Charlotte Salomon completed her autobiography, *Life? or Theater?* during the height of Nazi occupation in Europe and as a German-Jewish woman experienced first hand the trauma of Nazi oppression. This essay examines how Salomon in her autobiography uses a combination of written text and visual representations to create an extraordinary work of resistance and preservation.

Autobiography, Visual Representations, and the Preservation of Self

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By age twenty-six, Charlotte Salomon had finished what may be one of the most creative and ambitious artistic undertakings of the twentieth century. Completed in 1942, Salomon's autobiography, *Life? or Theater?*[1] is an innovative blend of textual narration, dramatic dialogue, and hundreds of paintings. Unlike traditional autobiographies, Salomon's narrative is written in the form of a play. Her drama opens with a playbill introducing the audience to the main characters in the drama. Each character corresponds to a significant person in Salomon's life. Although the names have been altered, those familiar with Salomon's life can identify easily each character. Astrid Schmetterling describes this cast of characters as "performers of a dramatized life in which reality and imagination are ingeniously intertwined" (51). The autobiography is constructed around approximately 760 separate, small gouache paintings that function to *stage* the play through the creation of vivid scenes. The narrative text and dialogue are written in pencil on tracing paper overlays that are carefully attached

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to each painting with an adhesive. As the autobiography progresses, however, the written text is painted directly on the artwork. Mary Lowenthal Felstiner describes the work as "at once a diary and a drama; it turns events into episodes, people into personae; it tells a true story and treats it like a script" ("Taking" 320). Despite the extraordinary nature of *Life? or Theater?* it has only been during the past twenty years that the general public has become aware of Salomon's project. The work is usually housed at the Jewish Historical Museum in Amsterdam, but international tours of much of the collection in the early 1980s, exhibits at the Royal Academy in 1998, the Art Gallery of Ontario in 2000, the Boston Museum of Fine Arts also in 2000, and the New York Jewish Museum in 2001 have finally earned Salomon the recognition she deserves.

One possible reason for the early obscurity of Salomon's work could be the conditions under which it was completed. As a Jewish woman born in Berlin in 1917, Charlotte Salomon spent much of her young adult life in the midst of social turmoil and racial discrimination. The oppressive force of the Nazi regime weighed heavily on her. She was subjected to intense discrimination at school, which eventually led to her refusal to return to classes. Her father, a talented physician, and her stepmother, a well-known opera singer, both lost their employment opportunities due to Nazi policies.

The Salomons' experience during the early 1930s was not unique. Other students reported feeling marginalized in the public school system. Ruth Sass-Glaser, a German-Jewish woman about the same age as Charlotte Salomon, writes in her memoir, "I was fifteen years old and heard in my history lessons that the Jews were second-class citizens. I heard that Jews do not do any hard work, that they want to be doctors and lawyers, but never an elevator operator or mailman" (14). As anti-Semitism continued to be taught at public schools, an increasing number of Jewish students stopped attending. Many others also suffered the loss of their jobs and civil positions in the aftermath of Boycott Day. Boycott Day was initiated by the Nazis in response to what they believed to be an outpouring of "atrocity propaganda" by international Jews. Germans were ordered to halt all transactions with Jewish businesses and release Jewish employees. Jews were dismissed from civil-service positions, the courts, and public health service (Angress 70). Although many members of the Jewish community attempted to establish alternative organizations in which to utilize their skills, the loss of their status, economic stability, and respect as valued citizens was a strong blow.

Jewish suffering due to Nazi policies intensified as anti-Semitic demonstrations turned violent. The 9th of November 1938 was a night of terror for German Jews, as the mobs burned and destroyed homes, synagogues, and Jewish institutions. Approximately seven thousand Jewish businesses were looted and destroyed (Dawidowicz 102). So much plate glass was shattered that the pogrom was appropriately named *Kristallnacht,* or crystal night. Nora Rosenthal recalls the night in her memoir, writing, "Mobs roamed the streets, went into homes and smashed what they could lay hands on. They threw crystal glasses out of the windows. [...] That day I will remember: it spoiled my life" (52). During the *Kristallnacht* pogram, Salomon's father was one of nearly thirty thousand Jewish men arrested and sent to Buchenwald, Dachau, or Sachsenhausen. Although her father was eventually released, his time in Sachsenhausen had severely weakened him. These experiences led Salomon's parents to send their daughter to Nice, France, to live there in exile with her grandparents, who had already fled Germany.

When asked in an interview if they had attempted to make plans to leave Germany themselves following *Kristallnacht,* Salomon's stepmother, Paula Salomon-Lindberg, responded: "My husband had lost half his body weight. He had to lie in bed, and we had to give him something every twenty minutes. [...] Nobody knew then. There was no model for what was happening. You would have had to go back a thousand years to find something that you could have learned from" (Felstiner, *Paint* 84). Although Paula and Albert did not seek an immediate escape from Germany, many German Jews chose to escape the country and live in exile. Following *Kristallnacht* and increased Gestapo pressure, approximately 150,000 Jews departed Germany (Dawidowicz 191). Although the Nazis encouraged the Jews to leave Germany, they made the process of applying for emigration visas exhausting and humiliating. Applicants were required to stand in long lines at a variety of different agencies. Often they were told to come back at another time. Rosenthal offers her recollection of seeking emigration papers for her family in the weeks following *Kristallnacht,* "Although 'they' wanted us out, they made it as difficult as possible to comply with the new regulations issued daily" (52). Such was the system that was set up to humiliate the Jews while simultaneously expelling them from the country.

