The odds that I would meet Diana Kurz at the 2006 New York gathering of Veteran Feminists of America were slim. Although we were both included in "the book," we did not know each other's work. But when, on a rainy October afternoon, hundreds of women gathered to celebrate the publication of Barbara Love's encyclopedic volume, *Feminists Who Changed America, 1963-1975*[^1], some force of chance had us sitting a row apart.

We met at the end of a long afternoon session, when I turned around to apologize to the woman sitting right behind me because I had not passed the microphone to her during the open discussion (having promised it to someone else), and she never got to speak. Ostensibly we started to talk because of something I had said about the importance of art to the feminist project. But, I wonder, was it that, or did we somehow recognize each other as Viennese refugees posing as Americans? Did we catch some slight trace of German beneath our seemingly native English?

I remember an immediate sense of familiarity as soon as we started to speak. We quickly learned: not only were we both Viennese Jews (born within three years of each other, I in 1933, she in 1936), not only had both our families fled Vienna within a year of each other,[^2] not only had both of us as children wandered from country to country, but both our families...
DURGA 1977 Oil on canvas, 108 x 60 inches
ZORA AND MICHAEL KURZ 1999
Oil on canvas and paper, 75 ½ x 60 x 7 inches
DORRIT KURZ 1994
Oil on paper on canvas, 10 x 10 inches
Collection of Rachel Woursel

ZORA KURZ 1994
Oil on paper on canvas, 10 x 10 inches

below

MICHAEL and DORRIT KURZ 1990
Oil on canvas, 53 x 64 inches
LAST JOURNEY 1992
Oil on canvas and printed paper, 96 x 120 inches
Collection of Historisches Museum der Stadt Wien, Vienna

opposite
FENCE #3 1993
Oil on canvas, 58 x 44 inches
They separated the do
do so that no one instea
d saw.
below

VIENNA 1994
Oil on canvas and printed paper, 84 x 104 x 6 inches
Collection Historisches Museum der Stadt Wien, Vienna

opposite top
SELF-PORTRAIT 2000
Oil on canvas and hand-printed fabric, 52 x 66 inches
FREEDOM FIGHTERS 1999
Oil on canvas, paper, and wood, 75 1/2 x 57 inches
Diana Kurz with FACES
Oil on canvas, individual portraits, 12 x 12 inches or 12 x 14 inches at the opening of her one-woman show at Show Walls, New York City, January 2008

Evelyn Torton Beck in front of Kurz’s VIENNATRIPTYCH at the opening of Kurz’s one-woman show at Show Walls, New York City, January 2008
had finally escaped the war in the summer of 1940 in rough and dangerous voyages on the very last boats allowed out of Europe (I from Italy, Kurz from England). Then we had both landed in New York City and grown up in its boroughs (I in Brooklyn, Kurz in Queens). As dislocated youths, in our teens, both of us had haunted the art museums of the city as soon as we could take the subway uptown alone.

Although we quickly lost sight of each other in the mob scene that followed the end of the session, in that chance encounter, a powerful connection had been forged. I promised to call when next I came to the city and she promised to show me her work, especially the Holocaust paintings, which were surprising even to her.

It took me many months to get to Kurz’s studio, but the experience of viewing these beautiful, larger-than-life paintings of people in Kurz’s family and others who had perished in the Holocaust was more powerful than I could have imagined. Showing me the paintings was itself a labor of love, because it took great physical exertion for her to move the huge, heavy oils-on-canvas (many as large as nine by six feet) out of her storage closet so I could see them.

In a published interview, Kurz has said, “for me, the size of a painting has to do with the size of the subject, and it was a very, very big subject.” Elsewhere she states emphatically, “I always knew about the Holocaust.” When she was a child of ten, Kurz’s parents took in two orphaned cousins her own age who had survived the concentration camps and talked about their experiences openly and often in graphic detail. With the arrival of these traumatized children, the horrors of the Holocaust entered the family home (even physically in the form of illnesses the cousins brought with them), to the extent that Kurz sometimes felt as if she herself had lived through the atrocities. But, like many child survivors, she buried or hid what she knew, even from herself.

