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### Article:

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## “My Mother”: Karen Gershon’s mother and daughters in her poems

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ANITA BARMETTLER

Karen Gershon was an English author and poet who was fifteen years old when she came to England on a Kindertransport. She wrote fiction, non-fiction, and poetry about her Kind experience. This article focuses on the relationship between Gershon, her mother, and her own two daughters and how this is reflected in her poetry. The first section will give a short overview of her life, taken mainly from her own writings, followed by an interpretation of her poems in the second.

Gershon was born on 29 August 1923, as Käthe Löwenthal in Bielefeld, Germany. Her father, Paul Gershon-Löwenthal, saw himself first and foremost as a German citizen who happened to be part of the Jewish community. His wife, Selma, was a homekeeper and mother and grew up in a traditional Jewish family. Selma’s father, Adolf Schönfeld, was the head of the Jewish community in Bielefeld.<sup>1</sup> The author had two older sisters, Anne (born 1921) and Lise (born 1922).

As the poet was growing up, she experienced the impact of the National Socialists first hand. Social decline and exclusion, the unemployment of her father, hunger and poverty were part of her childhood. At the age of thirteen the girl found a connection to her Jewish heritage. During a summer camp, she first came into contact with Zionism, which proved appealing. She wrote her first complete poem at a municipal Hanukah celebration.<sup>2</sup> More poems about the state of the Jews followed and were printed in a Jewish newspaper.<sup>3</sup> Gershon’s mother disapproved of her writing in German, saying: “How can you make poems in the language in which we are cursed!”<sup>4</sup> In 1938, the young poet and her sister Lise joined the Youth Aliyah movement, an organization preparing Jewish youth for emigration to Palestine. Gershon then went to a Jewish school with the

1 Karen Gershon, *A Lesser Child* (London: Peter Owen, 1994), 11, 31.

2 *Ibid.*, 18, 37, 43, 47, 67, 75; 69; 130, respectively.

3 Ria Omasreiter-Blaicher, “Karen Gershon: Deutsche Jüdin und englische Lyrikerin”, in Karen Gershon, “*Mich nur zu trösten bestimmt*”: *Gedichte* [Only to Console Me: Poems], ed. Ria Omasreiter-Blaicher (Aachen: Karin Fischer Verlag, 2000), 152.

4 Karen Gershon, *Collected Poems* (London: Papermac, 1990), “Foreword”, 1.

aim of learning Hebrew. She wanted to please her mother and moved from writing poems in German to writing in Hebrew instead.<sup>5</sup>

After the Night of Broken Glass in November 1938, Gershon's mother no longer wanted to send her children directly to Palestine. In order to keep all three daughters in the same country, she sent Käthe and Lise to England by Kindertransport while Anne went separately with the Youth Aliyah movement. The trip was a big adventure for Gershon and she was not capable of understanding her mother's emotional reaction before the departure and could not empathize with her. She was a typical teenager, saying later that she "was reaching, had reached, the stage of adolescent rebellion against her mother while idolizing her father".<sup>6</sup> Gershon was not able to grasp the real extent of the situation and left assuming she was going to see her parents again soon. On 15 December 1938, she and her sister arrived in Harwich.<sup>7</sup>

At the camp at Dovercourt, Käthe and Lise waited for their onward journey to Palestine. During that time the young poet wrote stories, essays, and poems about her future life there. She knew that she wanted to become an author and writing was, she declared, "the most important thing about me." In February 1939, the two sisters moved to Whittingehame in Scotland where they attended another Youth Aliyah camp. Shortly before the war broke out, Lise emigrated to Palestine. Being too young, Gershon was not allowed to leave. Even though she could have left for Palestine in 1940, she decided for unknown reasons to remain in Britain.<sup>8</sup>

Before leaving the camp in Scotland, Gershon met Walter, a distant cousin, who fell in love with her. During the war, the young woman moved frequently and in less than three years had lived at seven different addresses. In 1942, Walter convinced her to marry him and her parents sent a letter agreeing to the wedding. It was the last letter she received from them. After the wedding, she settled in Edinburgh.<sup>9</sup> In 1943, her sister Anne died<sup>10</sup> and shortly after this tragic event Gershon separated from her husband. At the end of the war, in 1945, the Red Cross published lists of the survivors of the concentration camps. Only then did Gershon discover

5 Gershon, *Lesser Child*, 153, 157.

6 *Ibid.*, 187, 192–3.

