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## Broken Links, Parallel Lines: A Couple's Holocaust Diaries

**Abstract:** This chapter explores two personal narratives from the final stage of the Holocaust. Both members of a married couple kept diaries: Pál Trebits wrote a diary in Budapest, while his wife, Gabriella Trebits, documented her experiences in the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp in 1944–1945. First, the two diaries illuminate the different personal timelines of the war in the Hungarian capital and the Nazi concentration camp, based on the writers' perceptions and interpretations. Second, these texts nuance our understanding of gendered – both female and male – narrative strategies during the Holocaust, illustrating that personal accounts do not always conform to traditional gender roles.

Historical reconstructions often overlook phenomena that occurred between the supposed peak of the Holocaust and the beginning of the postwar period. Consequently, the time between October 1944 and Germany's surrender in May 1945 is described, to quote Kobi Kabalek, as a kind of “empty time” and narrative void.<sup>1</sup> This narrative void is particularly challenging to address in Hungary due to the complexity of events and the vastly different experiences of the persecuted groups. While the ghettoization and deportation of Jews in other European countries occurred gradually over several years, in Budapest, it transpired within a matter of weeks, in the final stage of the Holocaust. For the Jews of Budapest, the last few months began simultaneously in concentration and forced labor camps, Budapest ghettos, unarmed labor service, and hiding.

Two Hungarian diary keepers contribute to filling this – not at all – “empty time” with their experiences and perceptions: Pál Trebits kept a diary in Budapest, while his wife, Gabriella Trebits (née Weintraub), wrote her entries in the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp. The husband and wife had no contact during

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<sup>1</sup> Kobi Kabalek, “Edges of History and Memory: The ‘Final Stage’ of the Holocaust,” *Dapim: Studies on the Holocaust* 29, no. 3 (2015): 240–263, <https://doi.org/10.1080/23256249.2015.1109357>.

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these months and recorded their experiences of persecution in very different sites of the Holocaust. This chapter explores the complexity of the final stage of the Holocaust through the diaries of the couple, the stories of two persecuted people, and the narrative patterns of a woman and a man. Despite their Jewish background, the Trebits couple did not identify themselves as Jewish, whether in a religious or cultural sense. As members of the illegal communist movement, they considered themselves persecuted because of their political views. Furthermore, this exceptional pair of parallel narratives is worth analyzing from a gender and family perspective of the Holocaust. This examination has a twofold aim: First of all, the two diaries reveal two different personal timelines of the war in two different places of persecution. Secondly, these texts add further nuances to our understanding of gendered identity and narrative strategies during the Holocaust.

In the final year of World War II, the largest Jewish community in Europe lived in Hungary. The central story of the implementation of the “Final Solution” in Hungary is the outstanding speed and efficiency with which the rural Jews of Hungary were deported to Auschwitz-Birkenau and immediately murdered. Scholarship has established that Auschwitz came closest to realizing the concept of modern, industrial genocide during the brief period in the spring and summer of 1944 when the Hungarian transports arrived. Due to international protest and fear of his postwar prosecution, Regent Miklós Horthy halted the deportation of Jews from Budapest on July 6, 1944. Although transports continued to leave the country despite the announcement, the majority of Jews in the capital temporarily escaped eviction.

In the autumn of 1944, with the far-right Arrow Cross Party taking power, ghettoization and deportation affected the remaining Jews. They, including Gabriella Trebits, were no longer transported to Auschwitz, which was under evacuation, but to camps such as Bergen-Belsen, where tens of thousands died not from strenuous, often life-threatening physical labor, but from conditions of mistreatment and neglect.<sup>2</sup> Meanwhile, a group of Jewish men of military age, including the diarist Pál Trebits, were saved from the deportations by the compulsory unarmed military labor service. Since only a marginal part of the Jewish population avoided deportation, Pál’s story is more challenging to integrate into the history of the Holocaust in Europe.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> See about the history of Hungarian deportees in Bergen-Belsen: András Szécsényi, *Csereláger. Magyar zsidó deportáltak Bergen-Belsenben és azon túl (1944–1945)* [Exchange Camp. Hungarian Jewish Deportees in Bergen-Belsen and Beyond (1944–1945)] (Budapest: Jaffa, 2025).

<sup>3</sup> The Jewish community in Budapest survived the war with 120,000 to 140,000 people. Tamás Stark, *Zsidóság a vézskorszakban és a felszabadulás után: 1939–1955* [Jews During the Holocaust and After Liberation: 1939–1955] (Budapest: MTA TTI, 1995), 44–46.

I have not yet found any other examples of married couples keeping diaries in parallel.<sup>4</sup> In terms of genre, the two texts are a woman's camp diary, written between November 1944 and November 1945, and a so-called letter-diary, written in the Hungarian hinterland between December 1944 and July 1945. There is no broad scholarship on diaries written in Nazi concentration and forced labor camps. The real-time narratives of the victims can be gleaned from diaries written in ghettos and hiding places, such as Pál's diary.<sup>5</sup> Among the narrative strategies of diarists described by Alexandra Garbarini, there is the strategy of family correspondents – those who write their diary entries as if they were writing letters to distant loved ones.<sup>6</sup> Pál's entries are such unsent letters; his diary is a one-sided correspondence carried on in his imagination.

The main criterion for selecting the diary excerpts in this chapter was the authors' reflection on themselves and each other. These entries come closest to answering the question of how the diarists interpreted what was happening around them and within them. I focus on the meaning-making role of diarists, aiming to understand their perceptions and interpretive strategies.<sup>7</sup> I argue that diary writing not only reconstructs personal representations of events and daily life but is also an essential part of it. Furthermore, the choice of narrative mode and means was influenced not only by the wartime situations of the diarists but also by their pre-war experiences, shaped by their socialization, cultural norms, social and religious practices, and the gendered roles and expectations of the era.