Just a few months after her arrival in France, war was officially declared, and Salomon was sent to Gurs, a camp for refugees in the Pyrenees. The camp was overcrowded, and conditions were terrible. The inhabitants lived among filth and infection and slept at best on straw mats (Felstiner, *Paint* 121). Because Charlotte had a permit and a place to live in Nice, she was eventually allowed to return to her home there. Although she spent several weeks at Gurs, she did not include a single mention of the experience in her autobiography. She painted her father's experience at Sachsenhausen, but she could not, or perhaps would not, record her own life at Gurs. Felstiner observes that Charlotte "never put those weeks into her record, as if the time in camp formed a parenthesis. But it was also a genesis. Imprisonment gave her a premonition, release a reprieve, that spurred her to paint her life" (*Paint* 124).

The years of oppression at the hands of the Nazis severely troubled Salomon. As a depression grew within her, she struggled to find a means through which to cope with her growing despair. In 1941, Salomon began to paint. She writes, in third person, of her decision to undertake the autobiographical project: "Despite her utter weakness, however, she refused to be drawn into the circle of the straw-graspers and remained alone with her experiences and her paintbrush. Yet, in the long run, to live day and night like this became intolerable even to a creature thus predisposed. And she found herself facing the question of whether to commit suicide or to undertake something wildly eccentric" (Salomon 776–77). Salomon worked incessantly for over a year, completing her autobiography in the summer of 1942. As Nazi forces advanced into southern France, the refuge she had found in Nice was compromised. As a precaution, she requested that a friend protect the autobiography for the duration of the war. In September 1943, Salomon was arrested by Nazi soldiers and sent to Drancy, an internment camp east of Paris. Shortly after, she was transported to Auschwitz, where she was killed upon her arrival.

After the war, the autobiography was returned to Salomon's parents, who had survived by hiding in Amsterdam. They eventually gave the work to the Jewish Historical Museum. In 1963, portions of Salomon's autobiography were published. A much more complete compilation of her work was produced in conjunction with the exhibitions of *Life? or Theater?* held in the early 1980s. Forty years later, Salomon's work is finally gaining international recognition.

Although Salomon's death was a tragic loss, her autobiography is evidence of her attempt to psychologically resist the forces against her. *Life? or Theater?* is forthright with its criticism of the Nazi regime. Salomon also uses her autobiography as a means to preserve her identity and cope with the emotional distress that develops when one lives under oppressive forces. Art critic Nadine Heller describes Salomon's autobiography as an "act of self-assertion and the preservation of her identity and self" (33). As Salomon's work reveals, autobiography can function not only as a tool for healing but also as a powerful statement of resistance against oppressive forces.

Recently, much attention has been given to the link between trauma and the impulse to engage in autobiographical expressions. Numerous accounts of abuse, rape, incest, tragic injury, and mental illness have been published over the past several years. Additionally, there is an increasing pressure to preserve autobiographical accounts of Holocaust survivors, as those who survived this experience are aging. Historian Dominick LaCapra suggests that the process of "working through" is fundamental to one's ability to confront a personal trauma. Moving beyond a traditional psychoanalytic approach, LaCapra argues that one way to negotiate the paradox of the need to express traumatic memories, and the sheer numbing effect of having to relive these traumas in order to do so, is to seek alternative and critical modes of articulation. Autobiography in its varying forms may serve as an alternative means through which its author may "work through" trauma.

Janet Mason Ellerby's recent work, *Intimate Reading: The Contemporary Women's Memoir,* explores the autobiographical impulse felt by many who have experienced traumas and as a result live within a shadow of personal shame. Ellerby begins the text with her own memoir about an unexpected teenage pregnancy in 1964. She argues that it was not until she was able to tell her story of alienation and shame that she could "reconstruct a healthier subjectivity" (32). The popularity of autobiographical works over the past decade is a sign that others recognize the powerful healing effect that such works can have on an author as well as the reader. Ellerby writes: "The memoir wants to teach us about living through and overcoming adversity. It can demonstrate how honesty can guide us toward transformation, stability, and empowerment" (xx). While articulating the experiences of one person's life, an autobiography can also help others make sense of their own lives.

One reason that autobiography is effective as a means to help one confront traumatic experiences is that it can function as a powerful tool of resistance and personal redefinition. Leigh Gilmore refers to this type of self-representation as "autobiographics." She explains that autobiographics "is concerned with resistance, contradiction, and interruption as strategies of self-representation" (*Autobiographics* 185). Sidonie Smith also supports this position, writing, "However problematic its strategies, autobiographical writing has played and continues to play a role in emancipatory politics. Autobiographical practices become occasions for restaging subjectivity, and autobiographical strategies become occasions for the staging of resistance" (156–57). By providing the opportunity to shape one's own subjectivity, autobiography allows its writers a means to counter the outside forces that seek to control and shape them. Gilmore adds: "Autobiography provides a stage where women writers, born again in the act of writing, may experiment with reconstructing the various discourse—of representation, of ideology—in which their subjectivity has been formed" (*Autobiographics* 85). *Life? or Theater?* is evidence of Salomon's performance of identity. Through her autobiography she is able to defy the forces seeking to tear apart her subjectivity. Suzette Henke explains: "Because the author can instantiate the alienated or marginal self into the pliable body of a protean text, the newly revised subject, emerging as the semifictive protagonist of an enabling counternarrative, is free to rebel against the values and practices of a dominant culture and to assume an empowered position of political agency in the world" (xv–xvi).