7 Karen Gershon, *A Tempered Wind* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2009), 37.

8 *Ibid.*, 50, 42, 57, 68, 74, respectively.

9 *Ibid.*, 79, 115, 129, 88.

10 Gershon, *Collected Poems*, 1.

about the death of her parents. Her soon-to-be ex-husband was able to find out more about their deaths, as he was passing through Bielefeld with the British army. Her parents had been taken to the Riga ghetto in December 1941 and her father had died a year later; her mother had stayed in the ghetto until it was destroyed in 1944 but her fate remained unknown. Gershon declined a scholarship from Edinburgh University, because after everything she had experienced a degree seemed an irrelevance and all she wanted was “to begin another family . . . and to write”.<sup>11</sup>

After the war, Gershon worked in basic jobs and as a household help. During that time, she met Val Tripp, a non-Jewish art teacher, whom she married in 1948 and with whom she had four children: Christopher (1948), Anthony (1950), Stella (1954), and Naomi (1962).<sup>12</sup> In 1968, the family emigrated to Israel but because nobody was interested in her work written in English and her husband could not find a job or adapt to the Israeli lifestyle, they returned to England in 1973 (Stella had moved to England two years before in order to study there<sup>13</sup>). The family settled in Cornwall<sup>14</sup> where Gershon died in March 1993.<sup>15</sup>

### Work

From childhood Gershon had a passion for the written word. Not only did she create her own poems at a young age,<sup>16</sup> she also wrote stories and a diary, to help her deal with difficult situations in life, such as when she was homesick in Dovercourt or an outsider in the camp in Scotland. Her transformation from speaking German to speaking English happened when she went to work with an English family. English poetry inspired her and she began to write in English.<sup>17</sup> Her first collection of poems came in 1959 and caught the attention of English poetry critics.<sup>18</sup> Some twenty-five years after leaving Germany, the poet returned to her hometown, stating:

11 Gershon, *Tempered Wind*, 163, 180–81, 183.

12 Judith Tydor Baumel-Schwartz, *Never Look Back: The Jewish Refugee Children in Great Britain, 1938–1945* (West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 2012), 224.

13 Shmuel Huppert, “Karen Gershon”, *Jewish Women’s Archive*, <https://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/gershon-karen> (accessed 4 June 2019).

14 Omasreiter-Blaicher, “Karen Gershon”, 151.

15 Huppert, “Karen Gershon”.

16 Gershon, *Lesser Child*, 130.

17 Gershon, *Tempered Wind*, 50, 65, 102.

18 Karen Gershon, “The Relentless Years”, in *New Poets 1959*, ed. Edwin Muir (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1960); review by Arthur C. Jacobs, “A new Poet”, *Jewish Quarterly* 7, no. 1 (1959): 42.

"There I harvested grief and sowed poems".<sup>19</sup> After composing these poems and publishing them in 1966,<sup>20</sup> she "had nothing left to say about the Holocaust".<sup>21</sup> That same year, she edited the collective autobiography *We Came as Children*.<sup>22</sup> According to Peter Lawson, this "established Gershon as a pioneer in the field of Holocaust literature".<sup>23</sup> Several poetry collections followed but from 1980 she dedicated herself to writing only prose, publishing three semi-autobiographical books of fiction.<sup>24</sup> The year before she died, her first autobiography was published in German under the title *Das Unterkind*.<sup>25</sup> The original version of this, written in English, *A Lesser Child*, and her second autobiographical work, *The Tempered Wind*, were issued posthumously, in 1994 and 2009 respectively. She also resumed writing poetry and completed her last collection, which was published in 2002 under the title *Grace Notes*.<sup>26</sup>