It was not until decades later that the idea of painting her lost relatives suddenly came to Kurz in an epiphanic moment that is etched in her mind. While visiting an elderly aunt in California, looking at old photographs of those family members who had perished in the Holocaust without a trace, among them, a tiny black-and-white picture of her uncle in Yugoslavia with his daughter, Dorrit, Kurz realized that through her art
she could create the record of their having lived. She had no idea that the fruits of this epiphany would change her life by occupying her mind and transforming her work for the next thirteen years. What had started out as a small project ended up as a series of twenty-one monumental paintings and numerous preparatory drawings.

**Memory, Loss, and Repair**

As a young woman, Kurz attended Brandeis University and earned an MFA from Columbia University. Her early period as an abstract expressionist (1950s and 1960s) was followed in the 1970s by a focus on figurative painting from life, followed by a period during which Kurz painted a series of still-life images. Much of Kurz's figurative work was produced in the context of the women's liberation movement. For example, a major accomplishment of that period was a nine-foot portrait of herself as the Goddess Durga (1977), which was included in *The Sister Chapel* project (intended as a feminist version of Michelangelo's *Sistine Chapel*). For this traveling exhibit, women artists were asked to reclaim images of powerful women from myth or history to create a composite female-centered story. Kurz's carefully researched Durga, the Hindu goddess with her many arms, is depicted with one foot on the head of the demon she has slain, thereby, as the myth tells us, liberating the world from evil. Durga is a deity who is especially worshipped by women in India where there is an annual festival dedicated to her. Within herself, she combines the power of both female and male deities and is the only goddess who is never depicted with a male consort. She represents independence and became an icon for the Indian independence movement.

Art by women has never been welcomed into the conservative art world, and feminist art even less so. But in the 1970s, female painters like Kurz found a home for themselves and their transgressive art in a community of women artists who were part of a feminist movement. However, when Kurz began to paint Holocaust portraits in the late 1980s, there was no obvious community for her to join. Her subject did not resonate with the dominant art culture, and painting from photographs was not consonant with her training. Her huge, colorful portraits in "soft, high-key" colors of those who did not survive also went against the Jewish
collective notion of what Holocaust art should look like (a black-and-white record of horrors), if the "inexpressible" could, or even should, be shown at all. In an artist's statement for a 2002 exhibit of these works at Seton Hall University, Kurz writes: "I did not want to portray violence or destruction, for these works are about loss and preservation." She often explains her choice by stating unequivocally that she is an artist, not a reporter. In these pictures, Kurz is deeply respectful of others' experiences; she did not want to paint anything she had not seen with her own eyes, and "the only thing I'd seen with my own eyes were the photographs."4

Contrary to expectation, the colors in these portraits are soft and multihued, the oil paints applied loosely and thinned out with washes so that they often have the texture of watercolors; the faces engage the viewer directly; the portraits do not depict victims, but ordinary people still full of life who unapologetically take up space. One or two are intimately small (portraits of her young cousins, Dorrit Kurz [1994] and Zora Kurz [1994] measure only 10 x 10 inches). A few portraits portray people whose faces are turned away from the viewer (Last Journey [1990]), so their facial expressions have to be imagined. When Kurz started this project, she intended the portrait of Michael and Dorrit Kurz (1990, 53 x 64 inches) to be a small rendering for her family that she would not show publicly, but as the urge to create images of the dead grew stronger, so did the size of their portraits and her desire to show them to a wider public. When, in 1998, in commemoration of sixty years after the Anschluss, she was asked to exhibit these portraits by the city of Vienna, the birthplace from which she had had to flee, "it was a dream come true." And she was even more pleased when the Kunsthistorisches Museum der Stadt Wien bought Vienna (1999) and The Last Journey (1990) for its permanent collection. Kurz believes that a museum dedicated to history and art provides better protection against those who continue to question the historical authenticity of the atrocities.