The appalling irony of Salomon's story is that her oppressors ultimately murdered her. Although her autobiography did not succeed in *saving* her life, the text does *preserve* her life. Salomon's decision to complete *Life? or Theater?* provided her with a means to work through the disturbing events of her life and resist the negative influence of Nazi oppression on her subjectivity. Raphael Rubinstein supports this assessment: "In *Life or Theater?* Salomon embarks on the emotional odyssey of discovering and communicating the truth of her existence, and she succeeds, phenomenally" (114). We do not know what Salomon would have done with her autobiography had she survived the war. That she made a concerted effort to protect the work implies she recognized its significance as a text of self-preservation.

Artistic expression, in any form, has long been considered an effective therapeutic tool for individuals who have experienced a traumatic event. The ability to represent these events in a distinctive, yet non-threatening, way can be highly beneficial to those who have suffered emotional and physical pain. Writer Denise Levertov explains that "the great power of art is to transform, renovate, activate. If there is a relationship between art and healing it is that" (qtd. in Trautmann 153). Although writing about traumatic events is cathartic, the transformation of such memories into visual representations of the painful events can be especially powerful. Art theorist Griselda Pollock suggests that art "may be able to generate not an image of the trauma but a symbol that allows the forecluded the relief of signification, a pathway into language" ("Gleaning" 274). Essentially, relief is "produced by restoring events to memory and thus delivering them into representation" (*Differencing* 109). Much of Salomon's artwork in *Life? or Theater?* communicates her emotional response to Nazi oppression while simultaneously staging a visual resistance of that oppression.

Art created during the Holocaust has been of interest to many scholars. Sybil Milton suggests that a relationship exists between art and atrocity. This relationship "influences our perception of World War II just as at the time it enabled the artists to retain their individuality under conditions of extreme duress" (147). Thus, for many, artistic representation became a way of coping with the events of the Holocaust. During Hitler's reign, voices of dissent were silenced through imprisonment and death. To engage in one's own private artistic expressions, although risky, provided some artists relief. Art is capable of transforming the unspeakable into vivid images that communicate emotions on a much stronger level than words. Pollock notes, "Aesthetic practices may [. . .] fold into the visible, processes, sensations and potentialities that can, by definition, not be simply said, or cannot *per se* become visible" ("Presence" 47). The few artistic representations of the Holocaust that did survive are vital to our understanding of this historical event. These images, when presented with verbal accounts of the events, communicate on a much deeper and personal level the intensity of the lived experience.

That we have been able to preserve some of the art created by victims of the Holocaust during the actual event is crucial to our ability to comprehend what happened. Enormous pressure has been placed on Holocaust survivors to recreate this history for us. Yet, for many survivors, remembering, much less retelling, these events serves to further their trauma. Pollock explains that the Holocaust ultimately lacked witnesses. She states, "Not only, in effect, did the Nazis try to exterminate the physical witnesses of their own crime; but the inherently incomprehensible and deceptive psychological structure of the event precluded its own witnessing by its very victims" ("Dangerous" 48). For many survivors, retelling the events of the Holocaust is too painful. The very act of bearing witness to the events would mean having to relive the experience. The psychological pain of this retelling has motivated many survivors to remain silent about their lives during the Holocaust. Artistic representations of the Holocaust do indeed "take us to extremely dangerous places" (53).