Applying gender as a category of analysis reveals that women and men experience the same events through different perspectives and therefore remember and narrate them differently. According to this view, men's narratives typically encompass more political and public content, whereas women's stories often emphasize personal, intimate content and emotions.<sup>8</sup> However, no era has a single

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4 Aleksandra Ubertowska analyzes symmetrical and complementary postwar testimonies: Aleksandra Ubertowska, "'Masculine'/'Feminine' in Autobiographical Accounts of the Warsaw Ghetto: Comparative Analysis of the Memoirs of Cywia Lubetkin and Icchak Cukierman," in *Women and the Holocaust: New Perspectives and Challenges*, ed. Andrea Petó, Louise Hecht and Karolina Krasuska. (Budapest: CEU Press and Institute of Literary Research of the Polish Academy of Sciences, 2015), 161–182.

5 Cf. Alexandra Garbarini, *Numbered Days: Diaries and the Holocaust* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), Amos Goldberg, *Trauma in First Person: Diary Writing During the Holocaust* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2017) and most recently, Amy Simon, *Emotions in Yiddish Ghetto Diaries: Encountering Persecutors and Questioning Humanity* (London: Routledge, 2023).

6 Garbarini, *Numbered Days*, 95–97.

7 Cf. Garbarini, *Numbered Days*, 1–5.

8 Marion Kaplan, "Gender: A Crucial Tool in Holocaust Research," in *Women and Genocide, Survivors, Victims, Perpetrators*, ed. Elissa Bemporad and Joyce W. Warren (Bloomington: Indiana

“typical” female or male experience or narrative. Autobiographical texts written by men and women – including those analyzed here – are much more complex than can be described by these two categories. For instance, Amy Simon argues in her book on Yiddish male diaries that “emotions were a primary way that ghetto diarists demonstrated agency during the Holocaust.”<sup>9</sup> Diaries reveal not only the gender identity but also “the personality and temperament of the author, as well as his/her attitude to defined values and ideas”.<sup>10</sup> All these factors, along with the historical circumstances at the end of the war, shape the narrative strategies in the diaries.

After briefly introducing the Treibits couple and their stories, I will examine how Pál’s diary turned from a documentation of events into an expression of impatient anticipation. Then, Gabriella’s diary reveals how she tried to interpret persecution as an order, and how her attention was diverted to the physical and psychological effects of camp life.

## 1 The Final Stage

The texts analyzed here were written by a woman and a man who were neither professional writers nor well-known public figures. Gabriella Weintraub was born in 1912 and grew up in an assimilated, non-religious Jewish family with five children. Before the war, she worked as a clerk; however, a police record indicates that she was also employed as an industrial artist. She became involved in the illegal labor movement through her brother. In 1968, the communist party recognized Gabriella’s party membership from 1933.<sup>11</sup> The young woman worked as a Red Aid activist. Women were often utilized as liaisons to deliver parcels and for charitable purposes. Social work in the Red Aid, which was viewed as the “antechamber” of party work, aligned well with traditional expectations of women’s roles.<sup>12</sup>

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University Press, 2018), 105. Alexandra Garbarini claims that “on the whole” fathers in letter-diaries to their children “tried to be more dispassionate than women when writing to their children, though some were not.” Garbarini, *Numbered Days*, 104.

<sup>9</sup> Simon, *Emotions in Yiddish Ghetto Diaries*, 15.

<sup>10</sup> Ubertowska, “‘Masculine’/‘Feminine’ in Autobiographical Accounts,” 169.

<sup>11</sup> Budapest Főváros Levéltára (Budapest City Archives, HU BFL) f. XXXV.1.a.4. 267, decision of the Budapest Party Executive Committee meeting, January 26, 1968, p. 12.

<sup>12</sup> Katalin Zalai, *Idegenbe szakadt hazánk lányai. Magyar nők szovjet emigrációban a két világháború között* [The Girls of Our Homeland Torn Abroad. Hungarian Women in Soviet Emigration Between the Two World Wars] (Budapest: Napvilág, 2022), 83–84.

The illegal workers did not mean to leave any traces, so we must rely on the documentation from police surveillance, specifically the state police files of the Ministry of Interior. The first record of Gabriella dates back to the beginning of 1935, when she protested several times during the trial of Mátyás Rákosi to secure his release.<sup>13</sup> In the same year, she participated in a trade union strike and illegal assemblies, and distributed communist leaflets – after all of which she was placed under police supervision.<sup>14</sup> The next event we know of is that Gabriella was arrested in early November 1944, sent to the Political Police's Defensive Department in Rökk Szilárd Street, and then deported.<sup>15</sup> The transport arrived in Dachau on November 14, from where the young woman was first taken to Allach. Then, at the end of the month, she was taken with part of the group to Bergen-Belsen.

Gabriella met her future husband through her brother, Pál Weintraub.<sup>16</sup> The family acquaintance became her husband in April 1935, a few weeks after the protests relating to the Rákosi trial. Pál Trebits was born in Budapest in 1909 and was a civil servant. He studied at a university in Brno, where he and Gabriella's brother became involved in the left-wing student movement. In Czechoslovakia, the Communist Party was allowed to operate legally, exposing young students to a completely different political atmosphere than in Hungary. When the young men returned to Budapest, they joined the illegal communists. Information about Pál Trebits in the state security register is identical to that in his wife's file.<sup>17</sup> We do not know how politically active they were in the first half of the 1940s, but in one of his diary entries, Pál reproaches himself for his party work, which was interrupted for years.<sup>18</sup> When the diaries were started at the end of 1944, Pál performed unarmed military service in the capital, working on fortification projects. His company was sent to the western border, where – probably thanks to his Swiss letter of protection – he escaped being deported. He was sent back to Buda-

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**13** As a leader of the illegal communist movement, Mátyás Rákosi (1892–1971) was arrested in 1925 and sentenced to prison in the first Rákosi trial. In 1940, he was allowed to leave for the Soviet Union under an inter-state agreement. He was the de facto leader of Hungary from 1947 to 1956.

**14** Magyar Nemzeti Levéltár Országos Levéltára (Hungarian National Archives, hereinafter: HU MNL OL) K-150-VII-9/b, Mrs. Pál Trebitsch.

**15** The National Rabbinical Institute (ORI – *Országos Rabbiképző Intézet*) was located at 26 Rökk Szilárd Street in Budapest. The site served as a Gestapo prison and transit center, and later as a jail run by the Center of National Defense.

