

5 PROUD & TORN: A VISUAL MEMOIR OF HUNGARIAN HISTORY

Bettina Fabos, Dana Potter, Jacob Espenscheid, Collin Cahill, Isaac Campbell, Leslie Waters and Kristina Poznan

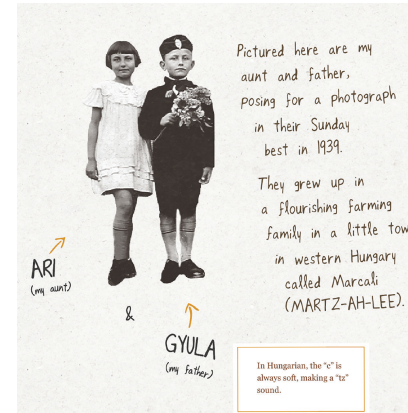


"Proud & Torn: A Visual Memoir of Hungarian History", is an animated, digital timeline that tells the story, across time, of a Hungarian farming family who, as serfs, worked the land of the Carpathian basin and both prospered and floundered under the economic conditions and political decisions of "great men" in power. The story of this rural Hungarian family—a "nobody" family—is a refreshing critique of Hungarian nationalism, the dominant narrative of Hungary. Narrated by the American daughter of a Hungarian émigré, the work contains over 1,000 photographs, maps, graphics, and looping film clips that together create a rich tapestry of visual storytelling controlled by the user via horizontal and vertical parallax scrolling that continuously anchors back

to the beautifully layered and interactive timeline interface. *Proud & Torn* stylistically combines the genres of timeline, photomontage and graphic history and celebrates amateur photographs. As such, the work is setting new standards for what is possible through historical texts in terms of visualization and the reinterpretation of history.

Reinterpreting History through an Interactive Timeline

The historical interactive timeline is an incredible rhetorical tool for communicating complex stories about our past. Combining the power of visuals—paintings, photographs, maps, video, and animation—with the logic of chronology,



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<https://proudandtorn.com>

we can chart changes over time in a rapidly accessible, provocative, and comprehensive way.

Most historical timelines, however, resort to a top-down history that typically chronicles the powerful people and the events of political states. This is the history portrayed by the collections at National Museum in Budapest: an endless parade of noble Magyar men, with just two women allowed into the narrative, the Habsburg Empresses, Maria Theresa and Elizabeth (who are not even Hungarian). These prominent figures, and the historical discourses that perpetuate their significance, dominate the way we understand Hungarian history.

As an alternative to the hegemony, the *Proud & Torn* timeline is populated by a typical family from the Hungarian countryside. It spans the years 20-1956CE, and each date is

marked by a family member's "character marker" whose life one follows at a particular moment in Hungarian history. János (a serf) received a small bit of swampland after the 1848 revolution; István fought on the Italian front in 1914; Gizi lost her mother to tuberculosis in 1918; Pista was tortured under the Communist regime in 1949. Ari and Gyula, who are the central characters of *Proud & Torn*, lived through some of the most turbulent years of the 20th century. Their family story—dramatic to American ears—is sadly a typical one for Hungarians. But beyond being typical, their story is helpful in that it resides resolutely in the middle of the larger narrative of Hungary's economic growth and modernization, nationalism, and social struggles. They were neither consigned to poverty, nor privileged as nobility. They were not flag-waving Magyar nationalists, but



were relieved of being an oppressed minority ethnic group (e.g., Germans, Slavs, Jews, Roma). They were enemies of the state—enough to be tortured—but not enough to be killed. From the middle perspective of the Fábos family, *Proud & Torn* explores and measures the extremes of Hungarian society. And, from the perspective of this family with a sister and brother of similar age, it explores the expectations and limitations of gender as well.

Our production team has divided the timeline into sixteen chapters that begin before Hungary was even a country (20CE) and end when my father and aunt were separated (1956), he escaping to America and she staying in Hungary. The clean interface lends itself to exploration and the photographs and animations increase engagement; a user can explore the chronology as a linear or non-linear narrative, and neatly leap to the Family Tree, the Epilogue, or scholarly perspectives on the project.

Our goal in constructing *Proud & Torn* has been to produce a public memory that is, at its heart, democratic. To this end, we combined Fabos's personal understanding of my family's history, the experiences of other ordinary Hungarians she researched and interviewed, and the more traditional ("great men and events") interpretation of Hungarian history into one integrated narrative based on time. Our desire is to fill in blanks and create a platform for the cultivation of other collective memories—images and stories—of Hungarian history. Interactive timelines that showcase the archival images of everyday life are one way in which to create more democratic, bottom-up social histories—emotional and cognitively compelling—and make them widely available through the web.



