Open Forum

Sue Vice*

Andrea Pető on Hannah Szenes: Multilayered Memorialization

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Abstract: This article addresses the important arguments made by Andrea Pető in relation to the 'circles of forgetting' in Hungary. In particular, it focuses on Pető's case study of the woman born in Hungary as Aniko Szenes, known in English as Hannah Szenes or Senesh, and the transformation of one into the other. Drawing inspiration from Pető's analysis, the article analyses the Anglophone representation of Szenes' history in the form of poetry and documentary cinema, to contrast the absence of Szenes from Hungarian memorialization with the ways in which she is remembered in the USA, Israel and beyond.

Keywords: Andrea Pető; Hannah Szenes; Courtney Druz; Roberta Grossman

Andrea Pető's wide-ranging body of work addresses vital ethical and historical questions about the construction and dissemination of a 'difficult past' in Europe. Her case studies from varied contexts include analysing the work of the artist Marina Abramović, Holocaust historian Father Patrick Desbois, literary and memory studies scholar Marianne Hirsch, biographies of women in the wartime Hungarian Arrow Cross and the importance of gender in the Cold War-era Hungarian intelligence services as well as in Holocaust history. In addition, Pető has carefully traced what she calls the 'illiberal turn' in memory politics since the 2010s, with a focus on the attacks mounted against the very practice of gender studies in East and Central Europe (Pető 2022).

In all these cases, Pető grounds her analysis in ground-breaking archival research to draw larger conclusions. My example of her work here is no exception. In this article, I will introduce and expand upon a particular instance of gendered

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***Corresponding author: Sue Vice**, University of Sheffield, Sheffield, UK, E-mail: s.vice@sheffield.ac.uk. https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4772-7739

memory. This is Pető's study of the memorialization of the woman born in Hungary as Anikó Szenes, known in English rather as Hannah Senesh or Szenes and as Chana Senesh in Hebrew.

As Pető points out, the biography of Hannah Szenes (as I will refer to her) as a writer and activist might seem so full of outstanding achievements and remarkable events that it would enable her to defy the 'historical oblivion' usually afflicting 'women who have done historic deeds' (Pető 2023, 11). Born in Budapest in 1921 to a middle-class Jewish family and becoming a creative writer and diarist from an early age, Szenes left Hungary for Mandate Palestine in 1939 where she undertook agricultural training and then joined Kibbutz Sdot Yam. Szenes was subsequently recruited by the British Special Operations Executive and in March 1944 parachuted back into occupied Europe on a mission to rescue downed Allied pilots and to take part in assisting Hungarian Jewry. Szenes was arrested while crossing the Hungarian border, found guilty of treason by a Hungarian military court and executed by firing squad on November 7, 1944. Yet, despite her 'martyrdom' and the 'significant literary oeuvre' she left behind, as the title of Pető's article asserts, in her native Hungary Szenes remains 'invisible' (Pető 2023, 10–11).

Pető uses the way in which the centenary in 2021 of the birth of Hannah Szenes was acknowledged in Hungary to explore the reasons for this invisibility. She concludes that the actions and legacy of such a remarkable woman have nonetheless been lost in Hungary to 'circles of forgetting' which intersect 'precisely in the narration of Szenes' tragically short life story' (Pető 2023, 10). Pető's analysis takes in those factors of which only the smallest traces exist in the conception of Szenes outside her native land. In Pető's argument, Szenes's story has been rendered unnarratable, both before and after 1989, in the Hungarian public sphere, affecting political discourse, public statuary and her grave alike (Pető 2023, 13, 21). The incompatibility of the available frames for conveying such a life history, those of Zionism or communism, has led to silence. Overall, the suppression of Szenes' memory is the result, Pető argues, of her history consisting of factors that are 'too much and too complex' for national recall, as 'a leftist, a Jew, a woman, a left-wing Zionist and a writer' (Pető 2023, 11). The memory of a Jewish woman, whose Zionist allegiance marked a 'radical move for dissimilation' through rebellion against the patriarchal norms and political ineffectuality in pre-war Budapest, and who was 'armed by the British' in her adopted home of Mandate Palestine, exceeds the boundaries of comfortable commemoration (Pető 2023, 11–12).