**16** During the war, Pál Weintraub was sent to a punishment military forced labor company and died on the Eastern Front (Information from Katalin R., 2023).

**17** HU MNL OL K-150-VII-9/b, Pál Trebitsch.

**18** Gedenkstätte Bergen-Belsen (Bergen-Belsen Memorial, hereinafter: GBB), BO 4174, diary of Pál Trebits, 40.

pest, where he survived the battle after the siege ring closed, partly in hiding and partly in the ghetto.

The diary of Gabriella Trebits is the only known contemporary Hungarian account from the Bergen-Belsen prisoners' camp. However, we only see the transcript of the original text she wrote at the British hospital in the liberated camp in the spring of 1945. Since, according to her daughter, she destroyed her shorthand notes before she died in the 1980s, we are unsure what changes the author made during the transcription.<sup>19</sup> Those persecuted who remained within their home countries' borders had more room to write diaries than those confined to the camps. Pál was able to create the conditions necessary for writing more easily and obtained the supplies for journaling. However, during the Arrow Cross raids, the siege, and later an illness, Pál's diary was interrupted for a while.

The two accounts overlap temporally by approximately seven months and contain several points of intersection. The personal chronology of war diverged significantly after Gabriella's deportation. Captivity in the camps provided her with far greater knowledge and direct experience of the Nazi genocide than her husband, who remained in the hinterland. Even if Pál was aware of the mass murders and even accepted them as reality, believing in the existence of concentration camps was not nearly the same as living in them. What in Pál's mind was a question, a dreaded supposition, or a thought he had dismissed, was, for Gabriella, the reality of everyday life.

After the city's liberation from Nazi and Arrow Cross rule, the disparity between the two diarists' circumstances became even more apparent. On January 25, 1945, the husband began his search for a factory job. Fortunately, he had secured his place as "one of the victims of the fallen order."<sup>20</sup> On February 6, while the battle continued on the Buda side, firewood was being collected from the ruins in Pest. As daily challenges were being addressed, planning for the future commenced. Sitting by the stove in the kitchen, Pál took stock of all the decisions they needed to make while a small candle "floated and fluttered" in front of him.<sup>21</sup> In contrast, the "order" in which his wife lived in Bergen-Belsen, about 1,000 kilometers away, was still far from collapsing. The light in Gabriella's daily life at this time was from a very different source: "The crematorium burns day and night, its terrible flame and stench never for a moment lets us forget where we are, in whose hands we live," she wrote on February 8, two days later.<sup>22</sup> While her husband contemplated his future studies in engineering at that moment, she was not

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<sup>19</sup> Information from Katalin R., 2021.

<sup>20</sup> Diary of Pál Trebits, 22.

<sup>21</sup> Diary of Pál Trebits, 35–36.

<sup>22</sup> GBB, BO 4173, diary of Gabriella Trebits, 56.

thinking of the future; rather “thinking of nothing,” as she lay on the bunk bed. By this time, the unburied bodies were stacked in pyramids in the camp yard. Gabriella remained hopeful for the Allies’ arrival, but she was uncertain if it would be too late for them.

On their tenth wedding anniversary, on April 7, they both took up pen and pencil again. Pál eagerly awaited his wife’s return home.<sup>23</sup> On the same day, Gabriella reported for the first time that she had contracted typhoid fever, was lying in a bunk bed with two dead people, and was beginning to lose her memory as a result of the illness: “So this is my wedding anniversary day, and I do not remember your face, Pali.”<sup>24</sup> While the husband hoped to see his wife soon, Gabriella considered her return most unlikely. In mass migration across Europe, small groups of former deportees streamed towards Budapest. Meanwhile, vast masses of the prisoners from the evacuated camps arrived in Bergen-Belsen, which had 15,000 inhabitants at the end of 1944 and 60,000 in April, almost all of whom were ill and starving.<sup>25</sup>

The young woman likely spent the liberation day of the camp, April 15, 1945, in a semi-conscious state, and her note from that day indicates that she could only sense a British soldier standing next to her. On April 30, she lay in her hospital bed, lamenting her shaved hair and her teeth, which were falling out of her gums but still completely intact, while also crying at the tenderness of the smiling Red Cross nurse.<sup>26</sup> Gabriella pondered the possibility of returning to her old life and poured her doubts onto paper: “I am alive. But only alive. Can life give me something to make me forget all this? Will I ever see the colors or taste the flavors? Will I ever be able to work, walk with my lame legs and hands, play the piano, and read?”<sup>27</sup> A day later, on May 1, Pál was in a very different situation, on the city streets, taking part in the May Day parade. However, he also felt a similar sense of emptiness: “I was alone in the city where millions of people were celebrating, alone among hundreds of thousands of marchers, and in the crowded square, the speakers’ words seemed to ring out in a void.”<sup>28</sup> In Budapest, liberated

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23 Diary of Pál Trebits, 56.

24 Nickname for Pál. Diary of Gabriella Trebits, 74.

25 David Cesarani, “A Brief History of Bergen-Belsen,” in *Belsen 1945. New Historical Perspective*, ed. Suzanne Bardgett and David Cesarani (London: Vallentine Mitchell, 2006), 13–21.

26 Diary of Gabriella Trebits, 99–100. Women’s hair, whether long or infested with lice, was cut again. The British made an exception for those who were able to grasp what was going on around them, and the haircut had a terrible psychological effect on them, but the majority of women were not in a physical state to resist. Ben Shephard, *After Daybreak: The Liberation of Bergen-Belsen* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2005), 49.

27 Diary of Gabriella Trebits, 99.

28 Diary of Pál Trebits, 22.

from the Germans and the Arrow Cross, and in the liberated Bergen-Belsen, the catharsis failed to materialize on the paper.