It must indeed have taken a good deal of courage for Kurz to take this path alone for so many years, to make images that resonated with neither the majority or the minority and which could well have jeopardized her position in the art world. So I wondered what factors came together to
create such a powerful threshold of readiness for change for Kurz when she was in her fifties.

In pondering the complexity of the shift in Kurz’s work in midlife, I turned to Gene Cohen’s research on adult development as well as to longitudinal studies of Holocaust survivors. I looked at Cohen because, in *The Mature Mind*, he writes about adult life as a period of great differentiation and dynamism, particularly as the life span grows increasingly longer.¹ I was drawn to the literature on child survivors and refugee women because I had a hunch that accounts of the long-range effects of children’s traumatic losses of home, family, and language might shed some light on Kurz’s decision to change direction in midcareer, and indeed they did prove helpful.²

Most researchers conclude that although childhood scars will remain, time erodes survivor guilt and the shame of having been chosen for annihilation, thereby also lessening the need to hide these early experiences and feelings. What arises in mature adulthood is the desire to repair the incomplete mourning process that may have been truncated in childhood, to make oneself whole by telling one’s story. Kurz’s portraits of her family and others lost in the Holocaust are her work of repair: their story is also her story, for as she realizes, they who did not escape could easily have been herself (as they could have been me). These portraits are a link to the past and her legacy to the future.

By the time she was in her fifties, the vulnerable child who felt like an outsider, who had silenced her own knowledge of the Holocaust (which had always been with her), had become a respected artist and teacher of artists. From this solid base, she could take a risk that over thirteen years became an imperative. The idea of this kind of shift in midlife is supported by Cohen’s research, which suggests that with age comes an inner freedom, a liberation from social constraints (what Jung called “adult individuation”) that allows for new and bold behaviors. Cohen also challenges the widespread belief in a “midlife crisis,” a stage he reinterprets more positively as a “midlife quest,” when adults may take existing work into new directions, which is exactly what Kurz did. Such epiphanies often grow out of a strong sense of “If not now, when?” No wonder that in her fifties, Kurz was ready to paint Holocaust portraits. No wonder that I, also a child survivor, related so strongly to our “chance” encounter that was no accident.³
The Paintings
In thinking about what I wanted to say about Kurz's paintings, I decided to read what had been written about her work prior to the Holocaust paintings and was rewarded by an insight that pointed to a continuity that ties the Holocaust paintings to her previous work, both in style and philosophical underpinnings. In a perceptive essay about Kurz's flower paintings and still lifes of the 1980s, Laurie S. Hurwitz notes the intensely luminous, sensual colors, and larger-than-life scale of the objects in Kurz's paintings; these qualities had become the hallmarks of her work and continued to be so in the Holocaust paintings. When Hurwitz quoted Kurz's explanation of her choice to paint flowers, I was astounded to read that she said:

At the time I hadn't wanted to paint flowers because they changed so quickly, but in Paris they were so readily available that I couldn't resist using them. I realized that I could capture the moment of a flower's life and make it endure... [My intention] was to make them eternal... In a way, the paintings are memorials for flowers that have been cut down before the end of their natural lives.9

(Emphasis mine)

Is this not exactly the intention of Kurz's Holocaust portraits? Are those who were murdered not flowers "cut down before the end of their natural lives"? In this light, I began to think of Kurz's Holocaust paintings as "memorial candles." The term comes from Dina Wardi's study of children of the Holocaust, where she observed that in most survivor families one of the children is designated as a "memorial candle" for all of the relatives who perished. As Kurz may be the memorial candle in her family, so her paintings may have become her candles, not only for those murdered in her own family but for all who perished in the Holocaust as well.10 In Jewish tradition, memorial candles not only honor the dead, but they are also sources of light and hope, as are Kurz's paintings, whose humanity draws us to them. Kurz has said that she sees these portraits as the specific extending into the universal, a memorial to all the innocents who have been killed the world over in wars and genocides, which have not abated in our time.