By contrast to this invisibility, Szenes has been widely celebrated outside Hungary, even if on grounds that are themselves selective. Such a positive commemoration arises from some of the very factors that have led to Szenes' occlusion in her country of birth. Pető lists those few cultural representations of Szenes that have appeared in the post-1989 Hungarian context, including a film, oratorio and drama (Pető 2023, 23). These works, however 'cautious' a commemorative canon, have been followed most recently by a paradoxical situation typifying

the illiberal turn in memory politics with its 'collaboration between far-right political forces in Israel and Hungary'. This has entailed a militarization of Szenes' memory, presenting her as 'first of all a soldier' (Pető 2023, 25). Perhaps most tellingly, a publication by MAZSÖK, the Hungarian Jewish Heritage Public Foundation, consists of a comic-book biography issued for Szenes' centenary, yet the 'crucial facts' of her fate, including her interrogation and execution not by the 'fascist Arrow Cross' but 'regular Hungarian soldiers', have been 'silenced' (Pető 2023, 25).

I will follow Pető's lead in examining Szenes's depiction by focusing on poetry and film, addressing examples that emerge from varied contexts but written or released in English. These works draw inspiration from the standard collection, *Hannah Senesh: Her Life and Diary* (1971, 2007), consisting of reminiscences by Szenes' mother Katalin and her fellow-parachutists in addition to her own writings, letters and poems.[1] The National Jewish Theater Foundation database lists 12 plays about Szenes from varied national contexts, including Aharon Megged's 1958 *Hannah Senesh* and David Schechter's one-woman play of the same name first staged in 1984. As is the case for Menahem Golan's 1988 fiction film *Hanna's War*, such works enlist the dramatic and dialogue-driven potential of Szenes' story. This includes emulating, most notably in Megged's drama, George Bernard Shaw's 1923 play *Saint Joan*, about the female martyr with whom Szenes is often compared (Pető 2023, 11). More recently, in 2007 Judy Batalion mounted a stand-up routine at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival entitled 'Judy Batalion is … Chana Senesh', invoking Szenes as the prompt for the historian's study of Jewish women's Holocaust resistance and her own third-generation identity (JMI 2007). These instances show the wide spectrum of symbolic and personal meaning to be derived from this story of a daring woman in wartime.

My examples here are two recent Anglophone representations of Szenes's story from the less usual genres of poetry and film: Courtney Druz's collection *The Hannah Senesh Set* (2015) and Roberta Grossman's documentary *Blessed is the Match* (2008). While Druz's work draws on Jewish memory cultures, Grossman's explicitly sets out to redress the fact that Szenes is better known in Israel than in the USA, as she has stated (Grossman 2007, 309).

As their respective genres of poetic representation and biographical cinema suggest, Druz and Grossman each places a different emphasis on aspects of Szenes' history and the facets of her identity as writer and Jewish partisan. While Druz's poetic homage emphasizes Szenes' status as a writer within a religious framework,

1 Other biographies include those by Anthony Masters (1972), Peter Hay (1986) and Candice Ransom (1993) along with a study of the parachute mission by Judy Baumel Schwartz (2010). The National Library of Israel hosts further primary material online, https://education-en.nli.org.il/primary-sources/hannah-szenes.

Grossman's film focuses rather on her biography as an activist. In the film, Szenes's deeds and her tragic death are highlighted through the phrase 'Blessed is the match', taken for the film's title from one of her best-known poems:

> Blessed is the match consumed in kindling flame.
> Blessed is the flame that burns in the secret fastness of the heart.
> Blessed is the heart with the strength to stop its beating for honour's sake.
> Blessed is the match consumed in kindling flame.
> (Senesh 1971, 256)

This poem is dated May 2, 1944, its place of composition given as Sardice, Yugoslavia (1971, 256), just before Szenes and her fellow-parachutists crossed the border into Hungary.[2] In the poem, the match is described as, 'consumed/in kindling flame'. Although her fellow-parachutist Reuven Dafne describes Szenes taking inspiration from an encounter with a female Jewish partisan in Yugoslavia, the moment of the poem's composition and her death not long after make it sound self-referential. As Mayer Nissim puts it, the poem suggests that Szenes envisaged herself as a 'self-immolating light for other Jews' (2023), at first as a pioneer and then as a partisan.

