

# **Twenty-First-Century Literature and the Holocaust**

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**TYPESETTING** Publishing House of the Institute of Literary Research,  
Polish Academy of Sciences

This special issue was published as a part of the project *21-st Century Literature  
and the Holocaust. A Comparative and Multilingual Perspective* (2020–2023).

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**teksty**<sup>english edition</sup>  
drugie

<b>1</b>	<b>2024</b>
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special issue

Institute of Literary Research, Polish Academy of Sciences  
Jagiellonian University  
and University of Adam Mickiewicz in Poznań

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# *Twenty-First-Century Literature and the Holocaust. A Comparative and Multilingual Perspective*

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## FOREWORD

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- 5 **AGNIESZKA DAUKSZA**      Bestsellers from Auschwitz: Guardians of Memory Versus the Auschwitz Gang  
Trans. *Ben Koschalka*
- 17 **JUSTYNA TABASZEWSKA**      The Holocaust and Literature  
Trans. *Ben Koschalka*

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## IN THE TEXTUAL WORLD OF TWENTY-FIRST-CENTURY HOLOCAUST LITERATURE

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- 22 **PRZEMYSŁAW CZAPLIŃSKI**      Managing Death. Polish Legitimate Cultures Concerning the Holocaust  
Trans. *Thomas Anessi*
- 52 **KRIS VAN HEUCKELOM**      From Spectral to Real Jews: Recent Trends in Flemish Writing about the Holocaust
- 70 **LUISA BANKI**      Remembering the Shoah and the Second World War in German Third-Generation Literature
- 88 **ELISA-MARIA HIEMER**      Entangled Identities and the History of Spaces in Twenty-First-Century Jewish Literature from Germany and Poland
- 107 **ERGA HELLER**      The Creation of a "Survivor" in Contemporary Israeli Holocaust Novels
- 125 **YULIYA ILCHUK**      The Multidirectional Turn in the Literature about Holocaust in Post-Euromaidan Ukraine (On the Material of Sofia Andrukhovych's *Amadoka*)
- 143 **ROMAN KATSMAN**      Poetics of Twenty-First-Century Russian-Language Fiction about the Shoah

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BETWEEN PAST AND FUTURE. TRANSFIGURATION AND  
TWENTY-FIRST-CENTURY HOLOCAUST LITERATURE

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- 159 **BETTINE SIERTSEMA** Fictional Representations of Hitler
- 183 **SARAH MINSLOW** Legacies of the Shoah in Jonathan Safran Foer's *Everything Is Illuminated* and Arnon Grunberg's *De Joodse Messias* [*The Jewish Messiah*]
- 203 **MICHAL BEN-HORIN** The Life of a Story: Aharon Appelfeld's Double as a Mode of Holocaust Representation
- 221 **VANESSA JOOSEN** Frozen in Sorrow: *Winterijs* [Winter ice] by Peter Van Gestel
- 239 **SŁAWOMIR JACEK ŻUREK** A Jewish Child in a Polish Hiding Place. Children, Adults and Animals in Nava Semel's *And the Rat Laughed* and Wilhelm Dichter's *God's Horse*

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JEWISH CHILDHOOD, HOLOCAUST AND TWENTY-FIRST-  
CENTURY LITERATURE

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- 267 **SYLWIA KAROLAK** The Holocaust Literature for Children in Translation into Polish
- 290 **DANIEL FELDMAN** Reading Time in Youth Novels about the Warsaw Ghetto
- 306 **IRENA BARBARA KALLA** The Unity of Subject and Object: Toys of the Holocaust Survivors as Memory Transmitters in Children's Literature  
Trans. *Patrycja Poniatowska*
- 325 **PNINA ROSENBERG** Anne Frank Is Dead and Is Living in New York
- 343 **MATEUSZ ŚWIETLICKI** Trapped Between Hitler and Stalin: Nazi Bogeymen and Implicated Subjects in Canadian Children's Historical Fiction



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# Foreword

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Agnieszka Dauksza

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## Bestsellers from Auschwitz: Guardians of Memory Versus the Auschwitz Gang

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TEKSTY DRUGIE 2024, NR 1, S. 5–16

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DOI:10.18318/td.2024.en.1.1 / ORCID: 0000-0001-8269-6096

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The research was carried out with financial support from the Heritage Priority Research Area as part of the Strategic Program of Excellence at the Jagiellonian University.

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Life as a series of sensations and scandals – this is how the symbolic exchange is played out on the literary scene, especially online. The participants are all the actors in the drama – writers, publishers, editors, translators, critics, reviewers, researchers, jurors, promoters, observers, self-promoting “book lovers,” and finally “non-professional” readers, sometimes known as “normies.” It would scarcely be an exaggeration to claim that social media sites are the appropriate space for this exchange, and the media, publishing houses, universities, foundations and judging panels in this respect are merely collateral suppliers of “content.” And practically everything that counts for discussion on the literary scene is played out today in the Facebook culture – in streams or their recordings, through posts and comments. Even if a discussion exists previously in the non-virtual sphere, soon it will move to social media. It seems not to occur to any of the participants in this dynamic exchange that it might be possible to separate this intertwining of the aesthetic, economic, political, identity-based and emotional.

In some spaces, however, affects and facts circulate somehow differently – not so much functioning by another logic as spawning different expectations. Some users, for example, demand “purity” of intentions from authors and publishers and a distinction between the factual and fictional, authentic

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and self-aggrandizing, ethical and opportunistic. One such field is the trend for literature about Auschwitz – or rather, in many cases, an imitation of Auschwitz. These are published as a glut of “striped” novels, characterized by the striped camp uniforms in the cover illustration, popular in the West since the 1990s, and taking the bestseller charts by storm in Poland in the last few years. Novels employing the “Auschwitz of Auschwitz”<sup>1</sup> formula – some translated into Polish, others written in the language and dubbed “Holo-Polo”<sup>2</sup> – are based on predictable plotlines, using the context of historical events to address “universal” problems, mostly about difficult interpersonal relations. Readers are therefore introduced to various acts of solidarity, betrayal, friendship, love, and resistance that occur under the pressure of ideology, enslavement, isolation, and violence. The events usually take place not at Auschwitz as a historical space of genocide, but against Auschwitz as a backdrop, in a non-place created in the author’s imagination and only loosely related to the factual time and place. Similarly fanciful is the novels’ supposed kinship with real-life people, descriptions of camp reality, and the everyday lives of prisoners and camp functionaries.

So why, one might therefore ask, play with authenticity like this? And why Auschwitz? Since the bestsellers’ authors attach so little importance to the camp’s factuality and materiality, what is their reason for referring to a real space, thereby opening themselves to accusations of inaccuracy? And what is the point of the tortuous playing with other people’s emotions and expectations, operating on the soft tissue of community remembrance and opening the wounds of those who lived through the camps or found themselves in close proximity to the experience?

A seeming side effect is undoubtedly one of the strategy’s objectives: the publication of such books as Heather Morris’s *The Tattooist of Auschwitz* tends to result in heated discussions, mass criticism, polarized opinions, and calls for boycotts, censorship, legal action and so on. Controversy, suitably whipped up and harnessed for marketing goals, becomes part of the promotion campaign, and of course results in healthy sales. The choice is not accidental – ever since the 1940s, Auschwitz has functioned in the public consciousness as the epicenter of the violence of the Second World War, and for many years it has been the place, more than any other, that has captured the attention of scholars, historians, politicians, survivors and their families, authors of memoirs, people of culture, film makers, journalists, bodies funding conservation work and subsidizing support for survivors, popularizers, tourists, vandals, but also conspiracy theorists and thieves stealing post-camp property.

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1 The title of the “ultimate bestseller” proposed by Przemek Dębowski in response to news that five of the 20 bestselling books in Poland in early 2020 were stories using a concentration camp as a backdrop. See <https://www.facebook.com/przemekdebowski.prace/posts/2827138370711324>, accessed September 21, 2023.

2 Sylwia Chutnik’s term.



A snowball effect took place: the camp acquired new meanings, references, citations and uses. Auschwitz became a brand in its own right and its celebrity began to endure: first as a starting point for philosophical, ethical and legal discussions, a place of worship and memory and a material foundation for archaeological research and commemorative practices, and finally as a tourist heritage museum, a literary and visual protagonist, a film star or an important cultural reference point. For many, by force of habit, Auschwitz – the symbol and cliché – began to operate as the foundation of the lucrative Holocaust factory.

That this remains a seductive potential is no surprise. Contemporary authors of popular stories employ symbolic and visual connotations to offer products imitating Auschwitz, which are easily recognized and classified by the relevant consumer groups. The immediacy and ease of association – for example of the motif of striped uniforms, watchtowers and barracks, ramps, gates, and the sign – guarantees a quick profit. Auschwitz pays – not only for the sharks of the publishing world.

The popular “The [Blank] of/from Auschwitz” narratives have been described as discount novels – widely available, easy to digest, compact, and packed in unambiguous, eye-catching covers. It seems, though, that their main audience is not people who chance upon them while standing in line at the checkout. The most engaged group reading Auschwitz bestsellers know exactly what they are looking for and wait for the latest installments in the series – loyal fans of their authors attending meetings, enthusiastically commenting on their books and sharing their impressions on social media.<sup>3</sup> These “striped” novels are the foundation of their reading experience, a source of emotions, excitement, entertainment, consolation and reinforcement, but also a reason for participating in the community of people reading, discussing and recommending. Often these are the only books, the only literature that encourages them to read. Its community-forming function is hugely important – the media circulations of such books are often enormous, with their readers giving thousands of ratings, leaving hundreds of comments, and discussing and recommending other novels to each other.