Also notable in Kurz's paintings is her focus on women and children and, rather more unusually, tender portraits of fathers with children;
during the Holocaust, the men were arrested first and some escaped alone, falsely believing that according to traditions of civilization, women and children would be spared. When we look at the hunched-over backs and the faceless scarf-covered heads of the three little girls accompanied by an older woman who are clearly setting out on their Last Journey, it is impossible not to remember that in the camps, “children were death sentences to their mothers. . . Women alone had a chance, but mothers and children were sent to death immediately.” Kurz brings the atrocities of the Holocaust into our minds without naming the details: the golden light that envelops this scene and the delicate pastels of the children’s coats make beauty out of what was an ugly, painful reality. That we cannot see the faces turns these figures into “everychild, everywoman.”

In addition to her love of color (“it was all color to me”), an important reason Kurz used such luminous and soft colors in these Holocaust paintings was to mirror the accounts she had read, when many of the worst atrocities took place on glorious sunny days in a luminous world that belied the harsh realities of the moment, creating a split reality. Kurz’s use of such subtle contrasts creates a tension in the work and a quiet intensity. In sharp contrast to the warm colors in these portraits, we feel an ominous shadow across those faces that look out at us: we see and feel the rubble and fires in the backgrounds and panels, trees that become flames, the writings above the images that speak of disappearance and loss, prayers for the dead, tiny images of concentration camps and the drawings children made in Terezin, and, of course, always the shadow of our own knowledge of what awaits those who are here portrayed. We know their fate, even if they themselves do not.

Kurz has stated that she wants her paintings to engulf the viewer and she achieves this not only with their often monumental size but also with the addition of altarlike “wings,” side panels that extend seven inches into the room and create a three-dimensional effect (see, for example, Zora and Michael Kurz). Kurz has also said that she wants the viewer to be an active participant in creating the meanings of her work. For this reason, sentences remain unfinished, as, for example, in a powerful painting she calls simply Fence, #3 (1993). In this image, we see two boys from behind, clutching onto the wire fence that separates them from their mother on
the other side. Across the painting are the words: “separated . . . the family . . . so that . . . in an instant,” leaving it up to the viewer to fill out the terrible picture of impending loss. When Kurz adds a predella (the bottom panel below an altar that contained small narrative paintings), the viewer has to literally crouch down to see the images (Zora and Michael Kurz). And when the writing circles the frame, one must look with care to read the documentation that exists nowhere else, for example, in Dorrit Kurz: Hidden in 1942 in a hospital in Belgrade Dorrit Kurz was discovered and murdered by the Nazis (see also Zora Kurz; Michael and Dorrit Kurz; and Zora and Michael Kurz). It is not possible to remain passive and really “see” the paintings, let alone understand them. The viewer must become involved and take some responsibility, as the many “bystanders” in history did not.

The portraits reach beyond images of individual people, especially when they are embedded in symbols of their cultural contexts, reminders of the historical reality in which the people in the paintings lived and died: copies of photographs, typed lists of significant dates and deportations, tiny color photos of burned-out synagogues and pictures of Auschwitz and Maidanek, prayers that serve as a kind of Greek chorus, interior borders that contain personal documents and identity papers. Particularly poignant is the use Kurz makes of the warning letter her family received from a journalist friend in Germany, urging them to flee Vienna, a warning that literally saved their lives. Giving it the centrality it merits, she photocopied multiple copies of this letter on yellowed paper that resembled the fifty-year-old document and cut these up till they formed an abstract border around Michael and Dorrit Kurz. Kurz is able to foreground the colorful portraits while at the same time, telling the whole truth, but “telling it slant.”