After a report on the celebration, there is a long break in Pál's diary. The following entry, on June 22, is significant, as it contains the first news of Gabriella, the "dear patient from Bergen."<sup>29</sup> According to the entry, on June 19, he learned from a fellow prisoner returning home that his wife was in Bergen-Belsen. The husband wrote a real letter on June 29, and Gabriella's first message arrived on July 11.<sup>30</sup> This is the last entry without any comments in Pál's notebook. From then on, the imagined letters were replaced by messages delivered by the postal service, which was moving very slowly in war-torn Europe. Gabriella's diary concludes with a symbolic return home on November 1, her last sentence reading: "With a wonderful sense of freedom – as light as fluff, as freshly fallen snow – I, the survivor, arrived at Eastern Railway Station [Hung. *Keleti pályaudvar*] on the All Souls' Day [lit. Day of the Dead – *Halottak napja* in Hungarian]." On this final page, the remaining space is filled with later entries, including a count of the living and the deceased, as well as the birth dates of children and grandchildren.<sup>31</sup>

In 2014, Gabriella's daughter donated both of the diaries to the archives of the Bergen-Belsen Memorial. Although Pál's diary is not related to the camp's history, the connection between the two diaries justifies their inclusion in the same collection. Fortunately, the second-generation survivor thought so too. Despite the marriage breaking up after the war, Pál often visited the family. This was the reason why Gabriella's daughter from her second marriage owned the diary and decided on its fate.<sup>32</sup> Pál's presence in the family after the war also testifies to his strong attachment to Gabriella, which shaped his perception of male roles and is reflected in his diary narrative.

## 2 Long-Distance Relationship

While the presence of men has been seen as normative and taken for granted, women have long been absent from history, including the history of the Holocaust. To nuance this statement, Maddy Carey claims, "traditional histories may

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<sup>29</sup> Diary of Pál Trebits, 61.

<sup>30</sup> A few days later, Gabriella's name was the next certainty to appear on the survivors' list of the DEGOB newspaper in Bergen-Belsen. *Hírek az elhurcoltakról*, vol. 2 (July 17, 1945).

<sup>31</sup> Diary of Gabriella Trebits, 121–122.

<sup>32</sup> Gabriella died in 1989, but I have not yet found any trace of Pál (Information from Katalin R., 2023).

present the Holocaust according to men, but they do not acknowledge those men as gendered.”<sup>33</sup> Masculinities have been shaped in various ways throughout different periods of history. Carey considers the influence of socially constructed normative identities, which are “the conscious impositions of the state or certain strata of society.” Furthermore, multiple masculine identities develop within the individual’s interior psychological experience and are shaped by family and relationships.<sup>34</sup>

Pál’s diaristic self is dominated by his role as a husband, which grew to become an essential part of his identity and a sensitive coping mechanism for survival. He portrays his motivation behind writing as entirely private: he would like to “talk” to his wife through writing.<sup>35</sup> Since he chose a narrative strategy suitable for his goal, all his entries focus on the deported woman. His letter diary was intended to maintain imagined contact between those who were physically distant from each other.<sup>36</sup>

Pál began keeping a diary to summarize the events that unfolded after their separation in early November and up to the time of writing in late December. By sharing with his wife what was happening to him – driving her through the besieged frontline city – he made Gabriella a part of his daily life. Meanwhile, Pál employs a range of emotional registers, including many emotionally charged words that express his deep love for his wife. Gabriella is always referred to by some nickname, something emotional, a term of endearment used between lovers (whereas in Gabriella’s text, Pál is referred to as Pali). This time, it is a man who speaks in the emotional language traditionally attributed to female narratives.

During the persecution, the masculinity of Jewish men was damaged in many ways: they were marginalized, excluded from workplaces and public life, and could not become soldiers, only unarmed forced laborers. Antisemitic policies also undermined Jewish men’s ability to fulfill their roles as defenders and guardians of their home.<sup>37</sup> In the contemporary and retrospective account, according to Sebastian Huebel, Jewish men talked from a “self-reflexive and self-critical” position. Jewish men “confessed” the growing anxieties they felt in their roles as pro-

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<sup>33</sup> Maddy Carey, *Jewish Masculinity in the Holocaust: Between Destruction and Construction* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017), 3. See further, Florian Zabransky, *Jewish Men and the Holocaust: Sexuality, Emotions, Masculinity. An Intimate History* (Berlin: De Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2024); Sebastian Huebel, *Fighter, Worker, and Family Man: German-Jewish Men and Their Gendered Experiences in Nazi Germany, 1933–1941* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2021).

<sup>34</sup> Carey, *Jewish Masculinity*, 24.

<sup>35</sup> Diary of Pál Trebits, 1.

<sup>36</sup> Garbarini, *Numbered Days*, 109–115.

<sup>37</sup> Cf. Huebel, *Fighter, Worker, and Family Man*, 96–126.

tectors for their wives.<sup>38</sup> At the beginning of his diary, Pál depicts himself as a passive victim of persecution without any room for maneuver.<sup>39</sup> Later, he presents himself as having failed to act: “My conscience gnaws at me day and night. How could I have been so helpless, allowing you to suffer this fate? How could I have left you staying here so vulnerable in such obvious danger?”<sup>40</sup> As Huebel claims, with this helplessness, “another crucial piece of the gender mosaic that constituted Jewish men’s identities was broken”.<sup>41</sup>

This is the only self-critical entry in the diary; it does not constitute the main thread of the narrative. To alleviate frustrations about helplessness, male narrators, including Pál, often strive to demonstrate their ability to act. Those Jews who managed to remain active usually state that this activity was crucial in sustaining their strength, referencing it specifically when discussing behaviors related to male gender identity.<sup>42</sup> Pál listed his achievements: he had obtained a letter of protection, saved his wife’s brother from conscription, and even rescued his 71-year-old father from the march. Recounting these episodes in his diary may also have served as a form of documentation, representing his agency and autonomy. Pál’s diary reveals that the main elements of his gender role, following the inter-war ideal, involved the provision for and protection of his family. He was able to save his family members; however, he failed to deliver the letter of protection to his wife in time to prevent her arrest and deportation. The failure to save the person most important to him highlights the limitations of his ability to act.

In addition to proving his agency, Pál employs further strategies in his diary to maintain his connection to his wife and his optimism. Alexandra Garbarini describes this narrative strategy of the diarists as “hopeful reading,” which means that the persecuted interpret news and rumors in a way that allows them to construct an optimistic scenario for their future.<sup>43</sup> A similar strategy evolved in the months following the war. Since Pál was unable to save his wife, he trusts that events will take a turn for the better. As a turning point in the narrative, the Russian capture of the Buda side meant the end of the siege for Pál, as he recorded in his entry of February 20. He was projecting his situation onto his wife, whom he suspected was still in Western Hungary, from where she would soon return to the capital after the front had passed.