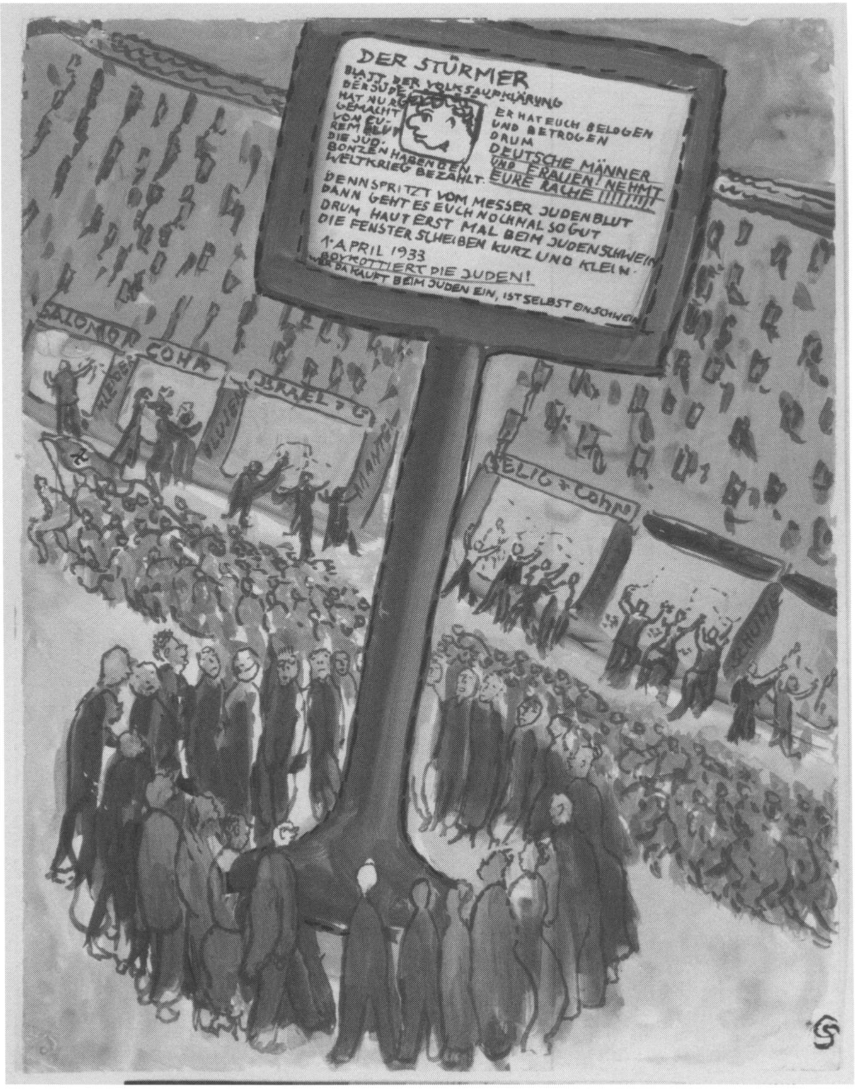
The use of visual representation within autobiographical writings is becoming more common. Certainly Salomon's inclusion of paintings in her autobiography is the most striking and ambitious example of this blending of genres, but other autobiographers have turned to the use of visual representation in their work as well. Frida Kahlo's journals are an eclectic blend of words and paintings. Additionally, Roland Barthes includes numerous photographs in his autobiographical writings. Writing in support of the use of art as a means of autobiographical expression, Susanna Egan states that "written literature fixes in permanent form precisely that which needs to be mobile, altering in the process what is said, how it is said, and how it is read and understood" (117). The use of visual representations is, for Egan, a more authentic rendering of one's lived experience. Language alone is too reductive. The blending of written and visual texts adds another layer of depth to the telling of one's life story.

Additionally, visual images "can often be integral to the construction of identity in autobiographical works" (Jay 191). In some cases, images can communicate more about a person's emotions and perspectives than words. In Salomon's autobiography, there are times when illustrations of herself are painted with full detail, and other times where she is merely represented with minimal tracing and shading. Often the less developed images correspond with moments in the story when Charlotte is feeling particularly vulnerable. Because of the power that such images have in communicating aspects of identity, it is crucial that scholars of autobiography do more to explore the intersections between visual and verbal recollections. When discussing photography, Linda Haverty Rugg says it is vital that we be able to "read" images to the same degree we are able to read words (238). Salomon's *Life? or Theater?* provides us with an opportunity to engage in this exploration.

The focus of my analysis is to demonstrate how Salomon combines textual narration with visual representation as tools designed to assist her in the process of identity preservation and ultimately resistance of Nazi oppression. *Life? or Theater?* is unique due to the degree to which Salomon does combine written and artistic texts. The distinctive intertextual nature of her autobiography warrants closer analysis. In order to understand how Salomon combines written and visual texts to preserve her identity, I first explain how she textually recalls general historical events yet visually reinforces the significance of these events through her artwork and, second, how her use of visual representations along with textual description emphasize the personal struggles she experienced due to constant Nazi oppression.

The first major political event Salomon presents in *Life? or Theater?* is Boycott Day. On 1 April 1933, Germans were instructed to begin a boycott of all Jewish merchants and business professionals. Salomon captures the chaos and hostility present on this day in a single painting, *Boycott Day.* Centred in the painting is a huge billboard proclaiming the new policy. The proclamation reads, "The Jew has made only money from your blood. The Jewish bosses financed the world war! The Jew has deceived and betrayed you, so—German men and women! Take your revenge!!! Once Jewish blood spurts from the knife, you'll have by far a better life. Hunt the swine until he sweats and smash his windowpanes to bits. April 1, 1933—Boycott the Jews! Whoever buys from any Jew, himself a filthy swine is too" (153). Salomon could have simply provided us with the written text of this proclamation. The words alone are biting enough to grasp the nature of Nazi hatred. The violence of the language, however, is reinforced by the accompanying image. A group of people is assembled in a circle around the base of the billboard. Behind them we see soldiers marching through the streets where they ignore a mob of people destroying the front windows of Jewish businesses. Despite the intense activity occurring in the streets, the presence of the billboard is the most striking part of the painting. The billboard bursts from the ground like a fist, its position in the painting as imposing as the words it displays. By blending the text of the Boycott Proclamation within this painted image, Salomon is able to capture the essence of violence surrounding this historical moment. Not only does the painting create a visual memory for Salomon, but it also clearly foreshadows for her audience that more violence is to come.