And yet it is also for this reason that more specialized readers criticize and downplay the Auschwitz bestsellers. The catchiness and connectivity of reading them is remarkable – readers declare that they couldn’t put the book down, that it captured their time, attention, feelings, enabling them to “pass through the whole of Auschwitz in two days.”<sup>4</sup> Of course, Auschwitz novels do not teach about the war or show the scale of violence; they are just “more or less” about the Holocaust. And

3 Such sites in Poland include LubimyCzytać, BiblioNETka, NaKaniepie, but comments on book blogs, Instagram and Facebook groups are also a significant phenomenon.

4 From a comment on the book *The Tattooist of Auschwitz* published at <https://lubimyczytac.pl/ksiazka/4845001/tatuazysta-z-auschwitz>, accessed September 1, 2023. Further readers’ comments that I quote were published on the same website.

this is the main criticism leveled at their authors and publishers: that by playing the authenticity card and implying realism – for instance by using a first-person narrative supposedly drawing from survivors' testimonies – they intentionally tear up the biographical pact, irresponsibly juggling facts taken out of context and cynically exploiting well-known motifs to present fictitious, tear-jerking stories high on pathos.

They are also accused – rightly – of deluding readers with facile consolation and underplaying fundamental experiences; furthermore, they are formally simplistic, predictable, using trite models of emotional behaviors, distorting historical reality, impersonating actual, historical figures and borrowing their fate and memories, with distribution and promotion methods so intrusive that they only cement their status as trash literature.

But if we are to use "discount" terminology, I would rather compare the phenomenon of these books to the popularity of the "Goodness Gang," plush toys depicting fruit and vegetables first offered in 2016 and 2017 as part of a loyalty program by the Biedronka supermarket chain. The toys were given out as "free gifts," in exchange for repeated shopping, rewarded with stamps. The campaign supposedly educated consumers and popularized healthy eating – more stamps were available for purchasing fruit and vegetables. In practice, though, it was about promoting Biedronka, resulting in a growth in sales of 11.9% in 2016, proving one of the most profitable ventures in the history of Polish trading.<sup>5</sup> The reason for this was the mass desire for the stuffed toys – customers shopped more often "for stamps," standing in line, competing and fighting over toys, setting up forums and groups with information about availability and for swapping, driving to other towns and cities in the search for missing characters, and engaging in backstreet deals for toys as well as stamps. And all this for moderately attractive, cheaply produced plush toys that sated childish desires and ambitions to possess them. There was probably a chain of collector's instincts at work, cranking up the temporary fashion – young people were desperate to complete the entire gang, and their parents set themselves the task of helping out.

The way the latest Auschwitz bestseller – or the Auschwitz gang, as we might call them – is presented is based on an analogous mechanism of training consumers to be loyal to the convention and to participate in a community of people up to speed with the latest developments "at Auschwitz." The pretext for publication of these books is supposedly historical education, raising awareness of the consequences of ideology, keeping the memory of the victims alive, shaping readers' imagination and empathy, and ensuring narrative continuity. In practice, however, it is about making the books' consumers open to a given format and instantly able to recognize cultural clichés. The will to take on board further impressions "from the

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5 Cf. "Gang świeżaków" wraca do Biedronki. Jeden kosztuje nawet 2,4 tys. zł," accessed August 25, 2023, <https://wyborcza.biz/biznes/7,147743,22270375,gang-swiezakow-wraca-do-biedronki-jeden-kosztuje-nawet-2-4.html?disableRedirects=true>.

series" results in demand, wide circulation, and repeated profits – loyal readers are hungry for the next installments of stories from the camp.

Some readers develop a condition resembling addiction: they expect the book to replicate the template of a camp story, yet satisfaction does not come solely from a return to what they know; what they need is a return with a shift, including in the reading experiences elements of difference, change, novelty, and surprise. Fans of Biedronka's Goodness Gang set themselves the objective of collecting all its characters: Rafael the Radish, Piers the Pea, Billy the Blueberry, and so on. But even securing the whole collection did not guarantee satisfaction: apart from the stuffed toys, one could also amass special stickers depicting the fresh heroes and watch short films and cartoons, and in the next installments of the campaign acquire the "new members of the gang" – Christmas specials, juniors, and then other spin-offs.

Readers of the novels on the "striped" production line also collect the latest books – adventures, intrigues, motifs, and protagonists – and above all collect reading experiences, which they then review on websites with red or yellow stars. For it is not actually about the formal, aesthetic or ethical aspects of this literature, but about its effect on readers, experiences replicating everyday life that can be shared with others. And so communities are formed of those who found *The Tattooist of Auschwitz* "unputdownable," for whom *The Sadist of Auschwitz* "plucked at the heartstrings," and who were "soothed" by *Auschwitz Lullaby*. Those who have completed the "full set" of bestselling titles become pickier and more demanding, expecting further titles to move different registers of emotions, demonstrate thematic innovation, and introduce them to an "unknown" Auschwitz, an "unseen" one "forgotten by history."

Two trends are interesting. One is an emerging rhetoric of snobbism among regular readers of the novels, who feel that they have an excellent mastery of the subject of the camp and know Auschwitz like the back of their hands. The other is an escalation of readers' needs: according to commenters, each book should deliver increasingly intensive experiences, test the limits of emotional resilience, acting like a poison that in the right dose can strengthen the individual's position, lead to renewal, and change ways of feeling and remembering. Users of the *Lubimyczytac.pl* website testify that "When reading this book, I experienced everything that happened."<sup>6</sup>

Sometimes, the view that a novel does too little to stimulate emotions becomes the source of criticism. Yet these charges are usually leveled from the position of experienced members of the reading group, connoisseurs of the series, at fellow "insiders" involved in the "of Auschwitz" community. One disappointed reader of *The Tattooist* commented: "insipid descriptions. [...] If not for the concentration camp

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6 "Sekret Elizy. Auschwitz. Płatna miłość" [Eliza's secret. Auschwitz. Love at a price] by Dominik W. Rettinger, *Lubimyczytac.pl*, accessed September 25, 2023, <https://lubimyczytac.pl/ksiazka/4900486/sekret-elizy-auschwitz-platna-milosc>.

theme, I doubt anyone would read this book." Another, after reading *Eliza's Secret. Auschwitz. Love at a Price*, lamented the inadequate clarity of the plot: "What bothered me most was the ending, which suddenly became chaotic. I don't like open endings in general, and here it particularly didn't fit and frustrated me how many questions I still had in my head after the last sentence of the book."<sup>7</sup> Included in the price are transparent compositions and the black-and-white, "strong" conclusions to the plot that guarantee such emotions. Shades and nuances, ambiguities and attempts at formal invention lead to clouded emotions that are seldom among readers' spectrum of expectations.

Readers expect the satisfaction resulting from the chance to trace the tensions between the factual and the fictional – as one reader put it, "A certain spice is added by the fact that the plot is interspersed with an authentic, factual account."<sup>8</sup> The first level of "spice" is the general awareness that the events of the novel could have taken place in reality – even if they did not, the fact that they might have (as the publishers' blurb suggested) means they effectively did take place. The logic of enhanced realism fits in with the need for authenticity and intensity of feeling: sometimes it allows readers to identify and empathize with the characters, and at other times it brings relief owing to distance from the events that are depicted.

The second level of reception is the pleasure that results from controlled uncertainty: the reader engages in the reality of the novel, but is unsure which elements are authentic, and which fictional. This brings a desire to "check" the authors, tracking and comparing the plotlines and historical facts. Detective readers, searching for distortions, changes, and errors, gain a sense of controlling not only their own emotional experience (of engaged reading), but also the depicted world, which they associate with a sense of "controlling" Auschwitz as a set of data.

This mechanism, incidentally, is not confined to Auschwitz novels – an analogous pact linking publishers, authors and readers also applies to other historical events and novels "inspired" by the Warsaw Uprising or everyday life in occupied Poland. One might consider to what extent the demand for these books results from a need to work through past wrongdoings to the Polish community or a return to stories past down in families. Equally popular, however, are novels set in the Jagiellonian era, at the time of Viking conquests, or in Ancient Rome. It appears that historical backdrops are just one of the elements needed to create a bestseller effect. Another important factor is the possibility of recognizing in stories from tough times more universal, recurring patterns in the functioning of a community. The combination of these components, together with an implied authenticity of the message – "this really happened" – results in maximum engagement from readers.

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<sup>7</sup> "Sekret Elizy. Auschwitz."

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

However, there is one more factor that results in popular historical novels' widespread recognition. It is possible for readers to compare the elements of the narrative's setting with what remains from the event: traces, leftovers, spaces that can be pinpointed and visited. Such a trip – for example to the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum – and reading novels become complementary acts in “experiencing” Auschwitz from the position of a reader and tourist. Consumers search for the “differences” between the qualities of the novel and the museum, frequently deeming them to be equivalent cultural texts that can be treated in a functional manner, for example by taking selfies outside the crematorium and posting photos on social media.<sup>9</sup> For many users, the proximity of the materiality is a key reason for their interest in popular war stories. It is no coincidence that the demand for historical bestsellers goes hand in hand with a fashion for family searches for “treasures” using metal detectors, participation in historical reconstructions, walks and excursions in the footsteps of past heroes, and dark tourism, meaning “alternative” visits off the beaten track and away from the sites usually visited by guides. The interest in dark tourism as a cognitive alternative combines the need for authenticity, immediacy, personal engagement, and at least partial assumption of the role of a “latecomer”<sup>10</sup> or “reconstructed witness”<sup>11</sup> – someone not directly connected to an event, but seeking to understand its “aura,” imagine its atmosphere, and “feel” its traces. These approaches are probably closer not to the figure of the delayed witness, but the gawker or bystander. Yet this does not change the fact that it is the perspective of this group that today dominates among consumers of popular culture, history buffs and visitors to commemorative institutions, which also has a secondary impact on their profile and work.