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38 Huebel, *Fighter, Worker, and Family Man*, 98.

39 Diary of Pál Trebits, 1.

40 Diary of Pál Trebits, 20.

41 Huebel, *Fighter, Worker, and Family Man*, 100.

42 Carey, *Jewish Masculinity*, 57.

43 Garbarini, *Numbered Days*, 81–89.

In early April, the news revealed the increasingly tragic reality of the concentration camps. The British had not yet liberated Bergen-Belsen, and photographs of the camp had not yet circulated in the world. However, newspapers were already reporting on Auschwitz and other camps. The press reports often optimistically exaggerated the number of expected returnees; they also recounted the horrors in the camps, suggesting that those waiting for someone still had reason both to hope and to fear.<sup>44</sup> In April, there was little doubt that Gabriella had been taken out of the country. Pál tries to reassure himself that perhaps his wife is better off not having had to endure the city's siege. In the capital, many, including himself, had been fortunate, but as he writes, "what was done to thousands of innocent people here is beyond the imagination of a normal mind, and sometimes it is hard to believe the descriptions and narratives."<sup>45</sup> It is hard to imagine that Pál hoped she would be in a better place than he was, but the "hopeful reading" of the news resulted in this scenario for him. Pál portrayed himself as a man determined to believe in reunion and not to give in to despair. At the very least, he did not use his diary to express his fear of losing his wife.

Not only did news reports begin to spread, but women from the liberated camps were also arriving in increasing numbers. According to the National Committee for Attending Deportees (DEGOB – *Deportáltakat Gondozó Országos Bizottság*), the survivors of the camps initially appeared sporadically, then in larger groups, averaging 200–250 people a day in the beginning of summer of 1945, rising to 7,000–8,000 in the first week of August. By July 1945, 25,678 people had registered with the relief organization.<sup>46</sup> Pál first wrote about the appearance of the deportees on April 11: "I can already see the women arriving on the street. What do they look like? My poor squirrel, how will you bear it?"<sup>47</sup> In the meantime, he was gathering more and more information, which he did not report in his diary, but which was undoubtedly beginning to give him an idea of his wife's possible situation. The news may not only have increased Pál's anxiety, but his failure as his wife's protector may have weighed on him as an increasing burden. The more

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<sup>44</sup> From March 1945, newspapers published a series of reports on Auschwitz. See, for example, [n. a.], "Az auschwitz haláltábor. Négy millió ember pusztulása a 'megsemmisítő telepen'" [The Auschwitz Death Camp. The Extermination of Four Million People in the Extermination Camp], *Népszava*, March 9, 1945, 3.

<sup>45</sup> Diary of Pál Trebits, 20.

<sup>46</sup> Rita Horváth, *A magyarországi zsidó Deportáltakat Gondozó Bizottság (DEGOB) története* [History of the National Committee for Attending Deportees in Hungary (DEGOB)] (Budapest: Magyar Zsidó Levéltár, 1997), 25.

<sup>47</sup> Diary of Pál Trebits, 57.

knowledge he gained, the more he could see how much suffering persecution and war could cause to deported women, including his wife.

In his April entry, he stated that waiting is becoming increasingly unbearable from day to day. By replaying this tension, Pál transformed his strategy for coping with his wife's absence. He continued to record the events, while at the same time, he systematically began to document his fantasies about his wife. The Austrian-born American child psychologist and writer Bruno Bettelheim, who was also deported to Nazi camps, writes, "While the fantasy is *unreal*, the good feelings it gives us about ourselves and our future *are real*, and these good feelings are what we need to sustain us."<sup>48</sup> The personal tone of the diary, as well as the intimacy of the "letters", deepened. Following Bettelheim, these fantasies were indeed unreal, but the strengthening of the bond that the man felt through them could have been very real.

At first, Pál recalled images of the past, the first spring of peace bringing back the nostalgia of springs spent together: "The first happy weeks of last year's beautiful spring in the greening garden, with you. Every time the sun shines on me, my Loló, I see you blossoming, I see you suntanning, I see you lying in the garden."<sup>49</sup> In contrast to the grayness of the city under siege, vivid and colorful memories emerged. The visions then went beyond reliving conjured memories of the past and became visions of the present. The man "dared to imagine" his wife returning home and their meeting. On May 8 – "Victory Day" – Pál celebrated Germany's unconditional surrender in the crowd in Liberty Square, alone and indulging in his fantasies. The visions did not appear as an alternative to reality, but they were incorporated into it:

Liberty Square, the monument to the Russian heroes, above the orating Rákosi, under a large red flag flying high, looking out over tens of thousands of people, the street opening into the square, opposite, leading into the distance, turns into a deserted, dusty country road in the spring from far away [ . . . ] and you are walking along it, worn, exhausted and ragged, but you are coming. You are coming!<sup>50</sup>

The "real world" and the imaginary world slipped into each other. Then Pál imagined his wife appearing beside him on the distant horizon: "You were standing right next to me, holding the flagpole; I felt it was easier for me to hold it. The wind waved your dress and carried your voice to the singing crowd."<sup>51</sup> The emer-

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<sup>48</sup> Bruno Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1976), 121–123.

<sup>49</sup> Diary of Pál Trebits, 45–46. Loló is a nickname for Gabriella.

<sup>50</sup> Diary of Pál Trebits, 60.

<sup>51</sup> Diary of Pál Trebits, 60.

gence of different sensory dimensions – sound, touch, and sight – made the vision even more real.

It cannot be a coincidence that Pál recorded his daydream episodes connected to the event that ended the European war on paper. The crowds gathered to celebrate peace, but the diarist, worried about his wife, could not find his own peace. Furthermore, he imagined his wife not just anywhere, but at a mass event of the legally established Communist Party. This would be the first time they could leave illegality behind and participate together in a political event aligned with their convictions, expressing their ideas openly through their presence and communist symbols. The diarist found a way to relieve the tension of waiting by putting the imaginary scenes into words. This way, he responded to global politics and the shifting public mood by adjusting his diaristic strategy.