A different emphasis is apparent in Druz's poems, where Szenes's literary practice is presented as the source of her resistance and her actions are evoked by that means. This difference is embodied in Druz's intertextual homage to the same poem 'Blessed is the Match'. While its distinctive central imagery of flame and match is invoked at several points in Druz's work (2015, 35, 61), her poem 'Foundation in Beauty' questions the translation of the Hebrew word '*ashrei*' into English as 'blessed':

> *Ashrei*: hard to translate – "praiseworthy?" "blessed"?
> "Happy" is better

The last line of Druz's poem consists of its own version of the famous phrase: '*Happy the match consumed in kindling flame*' (2015, 30). The choice of 'happy' over 'blessed' makes the destruction of the match for the greater cause of the flame into the outcome not of an external estimate but a subjective choice that is both active and welcomed.

1 The Hannah Senesh Set

Courtney Druz, a US-born artist and writer now living in Israel, published her poetry collection, *The Hannah Senesh Set*, in 2015. This work continues Druz's poetic

2 The location of Sardice given here does not exist on any map of the former Yugoslavia, although Szenes' landing is known to have taken place north of Zagreb in present-day Croatia (thanks to the anonymous reviewer for pointing this out).

engagement with aspects of Jewish religion and art, evident for instance in an earlier collection inspired by the poetry of Paul Celan (Druz 2012; see Vice 2021). In the present case, the form preceded the content. Druz uses the Jewish ritual of counting the omer, that is, the successive naming in the evening prayer of each of the 49 days between the festivals of Pesach and Shavuot, as a device for structuring her poetry collection. This formal idea 'came together', as Druz puts it in an interview, with her wish to commemorate Israel's Holocaust and Heroism Remembrance Day by 'writing about Hannah' (Druz 2017). The use of a religious framework for a seemingly historical biography suggests that, for Druz, a depiction of Szenes's life requires both realms.

As Druz elaborates on the structure of her book, the counting of the omer, or 'Sefirat HaOmer', marks 'the spiritual and historical significance of each day between Passover and Shavuot' in the Jewish calendar (2017). Thus, the collection follows the ritual's 49 days in consisting of an equal number of poems, its seven sections named after the attributes of the human heart that are celebrated in each of the observance's seven weeks. Since Holocaust remembrance day in Israel falls during this seven-week period, adding Szenes's story meant that 'suddenly everything came together' for Druz's literary project (2017). In the published work, it is as if Szenes' story has attained the status of a part of the liturgy.

Druz claims that the inclusion of Szenes in such a collection embodies 'the relationship between an individual life and collective history' (2017). This affirms Szenes's status as a religious and national figurehead in ambitious project. It uses Szenes' biography to establish the connection between Holocaust-era past and Israeli present within a form determined by Jewish religious practice. In Pető's phrasing, this demonstrates the longevity of Szenes's status as 'a heroine of the political religion' in Israel (2023, 11), enlisting her literary oeuvre to that end. This is evident in the citation in the very first poem of Druz's collection of Szenes's Hebrew poem, 'Walk to Caesarea':

> God – may there be no end
> to sea, to sand,
> to the water's splash
> lightning's flash,
> the prayer of people.[3]

Szenes' poem of 1941 lives on as the lyrics for the now-widely known song 'Eli, Eli' [My God, My God]. As its original title suggests, Szenes' poem is a paean to the landscape

3 I have amended Ziva Shapiro's translation (Senesh 1971, 254) by changing 'prayer of man' to 'prayer of people'. I follow Davidovich's lead in using the phrase 'the prayer of the human being', although this version seems to be based on the song rather than the poem (2013, 92).

inspired by the coastal walk from Kibbutz Sdot Yam to the village of Caesarea, as shown in its opening address: 'May there be no end/to sand and sea' (Senesh 1971, 254).