The pressure of popularization, along with its simplifications, distortions, errors, abuses, and commercialization of the past, is something from which guardians of memory attempt to protect Auschwitz. The criticism and pressure that apply in other service sectors and force producers to react have no major impact on publishing decisions and readers' preferences. With “Auschwitz of Auschwitz” books, critical discussions go on among people connected with literature – the titles change, but

9 On “inappropriate” behavior in a post-camp space, cf. Iwona Kurz, “Nieznośna lekkość reprezentacji,” *Didaskalia* 120 (2014), and the article of Karolina Marcinkowska, Dominik Puchała, Michał Bilewicz, Dominika Bulska, Mikołaj Winiewski and Maciej Górski, “Śmiech w Auschwitz, czyli o tym, w jaki sposób psychologia może pomóc zrozumieć łamanie tabu w miejscu pamięci Zagłady,” *Teksty Drugie* 5 (2023).

10 Cf. M. Rothberg, *Traumatic Realism: The Demands of Holocaust Representation* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000).

11 Cf. Dori Laub, “An Event without a Witness: Truth, Testimony and Survival,” in Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (New York, London: Routledge, 1992).

the arguments, though substantively justified, are repetitive. Indeed, they demonstrate not only the professional distance of critics and researchers. The guardians of commemorative and factual decorum seem not to believe it possible to use arguments to influence writers or readers. They assume that these novels are socially harmful and should not exist at all. The public sphere is replete with calls to defend Auschwitz from bad art or imitations of art, from publishers' cynical motives as well as authors' self-aggrandizing and economic incentives. They are usually accused of breaking several fundamental rules, above all disturbing the truth and verifiability of facts and banal presentation of the Holocaust as a peculiar event, but one that can be represented, narrated, and depicted in a few dozen sentences. Yet the criticisms of authors, pressure on publishers and vigorous discussions do not necessarily result in tangible changes to market and reading trends. They probably have a larger influence on the profiling of literary criticism and research practices, as publishers follow profit margins, authors remain unmoved by rebukes, and readers stick to the tried and tested track. Any measurable impact is more likely to be consolidating the divisions between professional readers and the rest of the reading public, between more ambitious publishers and those specializing in "Auschwitz of Auschwitz" novels, and between self-respecting, creative cover designers and those with designs featuring watchtowers or striped uniforms to their name.

It makes little sense now to ask whether the trends can be reversed and popular writers can be taught to respect *The Event*, or whether the avalanche of bestsellers thematizing traumatic experiences can simply be stopped. The answer is certainly no, as demonstrated by the latest "fashions" for novels about the Balkan conflict or war in Ukraine. The question arises, however, about the reasons for the continuing demand for wartime and camp motifs and stories, the causes of the growing divisions between various types of readers, as well as the impact of these divisions on social issues, including the nature of commemorative practices. Contrary to appearances, both guardians of memory and fans of the Auschwitz gang and dark tourism work as a system of communicating vessels, like it or not jointly creating a common emotional community and remaining dependent on one another.

One must ask who represents these groups. It seems easy to classify them and divide them into those who have a problem with the Holocaust, because it is difficult, painful and important for them, those who seem to have no such problems, and those capable of benefiting from the problems of others. Discussions on the legacy of the Holocaust – concerning identity, intervention and diagnosis – are therefore based on the belief in the existence of an "us" who care about protecting Auschwitz's heritage, and "them," who have not mastered the rules of rhetoric, aesthetics and ethnics, are harmful to the Holocaust and its victims, and ruin the effects of "our" decades-long efforts.

Undoubtedly, this is the last moment for meetings in the public sphere of such diverse voices and perspectives of people with diverse experiences. They are the

victims – people who survived the Holocaust – and their families, the subsequent generations along with their post-memory relationship; perpetrators – their children and grandchildren; witnesses, bystanders and their descendants – including very delayed ones; beneficiaries of companies participating in the results of the Holocaust, often based on wartime capital even today; those who wrote that history, those who rewrite it and those who question it; managers of historical policy; groups researching the Holocaust, its direct and far-reaching consequences, teach about it, popularize it, guard its material remnants, conserve them and share them with others; finally, those who constructively and reconstructively intermediate Holocaust stories, who process the Holocaust artistically, present it or distance themselves from it, who use it objectively, or to promote themselves, or live off it, build capital on it, and appropriate it.

The thing is, however, that the division into “them” and “us,” into completely separate, isolated interest groups – those who have a problem with the Holocaust: defenders of Auschwitz and guardians of memory in one, and those who make money from it, by cynically seizing on others’ symbols, property, identity and memory – is fundamentally false. It is evident, after all, that all the actors figure together in the social circulation, competing for influence, status, memory, interpretations and profits, clashing in competencies, emotionally and politically, but often also – even despite themselves and unintentionally – acting for each other’s benefit, generating a dynamic that helps them mutually.

The field of references of Holocaust culture is characterized by intertwining trends that cannot be considered separately. Probably the most dominant functions at present are symbolic-memory, research, therapeutic, identity (and self-creation), mercantile, parasitical and that based on the principle of commensalism. However, even a cursory distinction of the types of action strategies of people (and groups) engaged in the heritage of the Holocaust makes it clear that each party is implementing more than one strategy, and this is inevitable. For example, theoretically the least embroiled group seems to be those researching the legacy of the war. Yet even they are not immune to political and institutional concerns. Meanwhile, “grassroots” fans of stories “of Auschwitz” who see researchers as a hermetic milieu writing and speaking in an alien code, do not necessarily view Holocaust research as somebody else’s mission; they perceive it as a profession – one of many offering the chance to obtain a position, receive a salary, apply for additional funding, grants, scholarships and fellowships, and seek to win distinctions and awards. They treat research as work that is not only an ethical commitment, but also an ambitious initiative, a field of development and advancement, a factor affecting symbolic status, influencing identity, defining the research community and marking their position in life.

If we take into account the degree of entanglement on all sides, it is difficult to base criticism of Auschwitz bestsellers solely on accusations of commercial

exploitation of the Holocaust or the self-aggrandizing, predatory "takeover" of this subject by popular authors. Of course, the question of financial and symbolic profits is not conclusive. There also remains the huge problem of historical ignorance, deliberate abuses, and incessant factual errors, which, at least in some circles, are starting to function as fact. But it is equally clear that popular convention need not be synonymous with that which is erroneous or cynical, and something pathos-laden, tear-jerking or "kitsch"<sup>12</sup> should not be equated with something immoral – aesthetics is not a subset of ethics, even in the case of the Holocaust. It is worth remembering that, firstly, forms of pathos and kitsch also operated in concentration camps, as did straightforward scenarios of emotional behaviors. Secondly, after the war many survivors of the Holocaust produced texts, paintings, sculptures, and films which, were we to consider them "dispassionately," without venerating their authenticity, could be seen as formally uncomplicated, gimmicky, and biased works. Thirdly, it is not only contemporary writers who make mistakes, distort, twist and manipulate. Unthinking, self-aggrandizing, traumatic, but also manipulative revision of facts was and remains a common phenomenon in the narratives of victims and witnesses.

And it is in this sphere that the field of exchange between experts and publishers, popular writers or readers should be opened or reinforced. Exchange, meaning dialogue crossing the line of division and going beyond hermetic rhetoric, superior attitudes, the instinct to mark of one's "own" field and patronizing gestures, in fact on both sides of the barricade. Just as Holocaust researchers, historians and institutional memory practitioners can be snobbish, so too can bestselling authors and their readers.

Moreover, all the sides are dependent on each other – some of the people visiting the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum are viewers of *Schindler's List* or readers of *The Tattooist of Auschwitz* and the like, inspired by such cultural texts to come and see "how it really was." Seemingly conflicting interests and antagonistic or mutually exclusive outlooks often have a common denominator and are complementary, or at least increase each other's chances of success. Cutting off the branch of popular culture thematizing the war would affect the canon, destroy the flow of data, but also disrupt the circulation of social affects. In short, memories and narratives about the past would be petrified. Popular culture is not a threat; on the contrary, it guarantees the continuity of affective and memory exchange. Besides which, contrary to the intentions of guardians of memory, it is not possible to silence or censor the popular reactions to genocide. The Holocaust is not just a set of dates, numbers, and locations that can be contained once and for all, but a living tissue of cultural

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12 On the kitsch nature of popular camp novels cf. Aleksandra Ubertowska, "Krzepiąca moc kiczu. Literatura Holokaustu na (estetycznych) manowcach," *Zagłada Żydów. Studia i Materiały* 6 (2010).



feeling and thinking. It is therefore also a perverse capital, a space of aberration and profanation. And the post-Holocaust and (post)post-memory stage – like all the others – has its own rules.

The tensions between the conservative and experimental positions are probably key to understanding the contemporary phenomenon of the Auschwitz gang. These books take their place in the gap between the “right way,” the canonical convention of presentation of the Holocaust, respected by the majority, and “upstart” practices, initially infuriating to the insider community, labeled as scandalous, iconoclastic, impudent, but years later often seen as the avant-garde of the next stage of war testimonies and narratives. The stories of Tadeusz Borowski, Leo Lipski and Marian Pankowski are examples of this, as is Art Spiegelman’s *Maus*, Zbigniew Libera’s artwork *LEGO Concentration Camp*, the performance art of Artur Żmijewski, Jane Korman’s *Dancing Auschwitz*, and Ram Katzir’s coloring books.<sup>13</sup>

Against the background of these practices and their difficult perception, Auschwitz bestsellers are neither an extreme nor an exceptional phenomenon. On the map and intensity scale of Holocaust “profanations,” they play rather a mediocre role, despite having an undoubted wide reach and frequently being quoted. The Auschwitz gang books and experimental works differ in their degree of formal complication and are addressed to varying target groups, but what they have in common is their emergence “as a reaction” – not in a vacuum, but for someone and against something. They oppose Auschwitz conceived as a canon of knowledge and aesthetics, strictly defined ethical obligations that are untenable for future generations. They do not always represent a search for alternative means of expression, but usually find ways of freshening up the existing order of testimony, narrative, and representation. These might involve controversy, dissension, stoking of emotions and provoking – some people at least – to confront facts and material remnants. And undoubtedly, the higher the tower of The Event is raised, the greater will be the venting of emotions sought by those who are burdened by rules and conventions set by others, feeling and remembering according to the canon. Who has the right to Auschwitz today remains an open question – and the longer it remains open, the better for Auschwitz. As one reader of *Escape from Auschwitz* put it, “history smacks of private stories, but still, we’re damn well in this crap together.”