It is notable that Gershon focuses on facts and accounts of others in her work, such as *We Came as Children* and *Postscript* (1969).<sup>27</sup> She dealt with her own past by writing poems, which made it possible for her to distance herself from her experiences and make them more bearable. It also provided a frame in which to sort her thoughts and put them into words. Furthermore, she stopped writing in German completely, another way of creating distance. As time passed, she became capable of approaching her past in a more direct manner. She switched to writing prose, in an effort to reach more readers,<sup>28</sup> but still exploited fictional elements to maintain that gap between her emotions and the written word. The results of this phase are her semi-autobiographical novels *Burn Helen*, *The Bread of Exile* and *The Fifth Generation*. It was only shortly before her death that she could finally put her own experiences into prose. Interestingly, she referred to herself as

19 Gershon, *Collected Poems*, 2.

20 Karen Gershon, *Selected Poems* (New York: Harcourt Brace and World, 1966).

21 Gershon, *Collected Poems*, 2.

22 Karen Gershon, ed., *We Came as Children: A Collective Autobiography* (London: Victor Gollancz; New York: Harcourt Brace and World, 1966).

23 Peter Lawson, "Karen Gershon", in *Holocaust Literature*, ed. S. Lillian Kremer (New York: Routledge, 2003), 416.

24 Karen Gershon, *Burn Helen* (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1980); Karen Gershon, *The Bread of Exile* (London: V. Gollancz, 1985); Karen Gershon, *The Fifth Generation* (Long Preston: Magna Print, 1987).

25 Karen Gershon, *Das Unterkind* (Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt Verlag, 1992).

26 Karen Gershon, *Grace Notes* (Toppesfield: Happy Dragons Press, 2002).

27 Karen Gershon, *Postscript: A Collective Account of the Lives of Jews in West Germany since the Second World War* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1969).

28 Gershon, *Collected Poems*, 3.

Kate in her first autobiography, *A Lesser Child*. Only in her second memoir, *A Tempered Wind*, was she finally able to write “I” and honour the events of her life with herself as protagonist.

*Analysis: Gershon’s mother and daughters reflected in her poetry*

This section will shine a light on different events in Gershon’s life that involved either her mother or her daughters. The poems are divided into four main periods and ordered chronologically. The first stage also contains quotations from her autobiography to give another angle on that time. But we should bear in mind that the autobiography was written long after she wrote the poems.

*Farewell*

Gershon mentioned the time before and during the farewell to her parents throughout the rest of her life. She remembered that her mother provided her and her sisters with a happy childhood, despite the circumstances. But puberty put a strain on the relationship between Gershon and her mother: she was only fifteen when she left her parents. Her mother’s reaction to her daughter’s leaving was emotional but the adolescent showed no understanding and recalled that she had called her a “sentimental old cow”. As stated before, Gershon admired her father and revolted against her mother. But she did not see her parents again after the separation, “so when she left, this was how it remained, her feelings towards them frozen at the moment of leaving”.<sup>29</sup>

The key scene of the lyricist’s life was when she said goodbye to her parents at the station. Gershon of course did not know that this parting would be for ever and struggled afterwards with the way she had bid farewell to her mother: “Why had they not warned us, why had my mother not told me, ‘Say goodbye to me properly, it may be for the last time’? I had broken out of her embrace and run from her, so impatient had I been to get on the train which was to take me to England.”<sup>30</sup> But in retrospect she realized that her actions were a way of protecting herself: “She had to put her suitcase down so as to have her hands free to hug her mother – because it was expected of her and not because she felt like it. If she had at that moment felt anything she could not have left her mother.”<sup>31</sup> This

29 Gershon, *Lesser Child*, 193, 192, respectively.

30 Gershon, *Tempered Wind*, 44–45.

31 *Ibid.*, 197.