Salomon's autobiography also describes the events leading up to, and including


DER STÜRMER
BLATT DER VOLKSAUFKLÄRUNG
DER JUDE HAT NUR GESCHÄFTE GEMACHT VON EUREM BLUT
DIE JUD. BONZEN HABEN DEN WELTKRIEG BEZAHLT.
ER HAT EUCH BELOGEN UND BETROGEN
DRUM
DEUTSCHE MÄNNER UND FRAUEN! NEHMT EURE RACHE !!!!!!!!
DENN SPRITZT VOM MESSER JUDENBLUT
DANN GEHT ES EUCH NOCHMAL SO GUT
DRUM HAUT ERST MAL BEIM JUDENSCHWEIN
DIE FENSTERSCHEIBEN KURZ UND KLEIN.
1. APRIL 1933
BOYKOTTIERT DIE JUDEN!
WER DA KAUFT BEIM JUDEN EIN, IST SELBST EIN SCHWEIN
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Boycott Day (collection Jewish Historical Museum, Amsterdam, copyright Charlotte Salomon Foundation).

the chaos of, the *Kristallnacht* riots. She opens Chapter 1 of what she labels the "New Section" of the autobiography with a news release from *Der Angriff*. The release reports that a Jewish student studying abroad killed German diplomat Ernst Vom Rath. The release closes with the challenge "The German people will have their revenge! German men and women: our forbearance toward the criminal Jewish world-power has come to an end" (607). Once again, Salomon weaves this text into a chilling painting. The text of the press release is painted on a gray background in the centre of the image. A Nazi flag with a prominent swastika frames the upper left corner of the press release. The background of the painting comprises hundreds of arms raised in salutes to the flag. The colours are dark and foreboding. The text of the press release is the only piece of narration that Salomon provides. In this case, as with the Boycott proclamation, Salomon depends primarily on visual images to reinforce her message. If any artist were ever capable of blending the colour of evil, Salomon has done so with the sickly greenish-brown hue of the background to this painting.

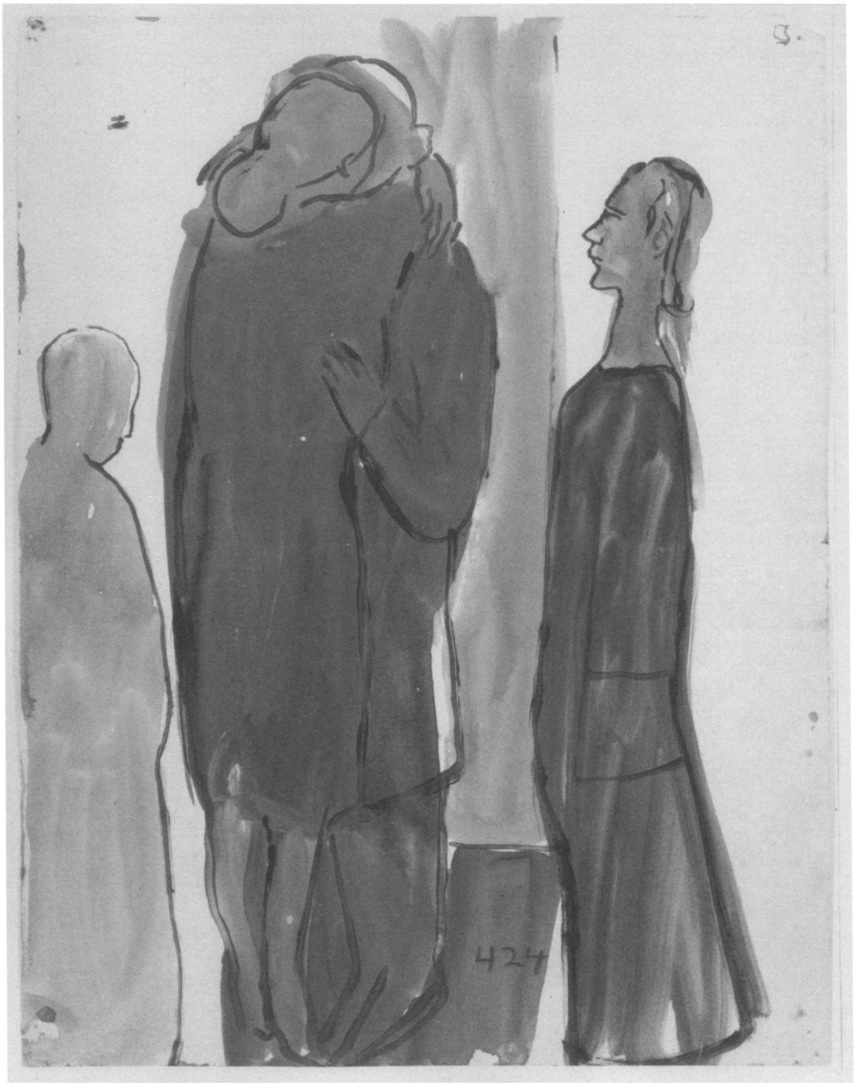
The next scene in the autobiography is of the actual riots that followed the news of Vom Rath's murder. The painting illustrates hoards of people running through the streets breaking windows and burning buildings. The bottom right corner of the painting shows two soldiers pushing forward three men who have been arrested. In the background, flames burst from building windows. The entire picture is cast in a sickly gray colour of smoke. The caption in the top left corner reads, "Perish Judea! Grab what you can!" (608). Although capturing only one moment of the events of *Kristallnacht,* Salomon's painting represents not only this singularly awful night, but it also prefaces the upcoming months of Nazi terror as thousands of Jews will be arrested or driven from their homes. Rather than depend on written text to describe the chaos of *Kristallnacht,* Salomon chose to communicate this via the use of visual images. The audience for her performance is drawn into these scenes, much as if we were watching actual film footage of the event.