They were living in shoddy buildings that were missing essential features like window seals, insulation, and proper lighting fixtures. Many of these buildings, like the school Gyula had helped construct, had flimsy, three-centimeter-thick floors and terrible ventilation. These buildings were built on productivity quotas; like so many parts of the Hungarian economy, quality was the lowest priority.

They were standing in endless lines with ration tickets in hand, hoping to buy a brick of lard or some flour to make bread, often coming home with nothing except feelings of anger.

COMBINING PHOTOMONTAGE, GRAPHIC MEMOIR, AND INTERACTIVE TIMELINE TO TELL THE HISTORY OF HUNGARY

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Proud & Torn: A Visual Memoir of Hungarian History [proudandtorn.org] is an interactive timeline that visualizes Hungarian history up to the year 1956 using archival photographs, maps, illustrations, and short film clips gathered through historical research in more than twenty Hungarian, European, and other image archives. The narrative explains how two siblings and their ancestors experienced the dramatic and sometimes horrific events of Hungary's history: multiple revolutions, two World Wars (and the Holocaust of WWI), forced labor, and a host of social, political, and economic instabilities in communist Hungary. The family narrative perspective explores history from the ground up (rather than the top down), utilizes family photos and primary documents alongside archival findings, and challenges the dominant and narrow portrayals of Hungarian and European history by placing a greater emphasis on rural and agricultural history. Fresh visual sources from amateur and underutilized collections, both digital and archival, complement the text and do much of the storytelling in the project.

The timeline stylistically combines the genres of photomontage and graphic memoir and presents the content interactively and chronologically with parallax scrolling, a special web coding technique that makes background images move slower than foreground images, creating an illusion of depth and a more immersive visual experience. Parallax, a relatively recent web capability, allows users to control text speed and activate animation and video with the vertical scrollbar, allowing for the sophisticated delivery of complex chronology without disrupting narrative flow.

Proud & Torn extends horizontally as a dynamic three-layer photomontage, and gives access to sixteen vertical “drop-down” chapters, all developed with parallax animation. Each of the chapters involve about fifty images (there are over 950 images in the project overall), which are often artistically animated as looped videos and include numerous short archival film clips and maps that are activated on the scroll; it is the user's choice to slow down and explore, or to continue moving downward. Through this project, we see that the combination of timeline history and parallax imagery can be a powerful tool in digital storytelling and for other applications in the digital humanities.

In documenting the story of a typical farming family that was impacted by world events and the decisions of European and Hungary's official lawmakers, *Proud & Torn* offers a more complicated and thoughtful understanding of everyday Hungarians' lives. In building this alternative web history, we have taken historian and educator Sam Wineberg's directives to heart: to “question the past” and “illuminate the present” using best practices in new media technology.¹ We hope that the immersive and visualized reading experience of *Proud & Torn* will give readers a wholly engaging and alternative narrative, and stimulate historians, educators, visual artists, and journalists to build visualized histories of their own using public digital archives.

The point of view of *Proud & Torn* is a woman in the present exploring how her father came to leave his family and country to migrate to America in 1956. To fully understand the story, the narrator investigates the larger context

of European history and the “proud” story of the Hungarian nation. The double theme of “proud” and “torn” permeates the overall narrative, as national pride very often interfered with the stability of Hungary, leading to multiple revolutions, Hungary's fateful involvement in two World Wars, and a long relationship with communism. The project's prologue sets the stage for this story as the narrator introduces her father and aunt with a photograph from 1939, when the two siblings were eight and nine, respectively: (Figure 1)

The narrative continues: “*Proud & Torn* is a history of Ari and Gyula and previous generations of their family. Through them, it is also a history of Hungary. My Hungarian family's personal lives, as remarkable or unremarkable as they were, were drastically impacted by the decisions and actions of world leaders.”