particular scene was depicted in her poem "A Jew's Calendar", part of her series "Poems on Jewish Themes", written after Gershon returned to Germany for the first time since the war and published in *Selected Poems*. In this poem, she divided her life into fourteen stanzas, of which this verse is the ninth:

A Jew's Calendar

IX

*At the station barrier  
my mother would not let me go  
I thought that I had outgrown her  
I did no longer want her love  
I was relieved to leave her there  
it was her life that paid my fare  
to recollect my childhood now  
is the only scourge I have<sup>32</sup>*

In the first five lines, Gershon describes the farewell from the perspective of a teenager. Her mother knew that this might be the last time she saw her daughter, a goodbye for ever. But the juvenile felt that she was superior to her mother and did not think she needed her love any more. Gershon goes even further in admitting relief when she was leaving her mother. It would be the description of a typical teenager had it not been the last encounter of the two. In the last three lines Gershon changes the perspective from that of a teenager to one of an adult. She knows now that her mother paid for Gershon's ticket to England with her life, and by saying this she reveals that she thinks her mother's death is her fault. She lost not only her mother but also parts of her childhood memories. Now, she has no chance to recollect those memories from her mother's point of view. Everything she remembers from her childhood is automatically linked to this particular moment and reminds her of her loss. In the last line Gershon compares this pain with a scourge. This metaphor gives us a glimpse of how much she punishes herself for not saying goodbye properly and how she cannot forgive herself for her behaviour. The self-inflicted pain is also the only thing she has left to remember her mother. The rhyming scheme is unsteady and reflects the mood swings of the poet, with her feelings varying from guilt to grief, to self-reproach.

Even though Gershon knew that her reaction was that of a normal

32 Gershon, *Selected Poems*, 27.

teenager, she could not forgive herself. It was only much later, in her autobiography, that she was able to reflect on her actions with distance and realize that it was natural behaviour for her age. In hindsight, she admits how much she missed her mother during the war, especially when reading the letters from home, because “they stood for her abundant love, which I still needed so much and was inaccessible to me.”<sup>33</sup>

### Mourning

After learning about the death of her parents, Gershon again tried to protect herself from the pain. She describes her reaction to the news: “I did not mourn my parents – then. I had been living as an orphan for so long that it was easy for me to deceive myself into believing that their death made no real difference to me. Their sending me to safety had felt to me like a rejection. What had been done to them I could at first cope with only by thinking that they must have deserved it.”<sup>34</sup> It was only in the poem “I Was Not There” (published in 1961 in the *Jewish Quarterly*) that she allowed herself to grieve for the first time through the written word. She reproaches herself for not having been there to save her parents but admits that it would not have made a difference.<sup>35</sup>

Her visit to Germany twenty-five years after she had left was probably the biggest trigger of grief and led to the creation of the poem “My Mother”. This verse is the second of two stanzas:

#### My Mother

*As I am now my mother was  
when she was summoned to be killed  
I cannot mourn her as her child  
I have disowned her for life's sake  
her hands once hesitant and white  
have touched me with the Jewish plague  
she is my enemy because  
I am burdened with her fate*<sup>36</sup>

In the first two lines Gershon compares the situation of herself with that of her mother at a similar age. Whereas her mother had been killed, Gershon is dealing with the loss of her. In the third line she states that she

33 Gershon, *Tempered Wind*, 70.

34 *Ibid.*, 181.