Vienna and Self-Portrait. These two portraits provide an unusual pairing, since they are in essence two versions of the same painting. The four women in Vienna are part of a well-known group photograph (taken by Nazis) of Jews waiting to be deported. Kurz was especially taken by the differences among the four; she could well imagine her mother, herself, and others she knew in that group. Particularly haunting are the eyes of the girl to the far right, with a “snail’s curl” on top of her head and a deeply haunted look in her
eyes, a look of shock and terror that I recognize in photographs of me from that period and which I still feel emerging to this day at times of great anxiety and fear. Across the top of the painting, providing an ironic commentary on the fate of these doomed women and girls, are Vienna’s most beloved landmarks: the Opera, the Palace of Schönbrunn, a Winged Victory, a statue of Johann Strauss, a view up the Danube, the delicately wrought-iron gate through which the Nazis marched when they annexed Austria (to the cheering of many Austrians). When, in a newspaper article about her work, Kurz saw a photograph of herself standing in front of this painting, she decided to paint a new version of the original and place herself into the portrait in front of those marked for annihilation (Self-Portrait, 2000). By painting the women and children in color and herself in black and white, she was declaring herself to be both “apart from and a part of” the deportations. Looking directly at the viewer with a defiant stance as if gazing out of a window (arms folded solidly in front of her, leaning on the frame of the painting), the artist becomes a shield, providing belated protection for those bearing the yellow star. While the Self-Portrait is a very strong painting, and perhaps more interesting in composition than Vienna, it seems to me that the artist’s presence (as an adult survivor) somewhat deflects from the tragic fate of the four who are about to be sent to their deaths. Studying these two paintings side by side offers the viewer the rare opportunity to see how an artist can rework the same material, boldly experimenting with both form and content to see what emerges.

Freedom Fighters (1999). Although thousands of women risked their lives in daily acts of resistance in the concentration camps, in the ghettos, with the underground, and among partisans in the forests, their contribution remained “hidden from history” until the Second Wave of the women’s movement led to its uncovering by a dedicated group of feminist historians. And the passage of time made it less of a sacrilege to say that gender may have been a significant factor that often differentiated the experiences of women and men during the Holocaust. Jewish men’s circumcision was such a giveaway sign of their despised identity that it was mostly women who put themselves in grave danger by carrying messages, weapons, or food. Kurz chose to break this silence surrounding women’s activism by
working from one of the most famous photographs of two of these women, identified simply as Freedom Fighters. The women stand close together in solidarity, their hands almost touching; the figures are imposing, strong, and colorful (75 1/2 x 57 inches), so that that the women’s heroism cannot be overlooked in spite of their stark eyes, in spite of their having been captured. A typed chronology of the Warsaw ghetto appended to the right side of the painting gives additional weight to the moment that is caught here.

Given Kurz’s history of support for civil rights and her active participation in feminist actions, exhibits, and protests, it should not be a surprise that her philosophy of painting closely parallels feminist theories of relationship and process: “Color is relational. Painting is very much about relationships.” Here she seems to be referring to the relationship between the artist and the color and texture of the paint on the canvas. Kurz has said that if she changes only one color, all the other colors in the painting must be changed in response. She is also referring to the relationship that must be established between the work and the viewer, which she wants to be active and participatory. Although Kurz plans out her large paintings, often working from carefully plotted drawings, in keeping with her emphasis on process, she usually paints spontaneously in response to what is happening in the moment. When the brush strokes and colors on the canvas do not turn out to be what she had anticipated, Kurz welcomes the new and the surprising into her work, as happened with the Holocaust portraits that emerged unbidden and from which she did not turn away. As it turns out, producing this body of work was a great relief to Kurz: “It was something I didn’t realize I was looking for until I found it.”

In summing up Kurz’s Holocaust paintings, it seems especially important to remember that while Kurz’s decision to paint these portraits grew out of the desire to preserve and memorialize, it is also her fervent hope that by turning the numbingly large numbers of those murdered into real people, who were once loved and cared for, her work becomes part of a world effort to prevent further acts of inhumanity.