A Study in Collective Memory

Focusing on the story of one typical farming family, but also featuring competing stories of other families living in the same Hungarian town, the project incorporates collective memory to tell the larger history of Hungary and twentieth-century Europe. “A collective memory perspective,” writes visual rhetoric scholar Carole Blair, “reminds us to think about how any message alters its context and speaks back to messages that have come before. And because of its focus on what and how we remember, it prompts us to think clearly about what is not said, as well as what is, for forgetfulness is a central operation in the process of constructing coherent and communicatively powerful memories.”² For poststructural and multicultural critics, revisionist social historians, and scholars of collective memory, the idea of a singular, objective and authoritative “History” became “increasingly (and rightly) untenable,” argues rhetorical

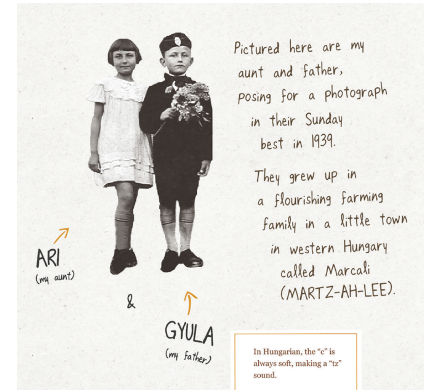


Figure 1 Detail of the Prologue, which introduces the story's main characters, Ari and Gyula.



Figure 2 Detail of photomontage element in *Proud & Torn*, chap. 13 (1949)

¹Wineberg, Sam (2001). *Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts: Charting the Future of Teaching the Past*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 132.

²Blair, Carole (2006). “Communication as collective memory.” In G.J. Shepherd, J. St. John, & T. Striphos (Eds.), *Communication as...Perspectives on theory* (pp. 51–59). London: Sage.

criticism scholar Kendall Phillips. “Scholars turned to the notion of memory, or perhaps more accurately, ‘memories,’ as a way of understanding the complex interrelationships among past, present, and future”.³ Collective memory discourses, played out through books, documentary films, museums, monuments—even in fictional plays and film narratives—have successfully helped us understand the complex interrelationships among past, present, and future. Visualizing collective memory is another matter. Today we have online access to non-commercialized, easily searchable digitized photographic collections (plus maps, illuminated manuscripts, prints, drawings, lithographs, etchings, and cartoons) in nearly every library and museum institution, from small town historical societies to large federal archives. This digital revolution in archival media has opened up access to previously unknown images and the possibility that these images could broaden and transform historical thinking. The U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM) and the Women in Military Service for America Memorial (WIMS) in Washington, D.C., for example, are notable in both privileging the memories of regular people and telling these stories through powerful photographs unearthed from personal archives. Rather than selecting famous figures on which to base their narratives, they represent social movements as evolutionary and they emphasize, through everyday rather than “official” photographs, the collective memories of regular people. Both of these museums are refreshing antidotes to nationalist mythmaking.

Proud & Torn is likewise rooted in a careful attention to collective memory scholarship and visualization. The narration constantly identifies Hungary’s national myths and comments about what and whose history is missing from them. The rich selection of photographs accompanying

the story points to the palpable reality of everyday people living out the political decisions that led to either greater democracy or greater social oppression. What sets *Proud & Torn* apart from other alternative visual histories is its unique combination of three visual genres: photomontage, graphic memoir, and interactive timeline.

Photomontage

Photomontage, a method involving the excision and reassembly of photographic images, is consciously employed as the main mode of visual presentation in *Proud & Torn*. It is an important symbolic strategy on multiple levels. First, photomontage was established as a modern art form from the 1880s to the 1930s in central Europe—the time period and location of much of the *Proud & Torn* narrative. Almost as old as photography itself, photomontage came to life in the satirical or fantastic postcards common in central Europe from the late 1800s. From 1918 to the 1930s, photomontage fired the imaginations of hundreds of progressive artists across Germany, Austria, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and Poland. German artist John Heartfield, who used photomontage as a political weapon against the Third Reich’s military agenda, is perhaps the most well-known of this group. Soviet artists also embraced photomontage, launching Constructivism as a significant movement in graphic design. The technique became a symbol of modernity through its use in magazines, newspapers, advertising, and book covers. (Figure 2)

Second, as a technique built on recycled image fragments, photomontage embraced “lowbrow” photographic culture in the same way that *Proud & Torn* embraces history from below. Disdained by serious photographers,

photomontage’s method of production also used the impersonal, collective enterprise of assembly and was geared for presentation to mass audiences. The socialist impulse in photomontage is germane to the content of the *Proud & Torn* narrative, which traces the political destruction, fragmentation, and reconfiguration that led from feudalism to capitalism, socialism, and communism in Hungary and other parts of Central Europe.