35 Karen Gershon, “I Was Not There”, *Jewish Quarterly* 8, no. 4 (1961): 15.

36 Gershon, *Selected Poems*, 30.

cannot mourn her as her daughter and then explains why: she rejected her mother so that she would have the strength to leave her and live her own life. Once more the poet reveals that she thinks that her own survival is responsible for her mother's death. It also gives us the impression that she thinks she is not worthy to mourn because of her behaviour before she left. In the last four lines the author focuses on her mother's Jewishness. The Jewish religion is inherited through the mother and that is why Gershon accuses her mother of burdening her with the Jewish heritage. What once was something ordinary and innocent has turned into a problem which was visible for everybody before and during the Second World War. The author goes further and even looks at her mother as an enemy. Being Jewish became a weight that had to be carried by whoever was "infected" by it. Gershon compares the fate with a disease which can lead to death, as happened to her mother. By linking the fate of the Jews to the Black Death, Gershon also equates the illness with the power of the National Socialists, which was as fatal as the plague. At the same time, she is appropriating a contemptuous expression used by the Nazis to describe the Jews. The Jewish fate could also stand for survivor's guilt, something many survivors of the war suffered. Because she is feeling guilty, she is not able to mourn properly. It shows that the author is torn when it comes to the death of her mother and she does not know whether to be angry with herself or sad. The lack of a steady rhyming scheme is a subconscious reflection of these emotions. When spoken aloud, the sounds of this stanza show an interesting pattern. There is an abundance of sibilants in the first few lines which could imitate the flow of life. But the lines finish with plosives and indicate a harsh end. The poet uses sound to underline the fate of her mother.

In order to give a complete image in her poetry, Gershon also often wrote of her father and the grief she felt for him. But never was he linked to the infamous farewell scene at the station and she never said that she felt guilty for his death. This fact emphasizes her statement quoted earlier, that she rebelled against her mother and idolized her father.<sup>37</sup>

#### *As a mother*

Over time, Gershon started to write more about her own family, her children particularly inspiring her. She wrote of the full spectrum of their lives, from the everyday to the tragic events such as the suicide attempt of

37 Gershon, *Lesser Child*, 192–3.

her son Tony, to happy occasions such as the weddings of Tony and her other son, Christopher.<sup>38</sup> But it was the relationship with her daughters that especially reminded her of the connection with her mother. The following poem is about her older daughter leaving home. When the family lived in Israel, Stella was the first one to decide to go back to England, in order to attend art school.<sup>39</sup> The poem contains four parts and these verses form the second part of the poem:

*Stella Going*

*Mothers are made out of the daughters they were.*

*I am pig-in-the-middle to my mother and Stella,*

*as if I were my mother and as if Stella were me.*

*I am the catalyst which those two share.*

*Stella is going from me as I went from my mother.*

*Continuity has blown its fuse in me,*

*imposing what was on what is going to be.*

*I am brand-marked "mothers and daughters don't stay together".*

*At every moment I remember how*

*I broke impatiently from the final embrace:*

*because of my failure as a daughter I face*

*what it meant for my mother to be my mother, now.<sup>40</sup>*

In the first stanza, Gershon claims that your experiences as a daughter shape your future role as a mother and influence your actions and behaviour. She sees herself as the connection between her late mother and her daughter but this time the roles have changed. When she describes herself as the common catalyst, she is emphasizing the link between the three generations of women.

In the second stanza, the poet indicates that she is being left by her daughter the same way she had left her mother. Although the circumstances were completely different, she does not distinguish between them. The fact that her own behaviour is repeated by her daughter causes a strong emotional reaction. With the phrase "blown its fuse", the author gives us an idea of how upset and angry she was about that history repeating itself. The literal consequence of "blown its fuse" is disruption of an electrical

38 Karen Gershon, *My Daughters, My Sisters and Other Poems* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1975), 9, 15.

39 Huppert, "Karen Gershon".

40 Karen Gershon, "Stella Going", *Legacies and Encounters* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1972), 45–6.

circuit, and here reflects the wish of the author to interrupt the continuity of her life. She looks at herself as being cursed when she states that she is branded “mother and daughter do not stay together”.

In the third stanza Gershon goes back to the farewell scene at the station and how she could not wait to leave her mother. She perceives this act as a failure and looks at it as the reason why her daughter left. To her, the pain which is caused by this separation is a punishment for her actions as a fifteen-year-old girl and therefore she feels she deserves it. But through that pain she feels a connection to her mother because for the first time she is able to relate to the feelings her mother went through when she herself left.