*Translated by Ben Koschalka*

13 On the gesture of artistic experimentation as a reaction to Holocaust “fatigue,” cf. Ernst van Alphen, “Playing the Holocaust,” in van Alphen, *Art in Mind* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005); Przemysław Czapliński, “Zagłada i profanacje,” *Teksty Drugie* 4 (2009).

## Abstract

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**Agnieszka Dauksza**

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*Bestsellers from Auschwitz: Guardians of Memory Versus the Auschwitz Gang*

The text scrutinizes the phenomenon of popular Holocaust novels, whose plot usually plays out on the scene of Auschwitz. The author interprets their meaning in the broader context of the activities of the modern emotional community, in which clash the non- identical perspectives of victims their relatives, witnesses, bystanders, and beneficiaries of the Holocaust, along with memory politicians, guardians of memory, Holocaust scholars and educators, and those who treat it as an object of experimental practices. The author argues that all these social actors function in an inextricable intertwining of mutual dependency, which despite appearances and their goals, makes them jointly drive the effect of "citability" and "commerciality" of Auschwitz as a brand. The text distinguishes several dominant strategies of action in the field of Holocaust culture, which one could not consider in separation: symbolic-mnemonic, scholarly, (self-)therapeutic, identity- oriented (and self-fashioning), commercial, parasitic, and commensalist.

## Keywords

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Holocaust, Auschwitz, popular novels, bestsellers, emotional community, dark tourism

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Justyna Tabaszewska

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## The Holocaust and Literature

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TEKSTY DRUGIE 2024, NR 1, S. 17–21

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**T**his new special issue of *Teksty Drugie, Twenty-First-Century Literature and the Holocaust. A Comparative and Multilingual Perspective*, notwithstanding the dynamic development of Holocaust research in recent years, provides an exceptionally interesting insight into its literary representations from nationally and methodologically diverse perspectives.

The division into sections adopted in this issue indicates its broad geographical and temporal perspective. While the two-part introduction, beginning with Agnieszka Dauksza's article, aims to provide an overview of the "conditions" of thinking and writing about the Holocaust in Poland, before mapping (as this short text also does) the volume's content, the next articles present the complex, heterogeneous, and – despite the passage of time – still extremely dynamic picture of literary representations of the Holocaust. The first of the sections proposed by the volume's academic editors, Sławomir Jacek Żurek and Kris Van Heuckelom, covers the subject of contemporary Holocaust writing, encompassing seven texts which deftly navigate the complicated memory universe of the Holocaust. These span articles dealing with third-generation German memory of the Shoah and the Sec-

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### Justyna Tabaszewska

– Associate Professor at the Institute of Literary Research of the Polish Academy of Sciences, member of the editorial board of *Teksty Drugie*, co-editor of the new journal *Memory Studies Review*. Author of four books, including *Humanistyka służebna* [Servile humanities] (2022), and *Pamięć afektywna* [Affective memory] (2022), as well as articles in such journals as *Memory Studies*, *Teksty Drugie*, *Przegląd Kulturoznawczy* and *Wielogłos*. Recipient of scholarships from the Institute of Human Sciences (IWM) (2021) and NAWA – Polish National Agency for Academic Exchange (the Bekker Program, Goethe University Frankfurt). Her interests include issues of affects and cultural memory. Email: justyna.tabaszewska@ibl.waw.pl.

ond World War (Luisa Banki),<sup>1</sup> describing the complex mechanisms of creating and controlling Polish memory of the Holocaust (Przemysław Czapliński),<sup>2</sup> presenting the specificity of Flemish Holocaust representation and memory within the broader context of Dutch-language literary and cultural production (Kris Van Heuckelom),<sup>3</sup> analyzing the poetics of the Holocaust narrative in modern Russian literature (Roman Katsman),<sup>4</sup> and showing the nature of the multidirectional turn in post-Euro-maidan Ukrainian literature (Yuliya Ilchuk).<sup>5</sup> This section also presents the intricacies of Israeli Holocaust memory, demonstrating how the figure of the survivor has been adopted by second- and third-generation authors (Erga Heller).<sup>6</sup> The level of complexity and of the geographical and methodological breadth of the various authors is particularly visible in an article tracing how Jewish literature operates in Germany and in Poland (Elisa-Maria Hiemer).<sup>7</sup>

Adopting such a complex perspective (each of the articles is about either a different country or a fundamentally different angle within the given national memory) means that at least a few different problems of contemporary thinking about the Holocaust can be outlined smoothly. Firstly, it at least muddies, if not quite undermining, thinking in the simple oppositions of perpetrator and victim (as well as significantly modifying the well-known triad which also contains the bystander). Secondly, it shows in practice how the idea of multidirectional memory and the notion of the existence of implicated subjects<sup>8</sup> can operate in the case of creating a truly comparative analysis of literature concerning the

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1 Luisa Banki, "Remembering the Shoah and the Second World War in German Third Generation Literature," *Teksty Drugie* English Issue 1 (2024).

2 Przemysław Czapliński, "Managing Death. Polish Legitimate Cultures Concerning the Holocaust," *Teksty Drugie* English Issue 1 (2024).

3 Kris Van Heuckelom, "From Spectral to Real Jews: Recent Trends in Flemish Writing about the Holocaust," *Teksty Drugie* English Issue 1 (2024).

4 Roman Katsman, "Poetics of Twenty-First-Century Russian-Language Fiction about the Shoah," *Teksty Drugie* English Issue 1 (2024).

5 Yuliya Ilchuk, "The Multidirectional Turn in the Literature about Holocaust in Post-Euro-maidan Ukraine (On the Material of Sofia Andrukhovych's *Amadoka*)," *Teksty Drugie* English Issue 1 (2024).

6 Erga Heller, "The Creation of a 'Survivor' in Contemporary Israeli Holocaust Novels," *Teksty Drugie* English Issue 1 (2024).

7 Elisa-Maria Hiemer, "Entangled Identities and the History of Spaces in Twenty-First-Century Jewish Literature from Germany and Poland," *Teksty Drugie* English Issue 1 (2024).

8 Cf. especially Michael Rothberg, *The Implicated Subject. Beyond Victims and Perpetrators* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2019).

question of the Holocaust. I write here deliberately not of "Holocaust literature," but texts concerning the question of the Holocaust, as the articles in this volume are interested in something more than purely tracing the intricacies of Holocaust memory. They seek to show the ways in which our thinking about this definitive event of the twentieth century is changing as a result of events in the twenty-first century.

This intention is particularly visible in the next section, titled "Between Past and Future. Twenty-First-Century Holocaust Literature." A particularly noteworthy article in this section analyses the depictions of Hitler in literature, including in alternative, counterfactual portrayals contrasting with the actual events of the Second World War (Bettine Siertsema).<sup>9</sup> The future as a point of reference and horizon of ideas<sup>10</sup> is also present in an article analyzing, among other things, blurred temporalities, taking the example of American and Danish novels (Sarah Minslow).<sup>11</sup> The complicated relations between present and past, memory and ideas, are also explored in a text on the writing of Aharon Appelfeld (Michal Ben-Horin),<sup>12</sup> while the final article in this section analyses complex types of memory (including post-memories, sub-memories and non-memories) with reference to Polish and Hebrew memory of the Holocaust (Sławomir Jacek Żurek).<sup>13</sup> Three cumulative movements can be used to outline the expansion of the subject area and methodology done by the authors of the articles comprising this part of the issue: firstly, leaning towards the future, including a counterfactual one that could have occurred if the Second World War had run a different course; secondly, going beyond typical representations of the Holocaust towards representing perspectives that have been examined less, of various types of unprivileged subjects including children and animals; thirdly, a movement towards building a supranational narrative beyond the framework of individual national memories.

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9 Bettine Siertsema, "Fictional Representations of Hitler," *Teksty Drugie* English Issue 1 (2024).

10 Reinhart Koselleck, *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*, trans. Keith Tribe (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004).

11 Sarah Minslow, "Legacies of the Shoah in Jonathan Safran Foer's *Everything Is Illuminated* and Arnon Grunberg's *De Joodse Messias* [*The Jewish Messiah*]," *Teksty Drugie* English Issue 1 (2024).

12 Michal Ben-Horin, "The Life of a Story: Aharon Appelfeld's Double as a Mode of Holocaust Representation," *Teksty Drugie* English Issue 1 (2024).

13 Sławomir Jacek Żurek, "A Jewish Child in a Polish Hiding Place. Children, Adults and Animals in Nava Semel's *And the Rat Laughed* and Wilhelm Dichter's *God's Horse*," *Teksty Drugie* English Issue 1 (2024).

