on, and she enjoyed an opera! She believed that clothing is very important to enjoy culture to the fullest.

And here was my daughter doing the same!

In the first piece, a journal entry about an unbidden memory, the figure of the victim of Nazi persecution makes her first fleeting appearance. In the second, a journal entry about a dream, the figure of the Jewish prisoner being marched to her death is fused with that of the marching, battle-fatigued soldier. In the third piece, which is her first deliberate attempt to review her life, the figure of the victim-soldier is replaced by that of the soldier-victim: it is the figure of the soldier as absent family member—and potential victim—that dominates the piece. The shadows of three wars fall across her life, and she structures her life review accordingly: it is divided into three major periods of absence. The First World War figures chiefly as the absence of a soldier-father; the Vietnam War as the absence of a soldier-son; the Holocaust as the absence of meaning. And for her, meaning means other people whom she can trust. She tells us that the Nazis destroyed her faith in people along with her people.

The fourth piece may be described as a “fantasy reminiscence.” It is liberating for her to get rid of the sincere narrator who is identical with the author. By assuming the mask of Judith of Bethulia, a beautiful woman and a soldier, she can speak of things that a proper, Orthodox Jewish woman ordinarily keeps well-hidden: sexuality and violence. But the deliberate inauthenticity of the piece permits it. The comic tone, which gives her license, has its source in the flamboyance of two types of stock character: its flaunt is that of the braggart soldier who is every inch the *femme fatale*. And yet it is the comic surface of the piece which indirectly allows her, for the first time, to hint at the horror she lived through: she is letting us in on her own thirst for vengeance. Paradoxically, the piece is what it represents: a high-spirited, audacious act. Irene, her voice ringing with pleasure, becomes Judith in the workshop: usually shy, even timid, she grows powerful and charming as she speaks of cutting off the head of her enemy and saving her people.

The configuration of images that recurs in these four pieces manifests the question that she has chosen to live with consciously. She is asking: What meaning can I find in survivorship? It is impor-

tant to note that the march she alludes to in the first piece happened “thirty-two years ago,” that is, in 1946: she is referring not to the trauma of deportation and imprisonment but to the shock of liberation, of having survived the concentration camp. And the recurring configuration that raises the question also contains the only terms in which it may be answered. The figure of the soldier is telling the victim: you were spared so that you could triumph over those who murdered your people.

“What meaning our life had—I cannot answer”: broken in half, that sentence ends her first summary of the significant facts of her life. After answering that question in a fantasy, she goes on, in the fifth piece, to tell a story that embodies the terms of her real triumph over the Nazis and thereby provides her with an emblem of meaning: she has survived to create life and to continue her mother’s way of life. The generational continuities she discovers now are female and positive, not male and negative. Looking back earlier at her life, she saw her son, like her father, as an absent soldier. Now she sees that her daughter has turned out to be a woman like her mother—a woman of high culture. Implicit in the story is an assertion of pride and accomplishment: she has been a culture-bearer; she has kept alive and transmitted the beautiful ways of the past.

#### **4. THE CYCLE OF GENERATIONS**

The life reviews of Irene Salamon and Margaret Friedman are both conducted under the aegis of a profound and never fully articulated faith: one might call it a belief in the inherent goodness of the cycle of generations. In very different ways, each woman must wrestle with the dead; each must search for an answer to the large question with which the dead leave us: for what have you survived? Each, in answering that question, points to her daughter. Through their daughters, they carry on the gift of their music-loving mothers, the gift of life and of a particular way of life. But they do not want to attach their daughters to the past. Rather, their relationships with their daughters, with whom they are close, help free them from the past so that they may live lives that are open to the future. By bridging the generations, by taking their place in the cycle of generations, they play a real, infinitesimal, age-old role in sustaining human life on the earth and in handing down their culture’s version of it. This

gives them a firm place to stand in the present as they feel the presence of death in their past and their future.

The life review process is an ongoing one. Peace may be won, but it is usually something like a truce between renewed outbreaks of conflict. Now, in their third year of meeting together, the people in the Astoria Workshop have undertaken a year-long "autobiography project." Rather than feel they have exhausted that subject during the course of the "journal project" and the subsequent "reverie project," they feel that the life review pieces they previously wrote have prepared them to reconsider their entire life-histories and to write book-length narratives.

Irene calls her autobiography *A Kaleidoscope of My Life*. In her chapters on adolescence and young adulthood, she speaks in detail of the persecution that she and her family suffered before the war and of the hardships they endured after it. Of her four years in German concentration camps she has refused to write, but she has begun to talk about those years in the workshop. Writing her autobiography, in addition to enabling her to venture onto terrain that was once off-limits, has given her a chance to survey her life once again, not only to document it, but to discover where the meaning is hidden. Now, what lay beyond her grasp is obvious to her: she recovers and consciously possesses the "answer" to which the earlier life review pointed but could not yet utter directly. How passionately she proclaims it now! Coming back to the birth of her daughter, she retells the story as the rebirth of meaning in her life:

Through June and July, I was mostly in bed and on July 8, 1949, our Pearl was born. Amazing how such an event can change your whole life. A new leaf on a nearly dried-out tree! Life had meaning again and was worth fighting for. My husband and I promised each other to do everything possible, so that she would grow up free in America and be whatever she wanted to be with G-d's help. There was no place for a crib, so we opened a drawer and that was her bed.