These verses have an ABBA rhyming scheme. Only in the first stanza does it differ slightly, the scheme being ABCA, some of which are half-rhymes. Interestingly, Gershon uses a so-called “enclosing rhyme”, meaning that the first and last line of a verse rhyme. In German this type of rhyme is called *umarmender Reim* which literally means “hugging/embracing rhyme”. It seems that the poet is subconsciously giving her mother the hug she denied her when she was a teenager. The impossibility of this subliminal wish gives the poem a deep sadness. But even though Gershon wishes to stop the continuity of daughters leaving, this occurrence creates a comforting bond between the three generations. In another poem, “Stella Gone”, Gershon describes the absence of her daughter as “a sort of death”<sup>41</sup> and she has to actively imagine her daughter alive. Here we can see how the trauma of the farewell scene is haunting the poet.

Not only big events like Stella leaving but also small moments like glancing at her daughter Naomi triggered memories and led to the creating of more poems, as we can see in “Sometimes My Mother”:

Sometimes My Mother . . .

Sometimes my mother shines  
out of Naomi's face,  
making her hers more than mine,  
taking her out of my reach,  
and my emotions race  
back to my childhood to pay  
the debt of love which I owe her  
and fetch my daughter away.<sup>42</sup>

41 Gershon, *My Daughters, My Sisters*, 34.

42 *Ibid.*, 29.

In this short poem Gershon describes how her younger daughter reminds her of her own mother. The first two lines seem to be the start of an infatuated road down memory lane. But in the third line, the reader's expectation is disappointed. The author states that her daughter belongs more to her mother than to her. She is probably trying to indicate that Naomi is the daughter Gershon's mother wanted her to be. Furthermore, she feels that she lacks a connection with her own daughter. In a subliminal way she lets the reader know that she thinks she is not the mother she could be because of her hurtful past with her own mother. The pain caused by looking at her daughter makes her incapable of forming a bond with Naomi.

In the fifth line one can see how strongly upset the poet is still about her behaviour when she was a girl. In her mind, her actions as a girl define her own relationship with her children. She still feels guilty and wants to make up for this as an adult. She also feels that if she could do that, she would be able to bond with her daughter and could fulfil her own expectations of being a good mother. By using the word "fetch" the poet insinuates that it is easy to pick up something quickly, in this case her daughter. In an almost naive manner, she applies her own logic in this verse: if I had been a good daughter to my mother, I would be a good mother to my daughters. Gershon cannot let go of the fact that she cannot change the way she acted when her mother was still alive. By being reminded of her mother through her daughter, she feels punished because it is pain and guilt she feels when looking into Naomi's face and she implies that she is too distracted by her own pain and guilt to be a good mother.

Her fear of not being a good enough mother is again addressed in her poem "Anti-Love Song – for Naomi".<sup>43</sup> Gershon asks her daughter not to love her constantly and so much because she "feel[s] at odds with the world and myself" sometimes. This leads to her rejecting her child which causes her self-reproach afterwards. It is as if she is asking Naomi to be an imperfect daughter in order for the poet's actions to be justified. Gershon is aware of her emotional states and asks for understanding. Retrospectively, she remarked about her relationship with her daughters that "I have more of a relationship with my younger grandchildren than I have with my adult children."<sup>44</sup>

43 Ibid., 30.

44 Karen Gershon, ed., *We Came as Children: A Collective Autobiography* (2nd edn, London: Papermac, 1989), "Second Foreword from 1988", 9.