The relationship between the woman and the man includes intimate moments spent together in the garden and holding a flagpole together at a political rally. Both private and public spaces become the setting for romantic, intimate scenes. Pál's political activism could have led to a more ideological purpose for keeping the diary and a more ideological reading of events. He framed his past and present experiences with the communists though more as a shared story with his wife than as a manifestation of his worldviews. For him, participating in the movement served to strengthen the bond between them. As a result, the man's private life dominates his narrative more than his involvement in public life.

Pál did not want to write about the persecution of illegal communists. Since he was unable to protect his wife, he took on the role of husband in his diary: he struggled with his guilt, thought of her constantly with hope, and “brought her home” through his fantasies. Meanwhile, Gabriella's diary-writing practice was shaped by entirely different conditions in Bergen-Belsen, some 1,000 kilometers away.

### 3 To Make Order

In both Eastern and Western Europe, prewar Jewish family life was “heavily structured along traditional gendered lines with men responsible for protecting their families and women in charge of domestic life”.<sup>52</sup> Gabriella did not conform

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<sup>52</sup> Zoë Waxman, “Towards an Integrated History of the Holocaust: Masculinity, Femininity, and Genocide,” in *Years of Persecution, Years of Extermination: Saul Friedländer and the Future of Holocaust Studies*, ed. Christian Wiese and Paul Betts (London: Continuum, 2010), 319.

to these traditional female roles and was also present in public spaces outside her family home. First of all, she had to work because of her lower social status. Her political activism, the risks associated with illegal movement work, and her experiences with police arrest and surveillance were not typical for women, who were mostly not even legally active in politics during Hungary's interwar period.<sup>53</sup>

Contrary to the traditional female narrative of the time, Gabriella's diary offers a more political and ideological interpretation of events than her husband's account. While Pál describes the deportation at the end of 1944 as a state of their "disconnection," in her narrative, she tells her situation as a result of the German "fascists" deporting the communists. Gabriella frames her situation at the community and political level rather than the personal level. Just as religious Jews interpreted persecution according to their beliefs and intellectuals considered it the crisis of modern society, so too did communists interpret persecution according to their own worldview. For Hanna Lévy-Hass, a Yugoslavian socialist diary keeper in Bergen-Belsen, as circumstances became increasingly life-threatening, communist ideals and values grew ever more vital to her as the only solution to future social problems.<sup>54</sup> Gabriella's perspective is anti-fascist, mainly in an overall anti-German sense, but does not align with communist ideology in other respects. She does not employ the communist vocabulary, as Lévy-Hass did when she referred to "supreme petty bourgeois types" of people, but Gabriella developed her own language to adapt her worldview to the extreme circumstances.<sup>55</sup>

By crafting her interpretation and vocabulary, she perceived a world that had become a new order, with "German justice" dictating all aspects of its existence, making everything German. Besides the ruined buildings of the bombed-out cities, she saw from the train on the way to Dachau that the bricks were lined up in "disgusting German order" and they traveled through the "strange German landscape" in the "German night." In Allach, they were registered with "German thoroughness." In Bergen-Belsen, they arrived through the "German woods." This new order divided society into free people and prisoners, reducing the latter to "begging slaves" in the "new Middle Ages" that unfolded in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>56</sup> Gabriella does not use gendered language, but generally depicts acts committed against humanity in her metaphorical images.

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53 Barbara Papp and Balázs Sipos, *Modern, diplomás nő a Horthy-korban* [Modern, Graduate Woman in the Horthy Era] (Budapest: Napvilág, 2017), 166.

54 Dominique Schröder, "Semantics of the Self. Preservation and Construction of Identity in Concentration Camp Diaries," *InterDisciplines* 1, no. 2 (2010): 138–141, <https://doi.org/10.4119/indi-936>.

55 Hanna Lévy-Hass, *Diary of Bergen-Belsen, 1944–1945* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2009), 79.

56 Diary of Gabriella Trebits, 23.

In the camps, the communists tried to infiltrate various functions and utilize the organizational system established by the SS to support their comrades.<sup>57</sup> Approximately thirty women from the Röck Szilárd prison were housed together in Bergen-Belsen, where they formed connections with their comrades from other countries. The diarist noted that the communist French doctor “slips medicine and sugar to our patients.”<sup>58</sup> This network may also have helped her secure a position in the camp kitchen, which provided her with more food and contributed to the conditions allowing her to write. Solidarity is based on comradeship, not female solidarity.

Beyond description of the new regime and the community, the diarist was also concerned with how systemic processes affect the individual, with the strongest sense of the past being stripped away from her. A month after her deportation, on her birthday, December 4, she wrote that her old life had approached her “like a distant, beautiful dream.”<sup>59</sup> Such a period was enough for her to be convinced of the personality-destroying effects of camp life. An entry from March 1945 reveals her increasingly shrinking consciousness: “There are no cities, no life, only camps, wire, *Scheiß*, brutality, disease, Germans, and Death. Never been there? No love, no life, no concerts, no poems. No childhood, no brothers, sisters, parents, family?”<sup>60</sup> Passages like these in the diary demonstrate how camp life disrupted the continuity between the three dimensions of time: past, present, and future. Witnesses reported a sense of time standing still, a static, massive present, and the disappearance of past and future.<sup>61</sup> The present also made the past fade for Gabriella because it no longer served as a reference point that could provide meaning and significance to experiences without any precedent. The receding past is the past of a civilized, cultured human being, whether male or female. Just like the world system, the description of internal processes is gender-neutral.

The conditions in the camp, as well as the emotional reactions they provoked, strongly contributed to the transformation of the personality tied to the old life:

The one who has arrived here must change feelings and thoughts if she does not want to perish. One must not think, one must not remember anyone, if one does not want to perish. However, how can the old mind escape once it is over? The bodies of men stripped naked on the open camp road, soaked in the rain, were piled in pyramids. I feel neither compas-

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57 Falk Pingel, “Social Life in an Unsocial Environment. The Inmates’ Struggle for Survival,” in *Concentration Camps in Nazi Germany. The New Histories*, ed. Jane Caplan and Nikolaus Wachsmann (London – New York: Routledge, 2009), 65.