However, as Tal Davidovich points out, in hindsight the wish that 'it never end' is temporal as well as topographical, expressing the desire of the poem's speaker to 'keep living' (2013, 92). The poem's adoption as an 'unofficial' Israeli anthem, including its retitling and the repetition of 'My God', a quotation from Psalms 22:2, act to emphasize religious apostrophe and underlie Druz's citation. In her usage, the land in 'Walk to Caesarea' is a metaphor not only for the natural world as a whole, but the human universe of ethical obligation embodied by Szenes' sacrifice:

> For those that love the world, serve it in action
> That it end not, ever:
> (Druz 2015, 3)

This combination of religious and national discourse determines which aspects of Szenes's life are represented in Druz's collection and in what way. Rather than allusion to Szenes' childhood, her family background or the details of her leaving Budapest for Palestine, it focuses instead on her parachuting back into Hungary for partisan activity and her final execution. The poetic form in which these elements are related enhances their legendary status, presenting in allusions or fragments these aspects of Szenes's story. Thus, traces of the practical detail of Szenes's mission are invoked in poetic form. They include the details of the parachute drop, represented in tactile terms of the 'tug' at the cord and 'silk' of the parachute, as well as the dismantling on landing of the radio for which she was responsible and Szenes's giving a comrade her final poem which he discards and then retrieves (Druz 2015, 25, 17, 26). Although the biographical source for these events, *Hannah Senesh: Her Life and Diary* (hereafter *Life*), names Szenes' fellow-parachutist as Reuven Dafne, here he is an unnamed figure taking part in a dialogue with the poet:

> if I don't return …
> he crumples the paper
> you've got to be kidding …
> drops it in the bushes
> she's giving me a poem … she's nothing but the light of a star
> (Druz 2015, 26)

These extracts seem to have the logic of a narrative, but consist rather of a palimpsest of voices and temporal moments. The translator of the *Life*, Marta Cohen, quotes Szenes' fellow-parachutist Dafne, who was so 'amazed' at being entrusted with her

poem, written 'at a time like that', that he 'threw it away' (Senesh 1971, 3). Although the poem turned out to be 'Blessed is the Match', Druz's anonymous Dafne quotes instead from the later poem 'There are Stars' written by Szenes in prison:

> There are stars
> whose light reaches the earth only after
> they themselves have disintegrated
> and are no more.

Like 'Blessed is the Match', this poem seems to constitute a brief and imagistic foreshadowing of Szenes' fate but also her illuminating legacy, as it does in forming the epigraph to the updated 2007 edition of the *Life*. Druz's poem appears to negate the original's central image in its version: 'she's *nothing* but the light of a star' (my emphasis). Yet the 'nothing' of this rephrasing highlights the paradox of the original poem, conveyed in its second stanza:

> And there are people
> whose radiant memory lights the
> world after they have passed from it.

Szenes's imprisonment is likewise depicted by Druz in the form of fleeting allusions to factual elements. These range from her drawings on the dusty window of her prison cell, as if were 'a chalkboard/in reverse', to making 'dolls/with scraps of cloth and thread' (2015, 5). This makes Szenes's own use of symbolic practices into poetic symbols in turn, showing her ability to make 'something from nothing' (Druz 2015, 5) in both a concrete and wider sense. In extension, the detail of Szenes's facing death by firing squad imagines an impossible first-person utterance: 'My eyes were open' (Druz 2015, 18). This acknowledges the accounts of Szenes' remarkable courage in refusing a blindfold in her final moments and her awareness of the circumstances of her mission. In addition, as befitting the work's liturgical form, it invokes the wider value of openly facing terrible truths.

Druz has stated that *The Hannah Senesh Set* is not a biography, despite its factual basis in the *Life*. Rather than following a chronological structure, the poems show Szenes's life in relation to the seven human attributes affirmed during the period of counting the omer. For Druz's purposes in commemorating Szenes, these range from kindness to beauty and endurance. Thus, the poem about use of the dusty window to send signals is titled 'Restriction in Kindness', suggesting both the terrible constraints of the prison setting and its transcendence through a contrastingly expansive virtue. In an instance that emphasizes her martyrdom, poem 27, 'Foundation in Endurance', alludes to Szenes's fellow-parachutist Yoel Palgi's account of her final moments as given in the *Life*, as Druz acknowledges in an endnote (2015, 82). This reliance on a biographical source is also evident in relation to the final words of the Hungarian

'prosecuting officer', Captain Julian Simon, to Szenes and his suppression of her farewell letters to her mother and comrades. The poem's first lines are those of a speaker honouring Szenes's memory:

> *There are no appeals.*
> She sat and wrote the letters
> and yet, not *dead letters sent*
> they were not sent
> but were not dead –
> her condemner read them all
> (Druz 2015, 41, emphasis in original)

The poem's speaker addresses a reader already familiar with this detail so that its symbolic and indeed legendary importance is clear.

