**4. What role does photography play in the (re)construction of Maron’s ‘Familiengeschichte’, *Pawels Briefe*?**

Photography, since its conception, has played a key role in family narratives and family identities. Even before photography became widespread with the invention of the Kodak camera, [[1]](#footnote--1) formal family photographs were taken and passed from generation to generation, thus becoming an integral part of the way we remember, and the way we view our identity within the family. Hirsch introduces a concept she refers to as postmemory:

‘Postmemory describes the relationship of the second generation to powerful, often traumatic, experiences that preceded their births but that were nevertheless ruthlessly transmitted to them so deeply as to seem to constitute memories in their own right.’ [[2]](#footnote-0)

For Hirsch, photographs are one of the most important media through which postmemory asserts itself: ‘Holocaust photographs are the fragmentary remnants that shape the cultural work of postmemory’. [[3]](#footnote-1)

In *Pawels Briefe* photographs are one of the main means through which Maron attempts to reconstruct the story of her family, beginning with the lives of her maternal grandparents Pawel and Josefa Iglarz. Because Maron never met her grandparents, in order to do this she relies on sources external to her own memories. Throughout the text she draws her information from her mother’s memories; some historical documents such as her grandfather Pawel’s birth certificate; letters between Pawel and his children from his time in the ghetto Belchatow and also family photographs. This essay will deal with the role that photography plays throughout the book, discussing first the way photographs and their accompanying imagetexts [[4]](#footnote-2) are used, and then discussing the relationship between photography and memory.

Within the text itself, photographs appear in the top left hand corner of a double page spread, and then are frequently repeated zoomed in or enlarged following a page turn, in the bottom right hand corner of the next page (the first example of this layout being on p26 and p29). This gap between photographs means that the reader, on coming to the second one, must turn back to the first and look at it again. This brings to mind the idea that ‘in order to see a photograph well, it is best to look away or close your eyes’ [[5]](#footnote-3). This page turn gives the reader a moment to ‘look away’, and then be presented with the photograph again, to view it with fresh eyes. As such, the photographs have a greater impact on the reader: we are forced to look at them much more closely than we otherwise would. This layout shows that the photographs in *Pawels Briefe* have more than an illustrative function: they are a source from which Maron seeks to draw information about her family and about herself.

By presenting some of the photographs enlarged, Maron draws the reader’s attention to the details which she herself finds most interesting or most moving, or which she considers to be of particular significance. Sometimes, such as is the case with the studio photograph that was taken when the family planned to move to America, this is stated explicitly. Maron writes: ‘Dieses Foto habe ich schon als Kind geliebt, wahrscheinlich weil meine Mutter, die darauf erst fünf oder sechs Jahre alt ist, so hübsch wenn auch so deutlich misslaunig aussieht’ (p.46). Sure enough, we later see the picture enlarged to show just Hella’s face. Sometimes, however, it is less explicit and the reader must construe for themself what Maron sees. An example of this is the photograph of Hella at the *Kreisparteischule* (p.174). Here, the enlarged photograph not only serves the function of showing the reader which member of the group Hella is, but also shows the people behind Hella and most particularly the communist flag in the background. In this one photograph, we see the mother-daughter conflict that is one of the themes in the text: Maron finds it hard to forgive her mother for believing so utterly in communism. Thus in the enlarged picture (p.179), the reader sees what Maron sees (her mother sitting smiling, beneath the communist flag) although our attention is not drawn to this detail in the imagetext. In this, we see that photography in the text is manipulated to show the reader Maron’s own viewpoint, both explicitly and implicitly.

More often than not, the photographs in the text are accompanied by a section in which they are contextualised or described by Maron: an imagetext. By doing this, she involves the reader further in the narrative. Discussing the Winter Garden Photograph in Barthes, Hirsch writes:

‘Barthes cannot show us the photograph because we stand outside the familial network of looks and thus cannot *see* the picture in the way that Barthes must. To us it would be just another generic family photograph from a long time ago.’

In the same way, in order to prevent us from dismissing the photographs as merely ‘just another generic family photograph’ or even as simply a historical source, in her imagetexts Maron forces the reader to view the pictures through her eyes, and dwell on them as would be done if the people within them were known to the reader. To use terminology from Barthes, we can see the Studium (‘it is by the Studium that I am interested in so many photographs, whether I receive them as political testimony or enjoy them as good, historical sources’ [[6]](#footnote-4)) of the photographs easily enough, and appreciate them for what they are, and Maron draws our attention to what is, for her, the Punctum (‘this is the element which rises from the scene, shoots out of it like and arrow and pierces me’ [[7]](#footnote-5)), by enlarging or cropping the photographs and showing them again a page later. Thus, through the layout and the imagetexts, Maron allows the reader to see her family photographs as she sees them, and therefore gives them extra significance, not just as historical sources and inspiration for her story, but as forming parts of the narrative in their own right.