58 Diary of Gabriella Trebits, 35.

59 Diary of Gabriella Trebits, 45.

60 Diary of Gabriella Trebits, 69.

61 Goldberg, *Trauma in First Person*, 33–43.

sion nor horror. No room is left in my heart for compassion; only indignation and hatred remain.<sup>62</sup>

In the spring of 1945, the corpses covering the campgrounds were an integral part of the Bergen-Belsen landscape, along with the barracks and the barbed wire fence. Documenting the camp world involves more than just describing it; it also requires an understanding of its complexities. According to Amos Goldberg, the narrative of camp life points to a seemingly unbridgeable gap between knowledge and experience: the sense that prisoners live in an extreme world where everyday rules no longer apply and the understanding that everything in the camp – including the bodies piled up in the streets of the camp – seems normal, even banal.<sup>63</sup> Gabriella knew that she should greet the sight of dead bodies with compassion and horror, but instead, she looked at it like any other ordinary scene. She felt that her healthy emotional responses had been dulled, and her inability to empathize, dictated by the emotional norms of pre-war life, led to apathy and indifference toward suffering and death. Gabriella was aware of the process described by Goldberg as an alarming and frightening feeling; however, the awareness and articulation of this inner process created a sense of self-control and mastery over her feelings.

Gabriella pays close attention to internal processes. Maintaining common sense in this extreme place and narrating these dramatic scenes could be overwhelming. Yet, the young woman's sensitive observational skills and intense self-reflection, stemming from her upbringing and personality, helped her express her feelings and continue writing. She proved to herself that her thoughts and emotions mattered and had significance, despite the impersonal massness of life in the camps, which made her feel the opposite.<sup>64</sup> However, the typhus outbreak seemed to override all survival strategies, making writing impossible for a while.

Conditions in the camps were highly conducive to epidemic diseases. Typhus, a rash spread by lice, broke out in Bergen-Belsen in February 1945. Gabriella first wrote about herself as a typhus sufferer on April 7, having been infected by a new bunkmate at the Revier, where she had been admitted with pneumonia and pleurisy.<sup>65</sup> The diary provides a textbook account of her diagnosis of typhoid fever in 1946, detailing physical and psychological symptoms such as dullness,

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<sup>62</sup> Diary of Gabriella Trebits, 63–64.

<sup>63</sup> Goldberg, *Trauma in First Person*, 15–16.

<sup>64</sup> Schröder, "Semantics of the Self," 126–130.

<sup>65</sup> Officially reserved for patients, the Revier meant no medical care or medicine, just a barrack full of bunks like the others, where patients were isolated.

muscle aches, headaches, fever, typhoid deafness, hallucinations, loss of consciousness, and loss of memory.<sup>66</sup> The woman's lines illustrate the extreme vulnerability of the abandoned, starving, and thirsty patients. From the detailed description of the hallucinations, we can infer a very close documentation of her experience.

Nevertheless, it is hard to imagine that Gabriella could write during her most severe state, with frequent blackouts. The entry in the diary dated April 13 is likely a post hoc insertion. What is certain, however, is that she considered this period worth documenting. Gabriella described the hallucinatory state as the arrival of an undefined someone. Later, she writes that this "other man" is a "part of her being," even if he is a "stranger." Instead of the "other person," a very familiar person, her mother, "arrived" the other evening.<sup>67</sup> The diary reveals a shared typhoid hallucination in which patients experienced a doubling of their personalities.<sup>68</sup>

Despite her deteriorating condition, the diarist was still able to interact with her fellow prisoners.<sup>69</sup> What the woman perceives around her is at least as challenging to describe in a narrative as what she experiences unconsciously. Gabriella watched as the newborn baby of her bunkmate – who "had neither the strength to cry nor much time" – was taken away from its mother, wrapped in paper, as the Kapo nearly beat her fellow prisoner to death, and then watched again as the woman's body was taken out the next day.<sup>70</sup> For Gabriella, the story of childbirth is not a woman's story, but rather the tragic intertwining of birth and death in the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp. We can see this kind of interpretation in an earlier entry, too, when she writes that they had to undress in front of German soldiers who did not treat them as "human beings". In the diarist's narrative, being forced to be naked is equivalent to being stripped of human dignity, not an attack on the human body.

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66 Géza Halász and Kornél Raáb, "Deportáltakon észlelt látási és hallási zavarok" [Visual and Hearing Impairments in Deportees], *Orvosok Lapja* 18 (1946): 1128–1130.

67 Diary of Gabriella Trebits, 85–86. Read more about the narrative of typhus in the diary: Heléna Huhák and András Szécsényi, "Real and Imagined Places in the Diary of Gabriella Trebits," *Genealogy* 7, no. 1 (2023), <https://doi.org/10.3390/genealogy7010016>.

68 Paul Weindling, *Epidemics and Genocide in Eastern Europe, 1890–1945* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2000), 4–5.

69 Hanna Lévy-Hass also caught typhoid fever. In her diary entries, she does not elaborate on her hallucinations. She notes only that she felt death closer and closer to her, no longer around her, but right next to her, even part of her: "I could feel his breath inside me." Lévy-Hass, *Diary*, 117–118.