Palgi's original account of these events given in the *Life* relies on hearsay, reported by an inmate on cleaning duty at the prison where Szenes was held. This prisoner overheard Simon's words as he presented Szenes with the ultimatum of asking for clemency or facing a firing squad: 'There are no appeals. I repeat: do you or do you not wish to ask for clemency?' (Senesh 1971, 199). The use of italics in Druz's poem for Simon's refusal of an appeal signals the presence of a quoted utterance and the exaggerated significance of his words to the reader in the present. Szenes's 'appeal', in the sense of her charisma and her meriting remembrance, is one received in the form of a poetic repurposing. This testimony is already layered and communal, passed from an accidental eavesdropper to Palgi and on to the poem's speaker, preserving not only Szenes's words of defiance but those of her accuser:

> even his words
> hang there at the start
> so the captain is kept alive by Hannah
> (Druz 2015, 41)

The poem's speaker refers to both Szenes's and Simon's actions when claiming in the final line, '*With witness I speak this*'. The way in which the captain is 'kept alive by Hannah' is through her renown as constructed by others, including a bystander and, in this case, a poetic witness.

2 Blessed is the Match

Roberta Grossman is an American director specializing in films that address questions of 'history and social justice' (Katahdin). Her works range from a biopic of the human rights attorney Gloria Allred (2018) to *Hava Nagila* (2012), a history of the

eponymous song, and *Who Will Write Our History* (2018), based on Samuel Kassow's book about Emanuel Ringelblum, Rachel Auerbach and the compilation of the Oneg Shabbat archive in the Warsaw Ghetto.

Grossman's *Blessed is the Match* is the first feature-length documentary about Szenes, although Loren Stephens has described how she and Peter Hay, Szenes' biographer and consultant for the released film, had tried to make such a work during the communist era (Stephens 2011). *Blessed is the Match* relates the events of Szenes' life by means of varied voices, most consistently that of narration by her mother, based on Katalin Szenes' memoirs. This is supplemented by Szenes' own diary entries and letters, drawn from a revised version of the *Life* for which Grossman wrote an afterword (Senesh 2007). In addition, we hear testimony from Szenes' former classmates, kibbutzniks, parachutists and fellow prisoners as well as commentary from such historians as Martin Gilbert and Judy Baumel Schwartz. In a version of Grossman's practice also evident in *Who Will Write Our History*, re-enactment is used to supplement archival footage. The re-enactments, in which actors take the roles but do not speak the words of the central characters, both substitute for and draw attention to the missing documentary record. Szenes' words are necessarily replaced with increasing frequency by those of others as the story progresses, while no visual record of her life in the period from the parachute drop onwards is available.

Grossman's film furnishes the historical context which Druz's poetry need not supply. This is a means for *Blessed is the Match* to flesh out the details that the poems take for granted while generating episodes of suspense within a pre-determined history. Thus, in the version of Szenes' final poem's retrieval after which the film is titled, we learn from Palgi that, even as the parachutists had just landed, she handed over a poem written for her fellow kibbutzniks back in Sdot Yam which he threw into the bushes. By contrast to the emphasis in Druz's poetic version on the words themselves, in the film, a recreation of this episode by the actors – Meri Roth as Szenes, Mark Feuerstein as Palgi – includes a close-up on the piece of paper itself. This seems to dramatize even as we watch the notion of the 'small gesture' with its entailing 'big things', as Palgi's voice is heard to say.

As in this sequence, the film's factual and fictional imagery is spliced together with deliberate obtrusiveness. The actor playing Szenes's mother Katalin (Marcela Nohýnková) while alone in Budapest during the war is shown holding a real photograph of Hannah and her brother Giora as children, while in other instances archival photographs are blended into the moving imagery of fictional black and white footage. We could see this as the filmic equivalent of Druz's practice of incorporating verbatim fragments into her poetry, equally designed to be recognisable as such. The use in *Blessed is the Match* of Szenes' own writings throughout, including from the last period some miraculously salvaged poems and a message to her mother (Senesh 2007), is

crucial to this emphasis on the voices of women, acting to restore what was 'missing' (Pető 2023, 25) from the official Hungarian commemorations.