Salomon depends more on textual narration when she describes the consequences that these riots had on her family. She gives several pages of her autobiography to the dramatization of her father's arrest and imprisonment. His arrest occurs during the chaos of *Kristallnacht,* but Salomon's attention is focussed on the pains undergone to obtain his release from Sachsenhausen. She explains in detail the efforts her stepmother takes to free her husband. Although there are paintings illustrating these scenes, the artwork is primarily of conversing faces. The focus in this section is on the written text and dialogue. Depending on the written text in this section allows Salomon to illustrate the urgency of the moment. Members of the family are in constant dialogue as they struggle to find a solution to this problem. Salomon seems to use more developed visual images when she wants to freeze moments in time, or at least slow down the action of the play.

While dramatizing the efforts the family takes to release her father from the prison camp, Salomon dedicates two pages of the autobiography to the illustration of what she imagines life was like for him there. These two scenes are a well-blended combination of textual dialogue and artistic representation. The paintings illustrate Salomon's father digging some sort of hole or trench as a Nazi guard hovers over him. The transition into these scenes reads, "Meanwhile Dr. Kann, former professor, is forced to do heavy manual labor" (644). The only other written text is the taunting of the guard, who grumbles, "You have to work here, there'll be no loafing. You've done enough loafing in your lives" (644–45). In this sequence of events, the written text and visual images work equally well together to help Salomon capture what she can only imagine was happening to her father while he was away. Her painting of the guard, with hands on hips as he glares down at an exhausted "Dr. Kann," enhances the guard's harsh words. Words alone would not have allowed Salomon to adequately communicate the horror she imagined for her father.

When Salomon's stepmother eventually succeeds in securing her husband's release from Sachsenhausen, Salomon once again shifts back to an emphasis on the visual to describe the joy and relief felt by the family. The painting *Homecoming* does not include any narrative explanation; thus Salomon depends entirely on the visual to convey the intensity of the moment. She centres the image of her stepmother and father in a tender embrace, while Charlotte stands to the side waiting for her chance to greet her father. This representation communicates the stress that thousands of Jewish families endured as the Nazis threatened their unity. Although we can read about such separations and homecomings, Salomon's visual image captures the conflicting layers of relief and anxiety felt at these moments. The concerned look on Charlotte's face as she watches her father and stepmother melt into each other's embrace reminds the reader-observer that, for German Jews during Hitler's reign, no joy was ever present without being wrapped in an even stronger blanket of fear.

In addition to the way in which Salomon's visual images reinforce the impact that historical events had on the shaping of her identity, her paintings are made to bolster the emotional significance of her more personal experiences with Nazi oppression. Essentially, "Salomon's remembering is an act that is at once personal and cultural. She represents the past as reverberating through and structuring the present of her narration, both mediating and being modified by it" (Watson 409). Boycott Day and the aftermath of *Kristallnacht* affected the lives of all German Jews. Salomon's autobiography captures

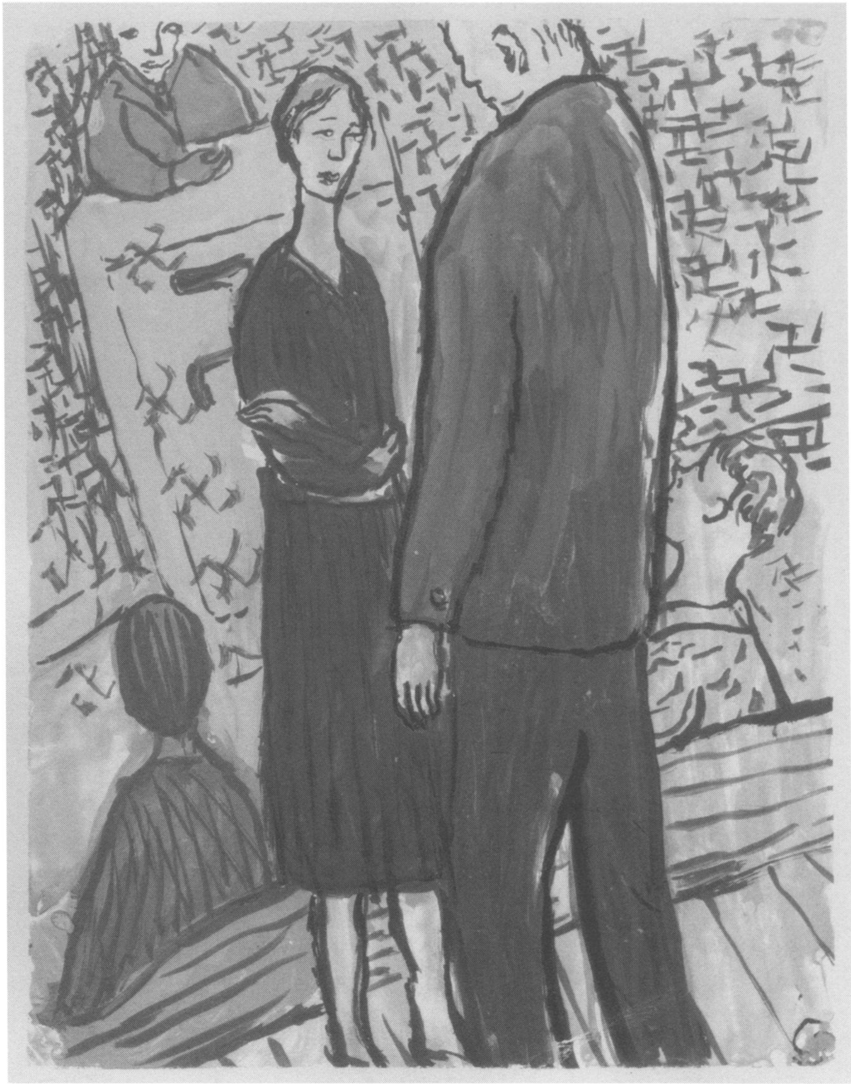


Homecoming (collection Jewish Historical Museum, Amsterdam, copyright Charlotte Salomon Foundation).

the historical significance of these events while also describing her own family's experiences. There are, however, segments in the autobiography that take a much more personal look at how Salomon dealt emotionally with the constant oppressive forces surrounding her. Her use of both visual images and narrative text in these sections of the autobiography intensifies the amount of empathy her audience feels. Rather than only reading about these experiences, we are literally allowed the opportunity to "see" her pain.