Particularly the last two of these movements are expanded upon and cumulated in the final section, titled "Jewish Childhood, the Holocaust and Twenty-First-Century." The articles grouped here not only explore the perspective of the child as Holocaust survivor, but also focus on the relatively new phenomenon of writing Holocaust literature for children and young people. The first of these articles enlarges this perspective further by investigating literary texts from various cultures translated into Polish (and thereby resonating with the Polish culture of remembrance) (Sylvia Karolak).<sup>14</sup> Meanwhile, complicated temporal relations run through an article on young people's novels about the Warsaw ghetto, which they treat as a kind of chronotope, a breach in time and space (Daniel Feldman),<sup>15</sup> existing as if "separately" to everything else. The separateness of children's or adolescents' experience of the Holocaust is also explored by the next article in the section, on the role of toys as memory transmitters in children's literature (Irena Barbara Kalla).<sup>16</sup> These articles employ a consistently supranational research perspective, analyzing literary examples that always come from more than one culture and language, which makes for extremely interesting findings. There is a willingness in this section to ask the questions "what if?," referring not only to the poetics of alternative or counterfactual novels, but also the problems of a supranational sense of guilt and responsibility for the Holocaust – as with the article on the literary representations of Anne Frank (Pnina Rosenberg).<sup>17</sup>

The relations (and often frictions) between what could broadly be called the aesthetic and the ethical function of literature are also the subject of an article on the Dutch children's novel *Winterijs* [Winter ice] (Vanessa Joosen)<sup>18</sup> as well one on Canadian children's novels (Mateusz Świetlicki),<sup>19</sup> and especially its portrayal of Nazis.

I am presenting the articles featured in this volume meticulously, albeit briefly, not only to do justice to their authors and the scholarly editors of the volume, but also to show the complexity and transient nature of the topics analyzed here. Al-

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14 Sylvia Karolak, "The Holocaust Literature for Children in Translation into Polish," *Teksty Drugie* English Issue 1 (2024).

15 Daniel Feldman, "Reading Time in Youth Novels about the Warsaw Ghetto," *Teksty Drugie* English Issue 1 (2024).

16 Irena Barbara Kalla, "The Unity of Subject and Object: Toys of the Holocaust Survivors as Memory Transmitters in Children's Literature," *Teksty Drugie* English Issue 1 (2024).

17 Pnina Rosenberg, "Anne Frank Is Dead and Is Living in New York," *Teksty Drugie* English Issue 1 (2024).

18 Vanessa Joosen, "Frozen in Sorrow: *Winterijs* [Winter ice] by Peter Van Gestel," *Teksty Drugie* English Issue 1 (2024).

19 Mateusz Świetlicki, "Trapped Between Hitler and Stalin: Nazi Bogeymen and Implicated Subjects in Canadian Children's Historical Fiction," *Teksty Drugie* English Issue 1 (2024).

though, as the well-known division into cultural and communicative memory<sup>20</sup> suggests, events whose eyewitnesses are no longer alive (which the Holocaust is gradually becoming, with 79 years now having passed since the end of the Second World War) should move into the realm of cultural memory, thus slowly disappearing from public discussion, as this volume shows, there is no sign of any gradual waning of interest in issues of the Holocaust.

*Translated by Ben Koschalka*

## Abstract

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*The Holocaust and Literature*

Introduction to the special issue *Twenty-First-Century Literature and the Holocaust. A Comparative and Multilingual Perspective*.

## Keywords

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literature, Holocaust, memory, multidirectional memory

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<sup>20</sup> Jan Assmann, *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization: Writing, Remembrance, and Political Imagination* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

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# In the Textual World of Twenty-First-Century Holocaust Literature

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Przemysław Czapliński

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## Managing Death. Polish Legitimate Cultures Concerning the Holocaust

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TEKSTY DRUGIE 2024, NR 1, S. 22–51

DOI: 10.18318/td.2024.en.1.3 | ORCID: 0000-0002-4805-6471

This article was written as a part of the National Science Centre project "Before the Law. Alliances and Conflicts Between Literature, Art and Law in Poland 1989–2020," registration no. 2020/39/B/HS2/02801.

**O**n April 19, 2023, on the eightieth anniversary of the outbreak of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, Barbara Engelking, a well-known and respected Holocaust researcher, said during the program *Kropka nad I* [Dotting the "I"], hosted on the independent TV station TVN by Monika Olejnik:

The Jews were unbelievably disappointed by the Poles during the war. [...] The Jews knew what to expect from the Germans. The German was the enemy and this relationship was very clear, black and white, while the relationship with the Poles was much more complex. [...] The Poles had the potential to become allies of the Jews and one could hope that they would behave differently, that they would be neutral, that they would show good-will, that they would not exploit the situation to such an extent, and that there would not be such widespread blackmail.<sup>1</sup>

**Przemysław Czapliński** – historian of 20th and 21st century literature, essayist, translator; co-founder of the Center for Open Humanities (UAM), which deals with the relationship between law and literature. Recent publications *Poruszona mapa* [The shifted map] (2016), *Literatura i jej natury* [Literature and its natures; co-authored with J. B. Bednarek, D. Gostyński] (2017), *O jeden las za daleko* [A forest too far. Democracy, capitalism, and environmental disobedience in Poland]; co-editors: J.B. Bednarek, D. Gostyński (2019), *To wróci. Przyszłość i przyszłość pandemii* [It will come back. The past and future of pandemics]; co-edited by J. B. Bednarek] (2022). Email: przemyslaw.czaplinski@amu.edu.pl.

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<sup>1</sup> *Kropka nad I* [Dotting the "I"], TV-program, accessed 16 March, 2024, <https://tvn24.pl/go/programy,7/kropka-nad-i--odcinki,11419/odcinek-1353,SooE1353,1047606>. Unless otherwise noted, all quotes are translated by the author of this article.



The following day, Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki posted an extensive, almost three-page comment on his official Twitter account. The general tone of the statement was established in the first paragraph:

On yesterday's program *Kropka nad I* on TVN24, outrageous words were uttered which have nothing to do with reliable historical knowledge. As Prime Minister, a historian and, above all, a Pole, I feel obliged to respond to the claims made on air. The fact that the Holocaust took place on Polish territory was a bitter paradox of history for a country that welcomed the Jews of Europe during the worst medieval and modern pogroms. It needs to be said out loud that the hecatomb of the Jewish people began with the destruction of the Polish state, an enclave of safety, so to speak, for Jews from all over Europe who had been fleeing persecution for centuries. Only after the liquidation of Poland as a state could the Germans begin their crimes. With the occupation, the Germans also destroyed the great culture, language and history of a nation that had been part of Europe for hundreds of years. Poland and the Poles were an obstacle and impediment to the Holocaust, not accomplices in it. The Righteous Among the Nations number almost 28,000 people from 51 countries. Of these, most are Poles – more than 7,000. It is estimated that the number should be much higher.<sup>2</sup>

Morawiecki went on to state that in Warsaw alone, some 70,000–90,000 Poles aided Jews despite being threatened with death for doing so, and that this figure was many times higher in the provinces.<sup>3</sup> Engelking's "unscientific" statement was placed by the Prime Minister within the tradition of anti-Polonism: "The scandalous opinions – I repeat – OPINIONS – not facts and the anti-Polish narrative presented in some media are unfortunately the result of years of neglect by the Polish state as well. In the People's Republic of Poland, which was known for its top-down imposed, communist anti-Semitism, and later in Poland after 1989, the topic of Poles aiding Jews was neglected and rarely discussed. This was exploited by other countries

2 Mateusz Morawiecki, Post (Twitter), accessed August 26, 2023, [https://twitter.com/MorawieckiM/status/1648986768429948928?ref\\_src=twsrc%5Etfw%7Ctwcamp%5Etwetembed%7Ctwtterm%5E1648986768429948928%7Ctwgr%5E3d79e4f9b4cbb1549c3167a5a4fa848cd2a34dc%7Ctwcon%5Es1\\_&ref\\_url=https%3A%2F%2Fwyborcza.pl%2Falehistoria%2F712168129683953polacy-wszyscy-jestescie-bohaterami-to-mowilem-ja-morawiecki.html](https://twitter.com/MorawieckiM/status/1648986768429948928?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw%7Ctwcamp%5Etwetembed%7Ctwtterm%5E1648986768429948928%7Ctwgr%5E3d79e4f9b4cbb1549c3167a5a4fa848cd2a34dc%7Ctwcon%5Es1_&ref_url=https%3A%2F%2Fwyborcza.pl%2Falehistoria%2F712168129683953polacy-wszyscy-jestescie-bohaterami-to-mowilem-ja-morawiecki.html).