Third, photomontage was widely used to comment on and comprehend the trauma of mechanized warfare during World War I, in which human beings were being torn apart and then reconstructed into a semblance of fitness through crutches, amputation, and prosthetics. The photomontage method of the time mimicked this absurd reconstruction of torn bodies, while simultaneously visualizing torn identities, torn towns and cities, and a tumultuous redistricting of Europe. All of these themes are evident in *Proud & Torn*, which captures the rips and reconstructions that marked early-twentieth-century Central Europe.

The photomontages in *Proud & Torn* make extensive use of the trove of family photographs and previously unpublished archival photos from Hungary. The Fáboses purchased a German camera in the 1940s to document life on the farm, capturing relatively rare images of agricultural production and everyday rural tasks. These family photographs are placed in conversation with images collected from Fortépan, an open access collection of amateur photographs from Hungary from 1900 to 1990, and archival sources, like the archive of the Hungarian Policeman newsletter and of Hungary’s national Museum of Ethnography. Designer Data Potter’s photomontage layouts layer photographs in blue and brown tones, adding to the multi-

dimensional look of the site. The horizontal stretches of photomontage throughout *Proud & Torn* encourage viewers to wallow in these rich archival photos and the narrative power they yield through their juxtaposition.

Beyond drawing inspiration from important photomontage movements, we have been influenced by a number of more recent artistic works that rely on photomontage. Among them were the whimsical and often surreal collage-based animations of Terry Gilliam, which he developed for Monty Python’s Flying Circus.⁵ Gilliam combined cutouts of Victorian-era photographs with his own art (hand-drawn feet, monsters, frogs) and colorful gradient backgrounds. Our animations, designed by animator Isaac Campbell, are more subtle than Gilliam’s and specialize in isolating and animating parts of a photograph, such as an official’s clapping hands, a communist supporter’s pumping fist, a bureaucrat’s typing fingers, or, on a larger scale, a family member riding past a field on a tractor or a skater gliding across an ice rink. The resulting animations add an element of surprise and interest as one works through the visual narrative. Two documentaries, *A Short History of the Highrise*, developed by Katarina Cizek for the New York Times,⁶ and *RiP! A Remix Manifesto*, an open source documentary by Brett Gaylor,⁷ also influenced our work, with their ability to combine and animate photographic elements to better communicate or dramatize a concept.

Graphic Memoir

With its roots in the commercial comic strip, the graphic novel form (and its subgenre, the graphic memoir) is one of the most exciting and evolving new categories of publishing.

³Phillips, Kendall R. (2004). *Framing public memory*. Tuscaloosa, Alabama: University of Alabama Press.

⁴Zervigón, Andrés Mario (2012). *John Heartfield and the Agitated Image: Photography, Persuasion, and the Rise of Avant-Garde Photomontage*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

⁵Gilliam, Terry (1979). *Animations of Mortality by Terry Gilliam*. New York: Methuen.

⁶Katerina Cizek (2013). “A Short History of the Highrise.” *Op-Docs*/New York Times. <http://www.nytimes.com/projects/2013/high-rise>.

⁷Gaylor, Brett (2008). *Rip: A Remix Manifesto*. National Film Board of Canada/EyeSteelFilm. <https://vimeo.com/8040182>.

⁸Spiegelman, Art (1991). *Maus I: A Survivor’s Tale: My Father Bleeds History*. New York: Pantheon.

Starting with the publication of Art Spiegelman's *Maus I: A Survivor's Tale: My Father Bleeds History* (which won a Pulitzer Prize in 1992)⁹, graphic memoirs have moved from a niche market to mainstream acceptance in the last two decades. Notable works include Raymond Briggs's *Ethel & Ernest: A True Story*,⁹ about his English parents throughout the twentieth century; Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis*,¹⁰ about her life in Iran; Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*,¹¹ about growing up with her secretly gay father; Maira Kalman's *And the Pursuit of Happiness*,¹² a personal investigation of American democracy and its workings; Mary and Bryan Talbot's *Dotter in Her Father's Eyes*,¹³ about two father-daughter relationships; and Joe Sacco's *Palestine, Footnotes in Gaza*, and *Journalism*,¹⁴ about his personal experiences in war-torn Palestine and Bosnia. All of these works make complicated history accessible through powerful visuals and a subjective and provocative point of view. Similarly, *Proud & Torn* puts an unassuming personal story at the center of the project and weaves a questioning, feminist, and consciously subjective voice throughout the story. Everyone's story, the narrator suggests, is significant. (Figure 3, 4, 5 and 6)

Instead of the hand-drawn illustrations of most graphic memoirs, each drop-down chapter is illustrated by powerful photographs (many of which are selected from their original background or subtly animated), narrative commentary formatted in a handwritten font specially designed for the project, looped animated gifs, background information boxes, and short video clips automatically acti-

vated by scrolling. The parallax technique applied to every chapter (as well as the timeline interface itself) makes all components float as if in 3D, visually enlivening each image.