An example of Salomon's unique combination of words and images to communicate the emotional intensity of the threats on her sense of self appears in the autobiography when Salomon explains the burdensome Nazi propaganda present in German schools. The scene shows Charlotte declaring to her father, "I won't go back to school. You can do with me what you will. I won't go back to school. I've had more than my fill" (166). The text preceding this statement indicates that Charlotte repeats this demand "over and over again." The corresponding painting illustrating the scene centres Charlotte, with her arms folded in front of her in defiance, and her father in the middle of the page (*Charlotte Refuses to Return to School)*. Behind them, as if projected on a screen, is a view of Charlotte's classroom. A professor stands at a lectern that is decorated with a large swastika across the front. Students can be seen seated in front of the professor. What makes this painting so powerful, however, is that the entire view of the classroom is flooded with small red swastikas. The swastikas float around the classroom as if drowning those seated there. Although Salomon's narrative text never mentions Charlotte's reasons for wanting to leave school, the painting is explanation enough. When viewing the painting, one cannot ignore the oppressive flood of swastikas. The defiant, yet somewhat defeated, look on Charlotte's face communicates the significant power that Nazi policies had on her identity. Illustrating her ultimate demand to remove herself from this situation is evidence of autobiography's effectiveness as a means of self-preservation. Salomon shows her readers resistance as a conscious choice.

When she describes Charlotte's preparations for her departure to France, Salomon depends on artwork alone to communicate the pain inflicted by Nazi atrocities. The lengthy series of paintings, with little or no narrative explanation, registers Salomon's experience of leaving Germany as so painful that it is beyond words. Exile is a highly traumatic experience. Andreas Lixl-Purcell describes the emotions felt by many exiles as feelings of "permanent uprootedness," where one is forced to engage in "the construction of a new sense of subjectivity on which to build a new identity and a new future" (6). The final chapter of the main section of the play is entitled "The Departure." Although much of this section describes the plans that were made to organize her exile



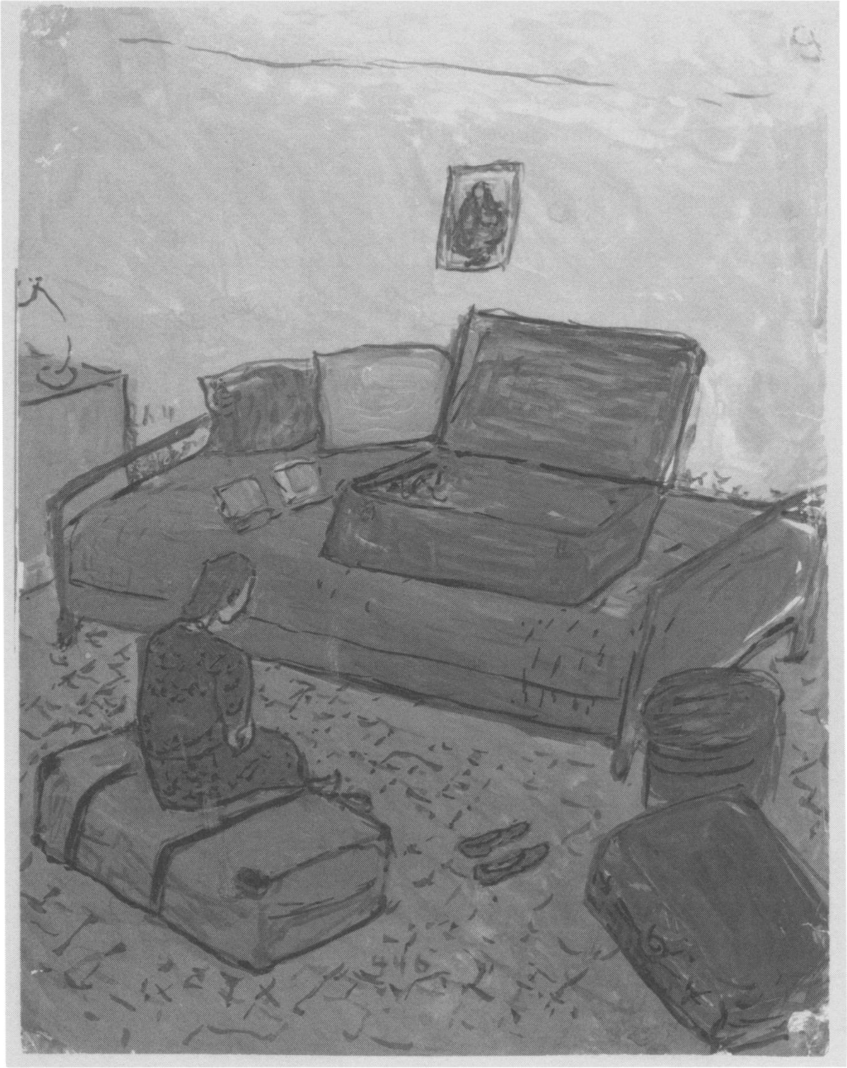
Charlotte Refuses to Return to School (collection Jewish Historical Museum, Amsterdam, copyright Charlotte Salomon Foundation).