3 Prime Minister Morawiecki based his data on Gunnar S. Paulsson's book *Secret City: Jews on the Aryan Side of Warsaw (1940–1945)*, trans. Elżbieta Olender-Dmowska (Kraków: Znak, 2007), a passionate but strongly one-sided story, contested by historians of the occupation and by Holocaust scholars.

to spread their own narratives, unfavorable to Poland, and to disseminate a falsified historical politics. The results are the kind of pseudo-historical statements we heard yesterday on TVN24. We are fighting for Poland's good name in the world. This requires time and investment."<sup>4</sup>

On the same day (April 20, 2023), Przemysław Czarnek, head of the Ministry of Education and Science, posted a comment on the ministry's official Twitter account: "I have commissioned a very broad inter-university study within the framework of the NPRH [National Programme for the Development of the Humanities – author's note] to demonstrate community by community the involvement of [Polish – P. Cz.] society in saving Jews during the Holocaust. So that people like those on TVN24 can never again insult Poles, [who were – P. Cz.] murdered by Germans for this reason."<sup>5</sup> In a radio statement, Minister Czarnek added: "This is scandalous, the unbelievable insolence of this lady, it's not the first time, after all. This woman does not understand what happened during the Second World War in Poland. This woman does not understand the tragedy of the Ulma family, for example, and this is just an example. [...] I do not intend to influence in any way the employment policies of the Institute of Sociology of the Polish Academy of Sciences – this is not my role. However, I will certainly review my financial decisions, because I will not provide significant funding to an institute which employs the kind of people who simply insult Poles."<sup>6</sup>

Neither of these officials mentioned the issue of blackmail or the extortion payments collected from Jews in hiding, both of which were raised by Engelking. Instead, they adopted a strategy of challenging her authority. They both called the researcher's statement "scandalous,"<sup>7</sup> both denied her words the

4 Mateusz Morawiecki, Post (Twitter).

5 Przemysław Czarnek, Post (Twitter), accessed August 26, 2023, [https://twitter.com/CzarnekP/status/1648954700807454726?ref\\_src=twsrc%5Etfw%7Ctwcamp%5Etweet%7Ctwterm%5E1648954700807454726%7Ctwgr%5E06bc90507cef03861e4c49ff86c42731b2c3c80d%7Ctcon%5Es1\\_&ref\\_url=https%3A%2F2Foko.press%2Fpremier-i-minister-nauki-atakuja-badaczke-zaglady](https://twitter.com/CzarnekP/status/1648954700807454726?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw%7Ctwcamp%5Etweet%7Ctwterm%5E1648954700807454726%7Ctwgr%5E06bc90507cef03861e4c49ff86c42731b2c3c80d%7Ctcon%5Es1_&ref_url=https%3A%2F2Foko.press%2Fpremier-i-minister-nauki-atakuja-badaczke-zaglady).

6 "Minister Czarnek: Będę rewidował swoje decyzje finansowe dotyczące Instytutu Socjologii PAN" [I will certainly review my financial decisions concerning the Institute of Sociology of the Polish Academy of Sciences] Polska Agencja Prasowa, April 24, 2023, accessed August 26, 2023, <https://www.pap.pl/aktualnosci/news%2C1565003%2Cminister-czarnek-bede-rewidowal-swoje-decyzje-finansowe-dotyczace>.

7 For the sake of order, it should be recalled that Barbara Engelking is one of the most careful (meticulous in collecting materials and cautious in formulating conclusions) Holocaust researchers. Her books have set directions and methods for the study of Polish-Jewish relations during the war – especially her book *Jest taki piękny słoneczny dzień... Losy*

status of scientific facts (they were “opinions”), and both linked them to the propaganda of the communist period and negligence during the years since 1989. Both politicians contrasted such “opinions” on the prevalence of black-mail with a heroic version of wide scale aid given to Jews by Poles; they both considered ignoring this aid to be an insult to the good name of Poland and Poles, and described study of the Holocaust as essential for Poland’s future.<sup>8</sup> Morawiecki’s threefold enumeration – “as prime minister, a historian and, above all, a Pole” – established the basis on which the Minister based his very real threats: in the name of the legitimate authorities, in the name of “real” science, and in the name of the nation; Czarnek, without hiding his bias, announced the commissioning of a study to document the involvement of the inhabitants of Polish communities in aiding the Jews. In doing so, the Minister considered “the feelings of Poles” as the only criterion for scientific validity<sup>9</sup> and announced that he would apply financial pressure to researchers who “insult Poles.”<sup>10</sup>

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*Żydów szukających ratunku na wsi polskiej 1942–1945* (Warszawa: Stowarzyszenie Centrum Badań nad Zagładą Żydów, 2011) [English edition: *Such a Beautiful Sunny Day: Jews Seeking Refuge in the Polish Countryside, 1942–1945* (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 2016)], as well as the monumental collective studies co-edited by Engelking: *Zarys krajobrazu. Wieś polska wobec zagłady Żydów 1942–1945* [Outlines of a landscape. The Polish countryside towards the extermination of Jews 1942–1945] (co-edited with Jan Grabowski and Alina Skibińska; Warszawa: Centrum Badań nad Zagładą Żydów, 2011), *Prowincja Noc. Życie i zagłada Żydów w dystrykcie warszawskim* [The province of night: Life and the extermination of Jews in the Warsaw district] (co-edited with Jacek Leociak and Dariusz Libionka; Warszawa: Centrum Badań nad Zagładą Żydów, 2007) and *Dalej jest noc. Losy Żydów w wybranych powiatach okupowanej Polski* (2018) [English edition: *Night Without End: The Fate of Jews in German-Occupied Poland*], co-edited with Jan Grabowski (Jerusalem, Bloomington: Yad Vashem–Indiana University Press, 2022).

- 8 Mateusz Morawiecki, Post (Twitter): “A nation that knows nothing about its own past, is not proud of the achievements of its ancestors, allows their Memory to be tarnished – has no future.”
- 9 “Czarnek grozi PAN: ‘Nie będę dawał pieniędzy naukowcom, którzy obrażają Polaków,’” [Czarnek threatens PAN: “I will not give money to scientists who insult Poles”] *Głos Naukowy*, April 25, 2023, <https://glos.pl/czarnek-grozi-pan-nie-bede-dawal-pieniedzy-naukowcom-ktorzy-obraza-polakow>; accessed August 26, 2023: “I will not allow Prof. Engelking to insult Poles and call us blackmailers. I will not give money for this. Poles do not wish it.”
- 10 In the article “Polacy! Wszyscy jesteście bohaterami! To mówiłem ja, Morawiecki, premier, historyk i Polak,” [Poles! You are all heroes! This is what I said, Morawiecki, the Prime Minister, a historian and a Pole] (*Gazeta Wyborcza*, April 21, 2023) Beata Maciejewska quotes the words Min. Czarnek uttered during a radio programme: “[...] there will be funds for grants in those areas of research that relate to objective values and

Both statements seem symptomatic. The reactions of the Prime Minister and the Minister to Prof. Engelking's words were not only manipulative (the Prime Minister), deceitful and aggressive (the Minister). They also expressed panic. This is how people who are fighting for the highest stakes behave. But what are the stakes?

### Old Death, New Life

The fact that both officials invoked the authority of the government, the nation and science, indicates that this conflict is over the basis for what constitutes a legitimate culture.<sup>11</sup>

According to researchers,<sup>12</sup> a legitimate culture is an axiological frame of reference for society as a whole: it defines what brings prestige and shame, it sets the ceiling for social aspirations, establishes the measure for evaluating the lives of individuals and societies, and allows the value of past and present actions to be assessed. It should be possible to apply this frame of reference in the evaluation of all past, present and anticipated actions. However, although a legitimate culture is the basis for definitive judgements, it is not itself subject to evaluation. What legitimates it is that it provides legitimacy. It is not subject to questioning because, by setting the standard for judging all other forms of culture, it produces mechanisms that make it impossible to know its basis. It dictates obligatory patterns (of reading, writing, speaking, behaving), defends their inviolability and, at the same time, is itself defended by them. According to Pierre Bourdieu's inspiring term, it is a dominant cultural arbitrary whose reproduction influences the reproduction of power arrangements and power

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are important for Poland, that examine important periods of our history or the involvement of the Catholic Church in fighting German or Soviet totalitarianism, in maintaining Polishness under the partitions. Swift and decisive decisions are badly needed in this regard. We will support the newly established philosophical and philological institutes."

11 Translator's note: In the original Polish text of the present article, the term *kultura prawomocna* is used to denote both the product and the source of two means of establishing cultural legitimacy. In English, the source of such legitimacy is often described as a "culture of legitimacy." To better reflect the source text and its roots in Bourdieu's model of culture, "legitimate culture" has been used as the equivalent for *kultura prawomocna* throughout the article – T. A.

12 See Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron, *Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture*, trans. Richard Nice (London: Sage, 1990), 22–23.

relations.<sup>13</sup> It is thus an official culture sanctioned by social institutions, but, at the same time, it endows these institutions with their own means of sanction. The stakes in this game are the means for representing what constitutes a legitimate culture, while its enactment is tantamount to gaining control over the circulation of meanings and values.

Meanwhile, the Holocaust – treated impartially – warrants asking precisely about how a legitimate culture functions in practice: in relation to the cultural (especially religious, patriotic and moral) basis for both aiding Jews and using violence against them, about the behavior of the Polish elites and masses towards Jews during the occupation, about the Polish idea of citizenship and nation, about the heritage of the legal sanctioning in German-occupied Poland of prewar anti-Semitism, about the position of Jews within Poland's social hierarchy and forms of action during the occupation that went beyond prewar expressions of contempt, about the attitude of the Catholic Church towards the Holocaust, about the reasons for people's hiding from other Poles the fact that they were aiding Jews, about the scale of wartime denunciation and blackmail, about postwar forms of Holocaust commemoration, and postwar digging for gold at the sites of former death camps... Studying the Holocaust likewise necessitates examining stories about the good relations between Poles and Jews in prewar Poland, of Poles' widespread solidarity with Jews during the Holocaust, of the warm reception received by Jews returning to their homes after the Holocaust. The study of the Holocaust is an expedition into the depths, to the very core, of Poles' uncertainties.

It is therefore understandable and justified to invoke the authority of the government, the nation and science to establish an operative, binding version of knowledge about the Holocaust. In order to exercise power in today's Poland, it is necessary to have control over the Holocaust narrative, and in order to control this narrative, it is necessary to have at one's disposal a legitimate culture. However, this applies not only to the current decade, but to the entire post-1989 period. After this turning-point, Polish culture and politics become intertwined by a new bond: from the moment independence was regained, any legitimate culture had to assimilate the Holocaust, i.e. transform it into a form that would allow the death of Poland's former Jews to lend its dark authority in the exercise of power – in managing social divisions, in establishing the limits of public debate and of art and science, in defining attitudes to the past, and in setting goals for the future.

