

Sandra Hurtes. *On My Way to Someplace Else: Essays*. Norfolk: Poetica Publishing, 2009.

Reviewed by Tahneer Oksman, Graduate Center at CUNY, New York

On the cover of Sandra Hurtes' book of personal essays, *On My Way to Someplace Else*, is the photograph of a young girl, laughing and looking admirably at her mother. The mother smiles tentatively at the camera, her body hunched towards her daughter as they hold hands. Hurtes describes this photograph in one of the book's early essays, "At One With Herself." She recalls finding it in a box of old photographs and feeling "a stab in my heart and [a] long[ing] to be that child" (18). When she asks her mother about the girl in the picture, her mother, confused, responds that it is a picture of the two of them. Hurtes writes about the epiphany that resulted from this incident: "I already was the person I longed to be."

In this moving and bittersweet collection of very short essays, Hurtes traces the often painful process of the search for an identity in the face of a devastating and overwhelming familial history. As the American-born daughter of two Holocaust survivors, she feels divided into two selves: "a daughter of Holocaust survivors and an average, liberated American woman." It is Hurtes-the-writer who manages to bring together these disparate identities in this collection of essays, even as she continually recognizes the fracturing nature of maintaining multiple senses of self. While she describes herself, in an essay about her mother's unveiling, as the "[d]aughter of an Auschwitz survivor. That's who I was" (107), in an earlier essay she comes to the conclusion that "[w]hile I was born into that world [of suffering], I don't have to accept it as my legacy" (95). These melancholic moments of revision give the book its' depth; reading *On My Way to Someplace Else*, one is privileged to witness the fragile, complex, and messy process of sincere and thorough self-examination, of a woman still and always in motion.

The book is divided into twenty-six short essays, many of which had previously been published in well-known newspapers and magazines. Despite the disconnected character of some of the essays, the book works well as a compilation. The variation of topics covered by Hurtes – her relationship with her family, her dating life, her thoughts about body image, knitting, and having (or not having) children– all come together to present the picture of a complicated writer

Women in Judaism: A Multidisciplinary Journal Winter 2010 Volume 7 Number 2

ISSN 1209-9392

© 2010 Women in Judaism, Inc.

All material in the journal is subject to copyright; copyright is held by the journal except where otherwise indicated. There is to be no reproduction or distribution of contents by any means without prior permission. Contents do not necessarily reflect the views of the editors.

trying to piece together the many legacies, memories, and experiences that have influenced her major life decisions. These are the thoughtful ruminations of a daughter who, childless and single in her middle age, is often asked by her father, to her chagrin, “Why are you so strange?”

Hurtes spends ample time describing her relationships with various loved ones, including her family, friends, lovers, and boyfriends. But at the heart of this memoir is the story of Hurtes’ relationship with her mother. In the opening essay, “A Daughter’s Legacy,” she describes the many hours she spent, as a child, sitting on her mother’s lap, listening as she “wove her tapestry of stories” (2). Her mother tells her of growing up in a *shtetl* in Czechoslovakia, of her time in Auschwitz, and of her eventual liberation by Russian soldiers. At the age of ten, Hurtes’ parents take her to the Loew’s on Pitkin Avenue to see *Mein Kampf*. Hurtes writes about the mix of emotions that she feels, as an adult, at having been exposed to the details of her mother’s history from such an early age, at feeling consumed by her parents’ legacy. In “My Daughter/My Self (or, the baby issue #2),” she writes about her imaginary daughter, Jesse, who gets to live a life “untouched by the scars of the Holocaust” (33). Jesse’s life is what Hurtes sometimes dreams her own life could have been without her parents’ legacy: carefree and protected. “Maybe she will learn about the Holocaust in school, a few steps removed in the way textbooks usually are. Perhaps she’ll learn about it in Hebrew school... What is for certain is this— she will be a psychologically healthy child” (38). Hurtes’ fantasies allow her a space to satisfy life-long, conflicting yearnings: the desire to present her parents with a child, “[s]ymbol of the blood that Hitler couldn’t suck,” and the desire to erase the very history that makes such a gesture necessary in the first place. As she writes in another essay about the question of having children, “Motherhood— Not Always a Clear Choice (or, the baby issue #3),” through writing she can finally experience “a mental ‘fertility’ that comes without a clock attached” (52). Although the revelation comes late in her life, Hurtes eventually finds freedom and fulfillment in such expression. As opposed to her relationship with her family, which she finds complicated and somewhat dysfunctional, she writes that “[t]he pen in my hand was like coming home” (110).

While the library of works written by the children of Holocaust survivors is vast, Hurtes’ book distinguishes itself by focusing on her parents’ history primarily through the lens of her own story. In this way, *On My Way to Someplace Else* adds to the growing canon of memoirs that tell the story of the search for an American identity with the Holocaust as a backdrop,

Women in Judaism: A Multidisciplinary Journal Winter 2010 Volume 7 Number 2

ISSN 1209-9392

© 2010 Women in Judaism, Inc.

including Joseph Berger's *Displaced Persons: Growing Up American After the Holocaust* (2002) and Alan Kaufman's *Jew Boy: A Memoir* (2000). As the children and grandchildren of survivors experience the reverberations of their ancestors' histories in new and unfamiliar ways, it is important for them to continue to trace these inheritances and to probe the many complexities of emotion and experience that form and inform their legacies.