In spite of the fact that photographs are one of the key historical sources used in the text, they are on several occasions shown to be somewhat unreliable. In an interview quoted by Byrnes, Maron says: ‘Ich wollte das Erinnern als etwas Vages, Unvollständiges, Verändbares vorführen.’ [[8]](#footnote-6) Through this means, even the photographs we see become filled with uncertainty. Barthes refers to photographs as being evidential: they show ‘what has been’ (ça a été) [[9]](#footnote-7). In a sense, not all of the photographs used in the text bear much weight as sources: they are shown by Maron to be as subjective and unreliable as memory itself, and do not always enhance the factual nature of the story that Maron chooses to tell. According to Barthes, ‘photography never lies: or rather, it can lie as to the meaning of the thing, being by nature *tendentious*, never as to its existence. […] Every photograph is a certificate of presence.’ [[10]](#footnote-8) Just because a photograph shows a moment in time, it does not mean that it shows any more than this, and any other reading must come from the viewer themselves [[11]](#footnote-9). When Maron moves from talking about what the photograph actually shows to hypothesising about the way the people in them were feeling at the time and what they were thinking about, we see that photography, as a means of recapturing the past, has fallen short. Of Josefa in the photograph captioned ‘Pawel und Josefa in Kurow’ (p.96), Maron writes:

‘Weint sie? Oder betet sie? Fragt sie ihren Gott, womit sie diese Strafe verdient hat? Flackert, vielleicht, nur für einen einzigen kurzen Augenblick, der Gedanke auf, daß es vielleicht doch eine Sünde war, einen Juden zu heiraten?’ (p.97).

Here, it is shown that the photograph reveals at once a lot and very little. We can see, literally, Pawel and Josefa sitting side by side in the sun, Josefa holding flowers and Pawel’s arm around her, but anything further than this is imposed on the photograph by the viewer (whether the viewer is Maron, or the reader). The effect of these imagetexts on the reader can be described by Hirsch thus:

‘Writing the image accomplishes even more in this scene of mourning: it undoes the objectification of the still photograph and thereby takes it out of the realm of stasis, immobility, mortification […] into fluidity, movement and thus, finally, life.’ [[12]](#footnote-10)

Maron seeks to bring her grandparents to life, not just for the reader, but also for herself, through these imagetexts in which she describes more than can possibly be read from a mere photograph.

The interplay between forgetting and remembering plays a very important role throughout the text. Sometimes, Maron uses photographs as testimony to fact, as can be seen in the language she uses to refer to them. The photograph taken prior to the family’s planned migration to America is introduced thus: ‘Einziges Zeugnis dieses ungeheuren Vorhabens, […], ist ein Familienfoto’ (p.45). The photo here is described as proof or testimony for something that actually happened, backing up Hella’s memories. Photography, however, is not always portrayed as being so reliable as fact, or so connected to memory. For example, Maron discusses a photograph showing Pawel’s father, her great-grand father, reading a book, when according to Pawel’s birth certificate he was in fact illiterate. The description, or imagetext, comes a page later than the photograph itself, so that it comes as something of a surprise to the reader that the man who looks so learned was in fact illiterate. In this instance, what the photograph shows is misleading, and we rely on other documents to find out more. Later in the text there is a photograph of a young Maron and her mother at a demonstration. This, it transpires, is an event almost entirely unremembered by both Maron and her mother:

‘Ob ich die flüchtigen Bilder, die sich für mich mit dem Foto verbinden, wirklich auf dieser Demonstration gesehen habe oder auf einer anderen oder ob ich sie nur aus einem Film kenne, der mich an das Foto erinnert hat kann ich nicht sicher sagen.’

In this situation we have the photographic evidence, but no memory to back it up. Through this, Maron shows how unreliable memory is. She does not trust her memories, but the photo exists nevertheless, in all its ‘evidential force’ [[13]](#footnote-11). Maron uses many different sources from which to draw her story, but none of them are shown to be hugely reliable: even when something is shown unequivocally, either through the existence of a letter, document or photograph from the time, it is often unremembered, and memory is shown to be highly unreliable. The sources used serve to highlight how little can be remembered, even of what may seem to be life-changing events at the time.

As Byrnes argues: ‘the immediate visual impact of photographs ostensible prompts recollection and authenticates the past. However, their role in Maron’s narrative is complex and occasionally ambiguous’. [[14]](#footnote-12) In *Pawels Briefe*, Maron illustrates how unreliable memory can be and how fragile the sources that we have are: she uses photography to back up and support memory, but at the same time acknowledges that photography is, by its nature, a flawed means of remembering and that it continually falls short of what she asks of it. The sense of uncertainty that pervades the text is not removed by the photographs, but is, on occasion, enhanced. The role that photography plays throughout the text is a complex one that varies from photograph to photograph: sometimes it has an illustrative function, sometimes it acts as a historical source or testament to the truth of something and sometimes Maron seeks, within photographs, more than can possible be read from the photograph itself, simply because of the nature of photography. Photographs, by nature, cannot have more than an evidential role, showing ‘what has been’, although the role that it plays in *Pawels Briefe* asks more of it than this.

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2. Marianne Hirsch, ‘The Generation of Postmemory’, *Poetics Today*, Vol. 29 No.1: 103-129, (p. 103). [↑](#footnote-ref-0)
3. Ibid, p. 103. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
4. Term taken from W.J.T. Mitchell in Hirsch,1997, p. 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
5. Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, London: Vintage 1993, p. 53. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
6. Barthes, 1993, p. 26. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
7. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
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9. Barthes, 1993, p. 85. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
10. Ibid, p. 87. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
11. Ibid, p. 20. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
12. Hirsch, 1997, p. 3-4. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
13. Barthes, 1993, p. 88. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
14. Byrnes, 2011, p. 122. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)