Interactive Timeline

The combination of photomontage and graphic memoir within an interactive timeline has never been undertaken on as great a scale as *Proud & Torn*. We are testing this combination to tap the enormous potential of historical interactive timelines for conveying visual rhetoric, public memory, and complex events. The immersive 3D parallax scrolling experience is also unique to the interactive timeline environment. The narrator begins the chronology in ancient times (Chapter 1: Backstory), moving briskly through (and critiquing) the country's foundational myths and introducing the narrator's first traceable family members (serfs working on a nobleman's estate). The subsequent fifteen chapters, from 1848 to 1956, tell Hungary's history through multiple generations of the Fábos family, advancing the timeline through the evolving cast of characters as they grow up, age, pass down the farm, and survive numerous revolutions, World Wars, the onset of communism, and complete disruption to their way of life.

Two interactive timeline projects influenced the development of *Proud & Torn*. The first is the timeline developed by the Anne Frank House in Amsterdam as an online companion to its museum.¹⁵ The image-laden project is an excellent and inspiring example of what is possible

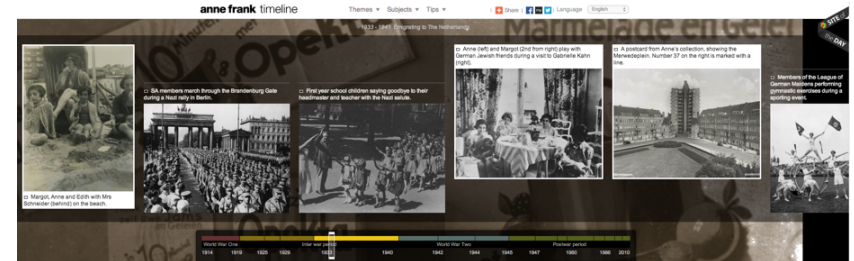


Figure 7 A screenshot image of the Anne Frank Timeline: <http://annefrank.org/en/Subsites/Timeline>. Published with permission from the Ann Frank House.

⁹Briggs, Raymond (2001). *Ethel & Ernest: A True Story*. New York: Pantheon.

¹⁰Satrapi, Marjane (2014). *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood*. New York: Pantheon.

¹¹Bechdel, Alison (2007). *Fun home: A Family Tragicomic*. New York: Mariner Books.

¹²Kalman, Maira (2010). *And the Pursuit of Happiness*. New York: Penguin Books.

¹³Talbot, Mary M. and Bryan (2012). *Dotter in Her Father's Eyes*. Milwaukee: Dark Horse Books.

¹⁴Sacco, Joe (2001). *Palestine*. Fantagraphics, Seattle; (2010) *Footnotes in Gaza*. Metropolitan Books, New York; (2013) *Journalism*. Metropolitan Books, New York.

¹⁵The editor of the Anne Frank Timeline, Gerritt Netten, has also created two similar adaptations to the first timeline: "Amsterdam of Anne Frank," <http://annefrank.org/amsterdam>, which focuses on the city of Amsterdam, and the interactive Anne Frank exhibit, which is housed at Google's Cultural Institute: <http://google.com/culturalinstitute/exhibit/anne-frank/wQI4ISy>. (There is an app for that as well, which is found on the Android and iPhone by searching repudo).



Figure 8 Three representative sections of Proud and Torn's horizontal timeline, with character markers that lead to full-length vertically-scrolling chapters.

online with chronology, photographs, and memory (Netten, 2010). By combining the story of Otto Frank and his family in Amsterdam (most notably Anne) with the larger context of cultural memory and archival photographs reflecting the everyday experiences of real people, we gain a deeper, more profound, and more memorable understanding of World War II and the Nazis' rise to power. We are also given greater insight into how such a normal family dealt with the nightmare of their terrifying situation.