to France, the most powerful portion of the section comes right before Charlotte must depart for the train station. Here, Salomon offers a painting of herself sitting on a trunk, alone in her bedroom (*Charlotte's Departure*). Arms clasped in front of her, she stares toward an open, yet packed, suitcase placed on her bed. With the exception of other travel bags and a lone pair of shoes neatly placed near where she is sitting, the room is tidy and sterile. The room betrays no hint of ever having been occupied. Irit Rogoff describes the symbolic significance of a suitcase as "the moment of rupture, the instance in which the subject is torn out of the web of connectedness that contained him or her through an invisible net of belonging" (37–38). When Charlotte must finally leave the safety of her bedroom, she will lose not only her home but also any remaining grasp on her previous sense of self.

Salomon takes her audience through each stage of Charlotte's departure. We see Charlotte walking through her home one last time, giving her father a parting gift and watching her house disappear behind her as the family leaves for the train station. Salomon includes seven paintings depicting Charlotte's departure. Only one of these paintings is accompanied by text, and that text simply relays her parents' words telling her that she had "better get on the train now" (675). The nearly exclusive use of visual images slows the scene, allowing Salomon to linger in the moment. As Charlotte prepares to board the train, her family surrounds her on the platform. She holds her father's hand as if afraid to let go. Once again, Salomon returns to the dark tones to establish a mood of sadness. The sequence of pictures continues as Charlotte boards the train, waves to her family, and watches them disappear as the train pulls away, all without words.

Whereas the narrative in this section of the autobiography provides us with the background information we need to understand where Charlotte is going and under what circumstances she must leave Germany, it is the visual images that truly create the emotional significance of this portion of her life story. What would have taken many words to express, Salomon can communicate powerfully and efficiently through a series of sombre paintings. Capturing these emotions in visual form does more to preserve the intensity of the experience, and it thus explains to the audience the serious effect that exile from Germany had on Salomon's identity. By illustrating her departure from Germany, she is able to forever claim that Germany was her true home and leaving it was painful. This part of her life is preserved through the combined power of words and images.

Life? or Theater? is evidence of the power that autobiography has to make a statement against oppressive forces. This analysis reveals that Salomon's autobiography



Charlotte's Departure **(collection Jewish Historical Museum, Amsterdam, copyright Charlotte Salomon Foundation).**

is consistent with Betty Bergland's assessment that, as a genre, autobiography "serves a political function" (131).

In addition to allowing those who have suffered a means through which to articulate their traumatic experiences, autobiography functions to inform the development of a larger collective memory concerning particularly turbulent historical periods. Joseph Sungolowsky states: "Autobiography is written as a testimony, especially when the author has lived a particular moment of history that must not be forgotten" (134). R. Clifton Spargo takes an even stronger stance, arguing that narratives of trauma provide us with "access to more difficult histories, providing us with entry into a world inhabited by the victims of extraordinary social violences" (114). Salomon's use of vivid artwork and her frank narration work together to construct a harsh critique of the Nazi establishment. As Felstiner affirms, "layering text over picture, explanation over event, drama over document, *Life? or Theater?* dissolves subjective and objective truths into transparency" ("Charlotte" 116). Although Salomon did not survive the war, her autobiography does serve as testimony to one young woman's struggle to make sense of seemingly senseless times. Autobiographies of personal trauma should not be discounted as merely self-absorbed therapeutic exercises. These autobiographies teach crucial historical lessons.

Perhaps one of the most powerful political statements that an autobiography can make is that such texts ultimately preserve lives. Although an autobiography may not be able to literally "save" one's life, autobiographies do provide some sense of assurance that a life will not be forgotten. Gilmore writes that "an autobiography is a monument to the idea of personhood, to the notion that one could leave behind a memorial to oneself [. . .] and that the memorial would perform the work of permanence that the person never can" (*Limits* 12–13). This function of autobiography seems of most importance to those who have experienced trauma and as a result feel an even more intense need to reclaim their lives.

Charlotte Salomon's is undeniably one of the most innovative and intriguing autobiographies ever completed. By weaving together drama and visual representations into her overall narrative, she presents the dramatic events of her life. She uses her autobiographical play to reframe her experience with Nazi cruelty in order to preserve her own identity. Pollock explains that "artistic practice transforms lived experience and communicates resistance or affirmation, celebration or pain, rediscovery or loss" ("Presence" 54). Although the Nazis eventually killed Salomon, she made a remarkable attempt to resist their power through the use of artistic expression. Unable to oppose the Nazi's physical strength, she wisely chose autobiography as her weapon to protect herself from their psychological force and ultimately to leave behind a permanent documentation of her life.

NOTE

1/Charlotte Salomon entitled her autobiography *Life? or Theater?* The Viking Press reproduction of her work, however, is entitled *Charlotte: Life or Theater?* I used the Viking Press reproduction and translation while writing this essay but prefer to refer to Salomon's work, using her original title.

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