*Before her death*

After having written mainly fiction during the 1980s, Gershon went back to creating poems shortly before her death. These poems have a more retrospective and conciliatory tone and seem to act as a bequest. "My Daughters as Mothers" is one of those poems with a more positive tone when focusing on the poet's mother and daughters:

*My Daughters as Mothers*

*Why should I not be learning from my daughters,  
grandmothers of the twenty-first century –  
it amazes me only because my own mother  
died before I could teach her anything.*

*Seeds of my mother's sowing,  
dormant in me,  
have sprouted, are growing  
in my progeny.<sup>45</sup>*

The poem contains four stanzas and these are the first two. The poet contemplates the relationship with her daughters. In her opinion, it is reciprocal. She wants to learn from the future grandmothers and by doing so, take something back for herself. Only now is she able to see that this natural cycle of giving and taking was disturbed between her and her mother. She was not capable of fulfilling this cycle, because her mother had died before she could give her something back. For the first time Gershon seems to acknowledge that it was natural that she misbehaved to her mother and that later she would have been given the chance to make up for her inappropriate behaviour had her mother still been alive. Also, it appears that her daughters have been reconciled with her, by giving back so much that the pain they have caused her has been eliminated.

In the second stanza the author can see that she was carrying a small part of her mother in her which she passed on to her daughters. The poetic sound and imagery of the second stanza stand out. This harmony reflects the author's state of mind shortly before she died. She is resigned with the idea that she cannot go back in time in order to make up for her actions and persuades the reader that she can finally let the past rest.

In this collection of last verses, Gershon recalls in "My Brother" the child

45 Gershon, *Grace Notes*, 17.

her mother lost before he was born and writes about her own miscarriage. She draws a connection between her mother and herself not only through her own daughters but also through strokes of fate the two women had in common.<sup>46</sup>

Even though the author appears to be at peace with herself at the end of her life, she reveals in the following poem that life is not meant to be a paradise:

#### Birth

*This is Eden from which we are exiled:  
our first moments which memory swallows  
– loved into living and uncomprehending –  
there's anticlimax in all that follows.*<sup>47</sup>

In this poem Gershon considers our first moments on earth as Eden. But we are not skilled to comprehend this precious moment because we will not remember. Even though it was love that gave us this life, we are not capable of understanding it to the fullest. In the last line, the poet reveals her impression of life. Everything that follows birth will be a comedown. We will not experience the perfection of our first moment of life again, but face disappointment and failure. Even though this outlook on life is pessimistic, the perfect rhymes in the second and fourth line reflect the author's agreement that it is a part of life.

#### Conclusion

In conclusion, it is obvious that Gershon's mother was omnipresent in her poems throughout the decades. The key scene of the poet's guilt is undoubtedly the farewell at the station, when the adolescent writer was not aware that this would be the final separation and, therefore, ran off into a new adventure instead of giving her mother a warm goodbye. This scene is mentioned explicitly several times in her poems. The fact that the poet was a teenager who was rebelling against her mother allowed her to blame herself in later life. She did not want to understand that her behaviour was that of a normal teenager. This caused a vast feeling of guilt and prevented her from mourning her mother. She even thought that the pain she experienced through her own daughters was a punishment for her being an appalling child and that she deserved that pain. All she wanted was to

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 4.

rectify her actions but that was no longer possible. It is only in her latest work that Gershon seems to have accepted her past and have been able to put her mother to rest. Especially in her autobiography, she was able to see that her relationship with her mother had been frozen in time and she was finally able to forgive herself for acting like a normal teenager.

In her last work, *Grace Notes*, the poet adds another element to the topic. She is looking at the relationship between her and her mother and daughters as an inter-generational connection, where everybody will live on through their offspring, and in so doing she emphasizes the female bond. She has found peace in this thought and finally accepts the destiny of herself and her mother. Through her children she can see how a mother–daughter relationship is supposed to be, including the conflicts she encountered, and she can acknowledge that the bond with her mother was interrupted unnaturally. She gives the reader the impression that she has finally reconciled herself with her fate. But, nevertheless, she shows a pessimistic undertone when she writes about life in general. In the poet's opinion, birth is the climax of life and everything that follows is a strain. Although Gershon might have found peace in her final days, life was not something filled with joy but remained a task with obstacles she had to overcome.