Not surprisingly, when after more than a decade, Kurz felt she had completed this Holocaust project with its huge paintings and heavy subject matter, she turned to making many dozens of small portraits (approxi-
mately a foot square) of fresh young faces of the living, representing the wonderful diversity of the population of New York City. But she still likes to “go big,” and when she shows these small oils, she connects them into large blocks (as large as 10 x 10 feet), so they almost become group portraits, an entire cadre of the young, celebrating life (Faces). Recently, she has shown these portraits together with another set of large canvases, also in vibrantly sensuous colors, that portray the magic and mystery of Hawaii’s fiery volcanoes, seething oceans, and gorgeously lush flora.

EPILOGUE: POST-HOLocaust
Before I embarked on this project, I had thought I was “finished with the Holocaust” (as if that were ever really possible for a survivor) and was preparing to give away my large collection of Holocaust literature. I had retired and was no longer teaching about the Holocaust and thought I had written all I wanted to say on the subject. Then, “by chance,” I met Diana Kurz. Because her portraits were so different from any Holocaust paintings I had ever seen, they quickly drew me in, and I became curious to find out how these portraits had come into being and if producing them had changed the artist. It never occurred to me that writing this essay could also have an impact on me. Finding mirroring in a person whose work I both admire and can relate to personally was nourishing in ways I had not anticipated. Kurz’s project of bringing the dead back to life in the form of art validated my own sense of loss and opened a space for me to celebrate my own dead.

I have always believed strongly in the transformative power of art to heal, both for the maker and the viewer. Although I am not an artist by training or profession, over the years I myself have produced art in dealing with my Holocaust experiences, among which is a drawing I made from a photograph of my beloved grandmother who was killed in Auschwitz. I also made a primitive drawing of myself as a child, feeling very lost and alone amidst a crowd on the deck of our boat as it sailed into New York harbor, greeted by the amazing vision of the Statue of Liberty. Kurz and I seem to have arrived in New York only days apart in the summer of 1940, and I hope I am not being overly sentimental when I say that I see Diana
Kurz's Holocaust portraits as the promise Lady Liberty offered to us refugees from the Holocaust on that bright summer day.

NOTES

2. This turns out to have been a fateful year, during which my father was incarcerated in Dachau and Buchenwald—to be released a year later—and we were evicted from our apartment, I was thrown out of school, and we had to live under harsh Nazi rule. My grandmother who lived with us was eventually sent to Auschwitz where she died. By fleeing so quickly, Kurz's father was spared the camps.
4. Much of the information in this essay was gleaned from personal conversations with Diana Kurz in 2007 and 2008, as well as a noncommercial videotape (Portraits of Remembrance, ed. Melissa Hacker, 2002) that Diana kindly made available to me. More information about the artist can be found on her website: www.dianakurz.com.
7. This refers to Rabbi Hillel's (30 BCE-9 CE) wise injunction, "If I am not for myself, who will be? If I am only for myself, what am I? And if not now, when?"
8. "Chance" looms large in both our lives. Our lives were saved "by chance"; it was "by chance" that while living in Vienna on a fellowship, Kurz "was given a studio located right next door to the building that had housed her father's office, which "by chance" was occupied by two artists who invited her to paint there; so she explains, "I ended up spending time in my father's old office, where I had spent many hours as a young child."

I attended the Veteran Feminists of America celebration only by the "chance" that my partner's apartment is across the street from Barnard where the meeting took place, and Kurz attended the celebration by the "chance" gift of a free ticket given to her at the last minute; and it was our "chance" meeting that resulted in this essay. The significance of such chance moments are discussed in interesting detail in an essay by Albert Bandura, "The Psychology of Chance Encounters and Life Paths," American Psychologist 37 (July 1982): 747-55, an article, which, as it happened, I found entirely by "chance" while reading a text on immigrant women I consulted for this essay.


13. The photograph that inspired this painting can be found in Laska, *Women in the Resistance*, 164. It is *Captured Freedom Fighters from the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising in 1943*, Nuremberg Trial Collection, Washington, D.C., National Archives, a photo taken by a Nazi soldier.