70 Diary of Gabriella Trebits, 92.

According to models of male and female autobiographical narratives created by feminist literary critics, male autobiographies are constructed from the perspective of a strong, complete entity and depict reality as complete and rational. On the contrary, the subject of women's autobiographies has created a peculiar antitradition within the genre, which can be defined as unstable, community-conscious, discontinuous, dispersed, digressive, and devoid of a strongly marked compositional frame. However, not all texts follow these patterns. For instance, Cywia (Cecylia) Lubetkin's autobiography, examined by Aleksandra Ubertowska, is closer to the male model, as a text that is coherent and linear, told from the point of view of a strong narrator.<sup>71</sup>

Typhoid fever truly tests the narrator's control over herself and her texts, but Gabriella is also a strong narrator, like Cywia. This time, the drama unfolded not in the camp's space but in the depths of her consciousness. Gabriella becomes increasingly trapped in the processes within her body and mind. Typhoid was tragic for the young woman because it attacked not only her body but also her sanity and consciousness, which she had been trying to preserve throughout her diary-keeping. On April 12, she voices her fears: "I do not dare to speak. I cannot see things clearly; I cannot figure things out. Are the English coming here? How? Does everyone with typhus really go mad?"<sup>72</sup> Because of the role assigned to the diary (meaning making, organizing, seeing clearly), Gabriella consistently insisted on writing and, therefore, also "organized" her hallucinations into a coherent and linear narrative. She consciously experienced her illness, its physical and mental symptoms, and then incorporated them into her diary. This last phase of her life in the camp, an experience that was fragmented and unraveling in all its elements, was thus transformed, albeit retrospectively, into a story that could be told through writing. Even in this situation, documentation was the link with her; suffering that did not seem very sensible made sense through its description. Gabriella documented her hallucinations as akin to real events in the camp. A gap exists between knowledge and experience. As quoted above, this perception of unreality as reality is confusing, but as she writes, "it is the only way she can express what she is experiencing." And that is the point: there was a way to recount her experiences, and she found it.

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71 Ubertowska, "Masculine'/Feminine' in Autobiographical Accounts," 176.

72 Diary of Gabriella Trebits, 77.

## 4 Conclusions

In personal accounts of the final year of the war, it is not unusual for historical figures to find themselves in very different circumstances, having various experiences at the same point in time. Moreover, these situations do not fit into the central narrative of the Holocaust. According to Kobi Kabalek, the final stage serves as a perspective that enables us to tell alternative and unconventional stories, thereby shedding new light on existing narratives.<sup>73</sup> The two diaries analyzed here provide a unique source to reveal these stories: Gabriella Trebits, as a member of the last group of Jews forced onto deportation trains, and Pál Trebits, as a member of the last remaining Jewish community in Europe, enrich the diversity of these stories. Moreover, the two diaries not only narrate the events in Budapest and Bergen-Belsen but also reveal how these events influenced their narration.

Just as individuals perceive their spatial environment through cognitive processes that create different mental maps, the timeline of events has its own individual significance. The chronology of events in Budapest and Bergen-Belsen led to variations in the diary writers' mental timelines. They experienced the flow and speed of time differently, yet the sense of slowness was a shared perception. In Budapest and the concentration camp, the events, personal expectations, hopes, and fears shaped their understanding of time. For Pál, the primary challenge was the struggle with time that seemed to crawl slowly as he waited for his wife. For Gabriella, time represented the competition between the Allied forces' advances into German territory and the devastating effects of typhus on her body and mind.

Furthermore, the couple's diaries reveal that male and female narratives do not always conform to traditional role expectations. Autobiographical sources eliminate the stereotypical views that present men as "heroic, active, and capable of effective defence". At the same time, women are "passive, emotional figures, as if they were condemned to the role of defenceless victims".<sup>74</sup> The circumstances of the man waiting at home for his wife, and Gabriella's involvement in political work, created narratives more complex than the dichotomy of women focusing on private life versus men's political and public perspectives. While Pál aimed to maintain a relationship with his wife and viewed writing as a family matter, Gabriella addressed her husband only on very few occasions. She writes about her feelings not as a wife, but as a free human being who has been taken captive.

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<sup>73</sup> Kabalek, "Edges of History and Memory," 249.

<sup>74</sup> Ubertowska, "'Masculine'/'Feminine' in Autobiographical Accounts," 165.

In both cases, keeping a diary served as a survival strategy, based on what the diarists deemed most essential for their spiritual survival. The husband sought to soften the absence and reinforce the sense of belonging through writing. Imagination plays a crucial role in Pál's narrative strategy. The letter diary transformed the present into the temporary, while the imagination reinterpreted it. The visions of desire, in contrast to reality, created a parallel perception of existence that encompassed physical sensations and emotions. Conversely, Gabriella, who had been deported, felt disconnected from her entire former life. Nonetheless, she could have utilized the diary for imaginary correspondence, but life in the camps elicited a different defensive survival response. For Gabriella, capturing the reality of the camp rather than the imagination of her pre- or postwar life proved decisive. The young woman delineated her boundaries through writing. When writing could no longer connect Gabriella to the past or lift her out of the present, it fostered an inner world by connecting her to herself – a self she had shaped as she lost some aspects of her old identity and personality while preserving others. Writing was not primarily a space for revisiting her old life but rather a foundation for self-reflection triggered by the distance from it.

Applying diary writing for different survival strategies results in differences in narrative, compositional, and rhetorical structures. Pál's goal is to fulfill the role of husband. To this end, he chooses the letter-diary as his narrative mode, employing the following devices: demonstrating his ability to act, engaging in hopeful reading, and engaging in fantasy. Gabriella's goal is to preserve her sanity, and she achieves this through self-reflective and self-documenting writing. Her tools are making order and meaning in the Nazis' world, in the body-covered camp yard, and in her mind. We can understand these texts more effectively if we examine them not in terms of masculine and feminine, but in terms of the diarists' relationship to reality/imagination, or the external/internal. Gabriella strives very hard to control the narrative, searching for order in the Nazi world and – even while suffering from typhus – recounting her hallucinations as a rational story. Pál is sometimes carried away by his imagination, detaching himself from reality to satisfy his emotional needs and alleviate the absence of his beloved woman. For the diarists, inside and outside mean different spheres: for Pál, it is the time spent together in the garden and the crowd participating in the communist celebration in Liberty Square; for Gabriella, it is the camp yard covered with dead bodies and the hallucinations that arise in her feverish, aching head. The former marks the boundaries between private and public life in the postwar hinterland. At the same time, the latter represents a place where the protection of both body and psyche is necessary for survival.

The most striking common feature of the Trebits couple's diaries is Gabriella's central place in both narratives. In other words, Pál wrote for Gabriella, and

Gabriella wrote for herself. The husband's letter diary was used to maintain the relationship with his wife during their long-distance marriage; for Gabriella, it was to maintain a relationship with herself. In this way, these unique diaries demonstrate the crucial role of historical context and time, particularly in the chaotic final stage of the war, which creates a distinct space for perception and meaning-making.