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

### Broadening the Rituals of Forefathers' Eve<sup>14</sup>

In the history of Polish legitimate culture<sup>15</sup> more important than 1989 is the mid-1980s, during which key forms of cultural activity were directed at dismantling legitimacy. The rationale for such a conclusion is not only the diversity of cultural forms emerging in the mid-1980s, but also the unique carnivalesque atmosphere of anarchism that targeted all – especially national, Catholic and also proto-capitalist – hierarchies.<sup>16</sup> In almost all registers of social life, activities emerged that contested both official and underground culture. This was the nature of the so-called “third circuit” in communication,<sup>17</sup> which maintained its independence from state structures and from the underground culture of Solidarity; the artzines,<sup>18</sup> that is the magazines created by small collectives, which emerged within the framework of the third circuit, parodied all officiality and allowed “immature” forms (humorous, irreverent, raw, amateurish) to speak out. Anti-hierarchism also manifested itself in the activities of artistic groups that combined moral scandal with political anarchism (TOTart from Gdańsk, Kultura Zrzuty [Pitch-In Culture]<sup>19</sup>). A less iconoclastic but more participatory carnivalesque practice was introduced into public life by the Orange Alternative happening movement.<sup>20</sup> A similar

14 The Polish term *dziady* [literally “grandfathers”], used here in the source text, refers in Slavic folklore both to the spirits of one’s forebears and to pre-Christian customs related to ritual commemoration of (and communion with) the dead. Today *dziady* is generally associated in Polish-Lithuanian-Belorussian culture with the pagan roots of celebrations surrounding All Saints’ Day and the title of Mickiewicz’s famed dramatic trilogy, traditionally translated in English as *Forefathers’ Eve* (Parts 1 to 3).

15 This category was used to describe Polish culture after the transformation by Joanna B. Bednarek – see *Żywotne zakłócenie. Skandal i przemiany kultury prawomocnej w Polsce 1989-2019*. Doctoral dissertation defended at Adam Mickiewicz University in 2021.

16 For the most comprehensive monograph on the phenomenon of resistance culture in the 1980s, see Marcin Kościelniak, *Egoiści. Trzecia droga w kulturze polskiej lat 80* (Warszawa: Instytut Teatralny im. Zbigniewa Raszewskiego, 2018).

17 See, among others, Entry: “trzeci obieg,” *Parnas Bis – Słownik literatury polskiej urodzonej po 1960 roku*, ed. Paweł Dunin-Wąsowicz and Krzysztof Varga (Warszawa: Lampa i Iskra Boża, 1995), 93; Entry: “trzeci obieg,” *Mały słownik subkultur młodzieżowych*, ed. Mirosław Pęczak (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Semper, 1992), 96.

18 The first monograph on artzine activity and poetic creation was written in German. See Michael Fleischer, *Overground: die Literatur der polnischen alternativen Subkulturen der 80er und 90er Jahre* (München: Otto Sagner, 1994).

19 See Kościelniak, *Egoiści*.

20 See Łukasz Kamiński, “Krasnoludki i żołnierze. Wrocławska opozycja lat osiemdziesiątych,” *Pamięć i Przyszłość* 2 (2008): 7–19.

tendency towards protest and provocation nature was characteristic of two important literary journals of the period: Poznań's "Czas Kultury" [Culture time] (1985),<sup>21</sup> and Kraków's "BruLion" (1986),<sup>22</sup> which dealt both seriously and comically with opposition culture.<sup>23</sup> Alongside these initiatives, a plethora of new value systems emerged, alongside new forms of association and action geared towards group bonding that blurred the boundary between creators and audiences, while also making no reference to "anti-communism" as a shared identity. Such a call for participatory engagement could also be seen in music subcultures (from rock to punk) and in close-knit communities of SF literature fans. All of these activities showed that social communication no longer fit into the "authorities/opposition" (communism/anti-communism) dichotomy into which Polish symbolic culture had become jammed after martial law.

Thus, in Polish culture of the mid-1980s a mass diffusion was taking place in practices on the streets, in artistic niches and in the popular register. A diverse culture was emerging, anchored in everyday communicative practices, engaging in group activity, and mocking all (ecclesiastical, national, Solidarity, etc.) authorities.

In this diffused movement, artistic activity often provided blueprints for a new and different society – one linked horizontally (and thus less hierarchical), rejecting existing codes, and consisting of many loose communities, giving social conflicts a ritualistic character, and blurring boundaries and cultural roles (especially between creator and viewer, professional and amateur).

Such a prospective society – expressing itself through multiple, diverse and relatively equal forms of activity – was significantly disrupted by literature. There was little of the offbeat energy of musical or performance groups in the literature of the mid-1980s. But these literary texts introduced a necessary dose of doubt, evoking the memory of social differences, the conflicts arising from them, and the violence that was carried out on such occasions. The combined criteria "memory–conflict–violence" defines a small constellation of works (Hanna Krall's *Sublokator* [The subtenant], Andrzej Szczypiorski's *Początek* [Beginning], Paweł Huelle's *Weiser Dawidek*, Piotr Szewc's *Zagłada*

21 For a selection of the editor-in-chief's sharpest columns, see Jerzy Grupiński, *Dziedzinniec strusich samiec. Kilka uwag o życiu umysłowym w Polsce* (Poznań: Obserwator, 1992).

22 See Marcin Wieczorek, *BruLion. Instrukcja obsługi* (Kraków: Korporacja Ha!art, 2005).

23 For a characterization of the literature of the 1990s from a generational perspective, see Jarosław Klejnocki and Jerzy Sosnowski, *Chwilowe zawieszenie broni: o twórczości tzw. pokolenia bruLionu (1986–1996)* (Warszawa: Sic!, 1996); Paweł Dunin-Wąsowicz, *Oko smoka. Literatura tzw. pokolenia bruLionu wobec rzeczywistości III RP* (Warszawa: Lampa i Iskra Boża, 2000).

[Annihilation], Tadeusz Konwicki's *Bohni*, Adolf Rudnicki's *Teatr zawsze grany* [Theatre always performed] and *Krakowskie Przedmieście pełne deserów* [Krakowskie Przedmieście, full of desserts] (1986), Jarosław Marek Rymkiewicz's *Umschlagplatz*, Henryk Grynberg's *Kaddisz* [Kaddish] Andrzej Kuśniewicz's *Nawrócenie* [Turnaround], Jacek Bocheński's *Stan po zapaści* [Conditions after the collapse])<sup>24</sup> that evoked the greatest social resonance in the latter half of the 1980s.

If the cultural activities discussed above designed and practiced a pluralistic society, literature offered a foundation for this pluralism – the memory of exterminated differences.<sup>25</sup> In all of the aforementioned texts, the specters of Poland's former minorities return: first and foremost among them are the Jews, but they also include the Kashubians, Gypsies, Ukrainians, Lemkos, Lithuanians, and others. Literature evoked these communities and began to reveal the attitudes that Poles once held towards them. These varied recollections included images of ordinary neighborly coexistence, sympathy, camaraderie, friendship and even love, all of which were decisive factors in people's providing aid to minorities both during the war and in the times of the People's Republic of Poland. Alongside this, however, much more often and on a larger scale, literature evoked darker affects: dislike, disregard, contempt, disgust and hatred. In these cases, the plots took us through the successive stages of Poles' attitudes towards Jews: from the nineteenth century to the late 1920s, Poles tried to keep Jews isolated; in the 1930s they resorted to legal discrimination and street violence; during the war they maintained an indifferent acquiescence to the crimes committed by the Germans. This literature did not provide a full picture of this process or suggest sociological explanations. Rather, it directed readers towards repressed content and posed questions: how did ethnic differences disappear? If the Germans are to blame for the eradication of these differences, why is the memory of those who were exterminated not widely cultivated? Does the poor and reluctantly

24 To this we could add the two-hour version of Claude Lanzmann's film *Shoah* (TVP, 1985), Jan Błosiński's essay "Biedni Polacy patrzą na getto," [The poor poles look at the ghetto] *Tygodnik Powszechny* 2 (1987), Jerzy Ficowski's ethnographic essays *Cyganie na polskich drogach* [Gypsies on Polish roads] (1953, 1985), *Demony cudzego strachu* [Demons of other people's fears] (1986), and *Cyganie w Polsce. Dzieje i obyczaje* [Gypsies in Poland. History and customs] (1989), and Erwin Kruk's novel *Kronika z Mazur* [Chronicle from the Mazury region] (1989).

25 Maria Janion, in her book *Do Europy tak, ale razem z naszymi umarłymi* [To Europe, yes, but together with our dead] (Warszawa: Sic!, 2000), identified the memory of the absent as a condition for the preservation of cultural continuity and the construction of a post-modern ethic.



expressed memory of Jews, Ukrainians, Lemkos and other minorities reveal any hidden secrets about Polish attitudes during and after the war?

Thus, in regard to one of the main hopes of the 1980s – the hope for a diverse and non-conflictual society – literature offered a warning. In doing so, it reached back to a deep-seated cultural memory, signaling a condition for such change. From this memory emerged the idea of “broadening the rituals of Forefather’s Eve”: prose proposed including the absent in the rituals of commemoration. The cultivation of memory was to restore names to absent people, to reconstruct their biographies, to re-establish them in specific places and communities, and – seemingly most importantly – to initiate a process of reparation. With the revival of Forefathers’ Eve, a circle was being formed that was essential to speaking out loud about such questions as: why do the absent haunt us? What should we do to give them and ourselves peace?

A desire for reparation directed at the past was combined with a warning for today’s society. This literature said that if we did not want a repeat of the past, equality between the social majority and its various – ethnic, religious, gender and sexual – minorities must become the basis for future relations. This prose did not point to any particular political system, but included in its preamble for a future social pact a reminder of the violence that rained down on minorities throughout the twentieth century.