Grossman's film is distinctive in taking a chronological form. However, its deviations from a strictly observed consecutive order reveal its mixed impetus. *Blessed is the Match* opens and concludes with footage of Szenes' state burial in Jerusalem in 1950, leaving the viewer in no doubt about her fate or that she is the title's 'blessed match … consumed/in kindling flame'. At the end, an intertitle accompanying the footage of the coffin in Israel 'traveling the country' affirms status as a 'symbol of resistance and hope for the new state'.

These public and personal factors are used dramatically in *Blessed is the Match* to foreshadow the events of Szenes's adulthood through other disruptions to chronological order, including its transformation into teleology. Thus, we learn that, as an adored child born into a middle-class, assimilated Jewish family, Hannah, the daughter of a famous playwright father, was used to 'having things done for her'. While the latter detail is presented with irony as the polar opposite to Szenes's later assertion of political agency, the literary renown of her late father Béla equally foreshadows that of his daughter.

The film's emphasis on Israel coexists with that aiming to situate Szenes' story in a context more familiar to American viewers. Thus, the accents of the actors reading out the words of Szenes (Alona Tal) and her mother (Joan Allen) are North American. This establishes the story's relevance for its implied audience in a sonic version of the visual re-enactments. Grossman's description of her film as a 'mother-daughter story' (2007, 311) marks a further effort to give the story a wide appeal and reduce any alienating effect of a distant time and place. Towards the film's conclusion, Szenes' claim, voiced just before her execution, might remind the viewer of Anne Frank: 'Despite everything, I believe the world was created for good'. Such a similarity to Frank, whose statement, 'In spite of everything, I still believe that people are good at heart' has been sometimes controversially highlighted, seems to join comparisons with Joan of Arc in claiming for Szenes a status as high as that of these globally known figures. Yet this entry in Szenes' diary is from three years earlier, dated September 1941 and written in Ness Tziyona in Palestine on the eve of that year's Rosh Hashanah (Senesh 1971, 133). In that context, it is part of Szenes' meditation on belief in God in the face of her personal loneliness and the worsening war situation. Placing such a statement in the immediate prelude to her death despite its earlier occurrence enhances its tragic irony.

3 Conclusions

The biography of Hannah Szenes reveals 'multilayered' facets that have led to uneven commemoration, including her personal idealism and 'independent ideas'

(Pető 2023, 24, 21) at a time of great historical calamity within different national settings. As Pető points out, the change in names itself conveys the complex transformation of Anikó into Hannah, the Hungarian-born woman into the Israeli, and indeed international, myth.

The works by Druz and Grossman pose questions about what role Szenes' biography can have outside the 'Americanization' of Holocaust memory. As Pető observes, Szenes' story does not fit the pattern of such Americanization's focus on the 'classic' type of victim, either those who died in the camps or 'survived and found new homes in the US' (2023, 24). Nor does the nature of Szenes' resistant actions and her writing always accord with the general civic and ethical 'lessons' that are taken, however inappositely, from Holocaust history (see Stone 2023). Adam Kirsch sums up the reason for the differential renown of Szenes as a diarist when compared with Anne Frank by claiming that Hannah's 'committed Zionism' makes her 'a specifically Jewish heroine', while Anne's 'universalism … appeals to readers of every background' (2020). In Aleida Assmann's formulation, Szenes is a 'religious martyr' rather than Holocaust testifier, her fate that of a 'potent adversary' rather than a 'helpless victim' (2006, 268). However, her death means that mar, unlike the surviving eyewitness, Szenes cannot recount her own story, that of a woman of great 'political and artistic creativity' in the 'fight against forgetting' (Pető 2023, 24, 10). Pető concludes by hoping that there might in the future be a fuller remembrance to Szenes, as an 'independent and revolutionary woman, who dared to exercise her agency while resisting expectations and conventions' (2023, 30).

Those encountering Pető's article on Szenes might eagerly anticipate her further work on Holocaust memory and the role of female figures pertaining for instance to the legacy in Israel and Hungary of the Kasztner Trial, in relation to which Pető mentions Katalin's witness statements (14–15: 2023). Readers might likewise wish for an account of Pető's own biography, as another 'inspirational' life story vital to the field of gendered memory studies.

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