Appearing horizontally, the Anne Frank timeline is divided into sixteen segments, with the first ten detailing a different period of the Frank family's life and the final six focusing on the history of the Anne Frank House. The entire timeline is controlled by a color-coded timeline scrollbar, which allows users to interact with a stream of horizontally placed photographs, all of which are clickable and lead to a more in-depth description. For example, the fifth segment (1933-1941), shows images of a waif-like five-year-old German girl (Anne), who we learn has recently arrived in the Netherlands with her family after fleeing an increasingly anti-Semitic Germany; she is overwhelmed by a strange new culture and doesn't speak a word of Dutch. The images selected in this part of the chronology illustrate the family's discomfort in their new environs: Anne plays outside her new housing development, stands for a school class photo in the back of an all-Dutch classroom, and shares tea with new friends. These images of personal discomfort are juxtaposed with the insidious images of everyday anti-Semitism synchronically taking place throughout Germany: gymnastic performers incorporate a Nazi flag in their routine; a Jewish man is publicly castigated for dating an "Aryan" woman; schoolchildren march in procession while giving their headmaster a Nazi salute. The explanations that link these photographs together offer a rich understanding of life under the Third Reich. (Figure 7)

To progress through this chronology is to experience the Frank family's repeated attempts to get away from the encroaching threat of Nazi Germany and the enthusiastic, normalized, and increasingly horrific assaults on Jewish life and culture that intensified throughout Europe. Through these juxtapositions of "everyday" (the everyday of Anne's family, and the everyday of Germany, and then Holland) come a more complex understanding of German Nazi identity and historical truth: the SS men led by Hitler did not alone "cause" the Holocaust, and the German people were far from oblivious to the annihilation of Jews. By placing Anne Frank's story in the context of larger social movements across Europe, and including gripping archival photographs to tell this story, this timeline succeeds dramatically in communicating public memory. We aimed to mimic much of this approach in *Proud & Torn*.

The second influential timeline inspiration was the tightly edited magazine piece "Arab Spring Break," written by Joshua Davis and developed by Upperquad for the online magazine Epic: True Stories.¹⁶ The timeline is built across nine short chapters that document the story of twenty-one-year-old math major Chris Jeon, who abruptly left a comfortable and prestigious paid internship in San Francisco for a "real" experience fighting with the rebels in Libya. The design of "Arab Spring Break" is astonishingly beautiful. The timeline has two directions -- a subtle interchange from vertical (when the story takes place in California) to horizontal (when the story switches to Libya), going back and forth multiple times, with the vertical scroll always controlling the parallax. We also appreciated how floating parallax elements, with foreground elements often pinned while background images move horizontally, moved the story forward. Upperquad captured tactile 3D photo elements on a light table rather than scanned them as flat images. These images are either animated (e.g., a crumpled dollar

¹⁶Davis, Joshua (2015). "Arab Spring Break." Epic: True Stories [Online]. Available: <http://epicmagazine.com/arab-spring-break>.

bill, opening up and crumpling back) or floated across the screen (e.g., a cigarette butt, a bullet, handwritten notes on a piece of cardboard, a wrinkled letter written in Arabic). We incorporated all these elements, to various degrees, in *Proud & Torn*.

Like "Arab Spring Break," we also incorporated short, looped videos, lasting only five to ten seconds, which act like moving photographs and offer a sense of dynamism and interest to the project; because of their short length, they don't require any time commitment on the viewer's part and have no issue with load-up times.

Taking all of these elements into account, we designed the *Proud & Torn* timeline interface as a sweeping horizontal photomontage that contains three independently moving layers (clouds, middle layer, foreground), and provides a visual overview of the entire history of Hungary. Sixteen character markers indicate each chapter, and users activate the timeline's horizontal movement by scrolling vertically on the right hand scroll bar, making the project immediately and intuitively interactive. A user can also scoot along the timeline by choosing any of the chapter numbers in the navigation bar at the top of the interface. Each chapter drops down to vertical stories about the family and their town at each chronological point in the timeline (Prologue, Backstory, 1848, etc., 1848, 1867, 1900, 1914, 1918, 1920, 1930, 1940, 1944, 1945, 1946, 1949, 1950, 1953, 1956, and Epilogue), conveying the story of Hungary (and much of Europe) in the process.

The chronological dimension of *Proud & Torn* pulls the project together and helps ground the narrative in the sweeping turmoil of Hungarian history and broader European and world events. The medium of an interactive timeline, used strategically, makes this complicated story accessible, engaging, and memorable. (Figure 8)