Building a social order on the ethical principle of respect for the Other and the renunciation of violence had a deep and disheartening justification in past experience. However, this project concealed at least three troublesome issues. Firstly, it founded its order of differences on differences that no longer existed (between Poles and Jews, Lemkos, Kashubians, Ukrainians, Byelorussians, etc.), meaning that the focus of the order proposed by Polish literature of the late 1980s and early 1990s were the ghosts of the absent rather than the bodies of the present. Secondly, the exclusion of violence by the majority was based on the story of its victims, which in turn transferred to the new period a messianic element expressed in the recognition of suffering as a means of participation in history. Thirdly, this dramatic narrative of Polish modernity focused on the use of ethnically based violence against minorities, leading to a disregard for economic issues and the omission of victims belonging to the majority. The books in question did not help prepare readers to recognize market or political discrimination; divisions based on class and material wealth – with all their complexities – existed here merely as a backdrop against which new, diverse, consensually coexisting and mutually respectful identities were to be more fully presented.

Despite these worrying blank spots, this idea would have had a chance of success if, after 1989, it had been followed by the transformation of school education, a profound modernization of the Church, the introduction of the

theme of Polish indifference to the death of Jews into religion lessons and recognition of this attitude as the original sin of postwar Polish identity, and the creation of mechanisms to combat inequality. Things turned out differently, however, and the emancipation story conveyed through literature became the moral guarantor of a new legitimate culture.

### How Neoliberalism Hijacked the Holocaust

An area where Poland's new political system found common ground with an emerging emancipatory culture that sided with the Other was in the deregulation of collective ties. From the point of view of the emancipation movements, only the dismantling of existing collective identities offered the Other – in Polish culture this included, above all, women, sexual others and Jews – a chance for equality<sup>26</sup>; the delegitimization of Polish masculinity gave rise to hopes for loosening patriarchal ties and opening up to female Polish historical narratives (herstories)<sup>27</sup>; the weakening of the heterosexual regime was a condition for the emancipation of sexual minorities; the dismantling of nationalism provided a basis for naming and possibly eliminating the ideological violence used by the majority against minorities (especially against Jews). Exposing the discriminatory aspects of identity and collective categories – like “nation,” “local community,” “Catholicism,” “masculinity,” “Polishness” or “patriotism” – offered a chance to move on to a new stage of modernity. For this reason, the 1990s saw the deconstruction of the story of the collective subject in Polish culture.

This appeared to be the dawn of a new historical period, one where the weaker, discriminated against, overlooked and marginalized minority subject would be granted fuller citizenship. However, this subject did not enter into a world in which freedom and equality were successfully established. The new world had shattered existing ties, seen as obstructing both democracy and capitalism. The political transformation in Central Europe began thanks to mass protests, but the implementation of regime change was based on the dismantling of collective subjects: there would have been no Solidarity and no victory in 1989 without the industrial proletariat, but there would have been no Polish capitalism without the rapid dismantling of the working class. In the early 1990s, the most important collective subjects – workers, farmers, the

26 See Kinga Dunin, *Czytając Polskę. Literatura polska po roku 1989 wobec dylematów nowoczesności* (Warszawa: W.A.B., 2004).

27 See Inga Iwasiów, *Rewindykacje. Kobieta czytająca dzisiaj* (Kraków: Universitas, 2002); *Gender dla średnio zaawansowanych. Wykłady szczecińskie* (Warszawa: W.A.B., 2004).

intelligentsia – turned out to be victors defeated by a history they themselves had ushered in.

The process of dismantling collective entities was rooted in a troublesome nonculpable guilt on the part of culture. Both Polish culture and Poland's economic transformation were working towards the same thing – deregulation. Their objectives, of course, were different. Cultural work sought to raise awareness of the damaging power of the family, the nation and male identity, and pointed to the need to develop new bonds – ones based on choice, granting more freedom to the individual, and promoting equality and reciprocity. Capitalism, on the other hand, was interested in individualism, not in new bonds: the success of the economic transformation was conditioned on the transformation of collective subjects into a collectivity of separate subjects. However, the difference between capitalism and critical culture became blurred where neoliberal rhetoric met emancipatory discourse: neoliberals attacked the social demands of workers and peasants, while proponents of emancipation criticized the oppressive nature of the masculocentric, national or Catholic community. The object of criticism – collective subjects – was a shared one.<sup>28</sup>

This ad hoc discursive alliance allowed Polish liberal-capitalist democracy to appropriate the Holocaust. This assimilation consisted in transforming the Holocaust into a delegitimization of nationalism and, more broadly, into evidence of the dangerous power inherent in collective subjects – especially the nation or religious community. When viewed in this way, the Holocaust needs to be seen as a challenge to the renewal of collective ties;<sup>29</sup> however, neoliberal discourse essentially incorporated the Holocaust into a broader process of weakening collective ties. This discourse warned against collectivism, recalled the criminality of nationalism and racism, and realized that

28 This discourse implied a rather simple social contract. It argued that social conflicts would disappear if, in democratic and free-market realities, everyone would strive for their own success (career, health, wealth, recognition) without interfering in other people's lives. There was room for association in this contract, but the only collectives that were desirable were those with a pragmatic (e.g. to set up a non-public school or business) or ludic (e.g. to throw a festival) orientation. On the delegitimization of collective problems, see *Cudze problemy. O ważności tego, co nieważne. Analiza dyskursu publicznego w Polsce*, ed. Marek Czyżewski, Kinga Dunin and Andrzej Piotrowski (Warszawa: Ośrodek Badań Społecznych, 1991).

29 See Kinga Dunin, *Czytając Polskę*, 48: "It is the Holocaust present in museums, on monuments, in cinema and television, in official politics and political contestation that is the axiological warp of the world of late modernity." It should be added that the weaving of the axiological warp was attempted by means of "political contestation," while "official politics" tended to tear apart the social fabric.

ideological unity always leads to collective violence. In the public debate of the 1990s, an effective defense mechanism against collective identities was created: if workers stood up for workers' interests, this was labelled an entitlement mindset and snubbed as an attempt to return to communism; if someone called for protection of the Polish labor market or Polish products, they were accused of nationalism and their attitude compared to fascism. A syntax was thus created that allowed every collective subject to be placed in the light of suspicion, and every suspicion to be justified by the memory of mass violence. In this way, neoliberal discourse hijacked the Holocaust to use as a means of self-legitimization and appointed itself as the guardian of a new legitimate culture.

Since the 1990s, it has been possible to use the Holocaust as a label to situate oneself within a legitimate culture. This required shifting the shame from "being Jewish" to "being a persecutor of Jews." After the debate on *Neighbours*, the Polish right wing often levelled the accusation that the cult of Holocaust victims was designed to make Poles feel ashamed – to instill in members of the Polish nation a sense of dishonor about the deeds of their ancestors. These accusations seem misplaced: the error, the fault, the negligence of the first legitimate culture lay in the fact that it made it all too easy to free oneself from the shame associated with the Holocaust. The Holocaust was, within this culture, not a machine for shaming, but the exact opposite, a machine for self-purification. It is no coincidence that in the literature of the 1980s one can observe biographical operations that prevented this kind of self-absolution: writers did not assume the role of judges of the nation, but simulated a kinship with Jews (this is what Tadeusz Konwicki did in *Bohni* and Jarosław Marek Rymkiewicz did in his autobiographical essay *Umschlagplatz*), assigning a new identity to social dispositions and signaling that they were ready to accept the possible stigmatization associated with Jewishness.<sup>30</sup> This fostered thinking that was less focused on the guilt of the (co-)perpetrators of the Holocaust than on Polish attitudes towards Jews. In public discourse, however, distancing oneself from the shame associated with the Holocaust took on the form of dissociating oneself from its ideological sources (nationalism,

30 This kind of operation was parodically depicted in later literature as being too easy – see the scene from Igor Ostachowicz's novel *Noc żywych Żydów* [Night of the living Jews] (Warszawa: W.A.B., 2012) between a girl (nicknamed "Skinny") and her boyfriend, which is a model in this respect: "Skinny, with a haze of melancholy in her eye, whispered to me, with her hot breath on my cheek, that her nationality was probably Jewish, although no one is certain because her family hid this fact both from the world and from her, so it's just intuition, but you know... Poor me, an unhappy punk, robbed of the remnants of my aggression and contempt. 'Skinny, I beg you, cut the crap, after all, Baryła is your Slavic surname' [...] (13).

fascism, racism) or its contemporary derivatives (neo-fascism). The associated critique of collective subjects endowed Jewish identity with the quality of being the only acceptable one, and made the Jewish experience of death an exemplary form of suffering. As a result, the clash of various social memories turned into a battle for exclusivity.<sup>31</sup> Artistic works (e.g. Bieńczyk's *Tworci* or Bożena Keff's *Utwór o matce i Ojczyźnie* [A piece about mother and fatherland]) made it difficult to simply identify with the victims of the Holocaust,<sup>32</sup> differentiated perspectives, mixed languages, and encouraged an empathetic reading while at the same time creating a readerly distance. Political discourse, meanwhile, used the Holocaust to delineate a "correct" sensibility, one which neither broadened social empathy nor helped to connect diverse social problems. Thus, in the Poland of the 1990s, it was possible to empathize with the victims of the Holocaust and yet remain completely indifferent to current exclusions, especially if they affected members of the majority (e.g. the unemployed or the "mohair berets," i.e. older women declaring their attachment to the Catholic Church). The memory of the Holocaust, incorporated into the mechanisms for producing distinctions, became a tool for hierarchizing suffering and isolating social groups.

This diffused process meant that the cultural capital of neoliberalism grew, while at the same time the social assimilation of the Holocaust was dangerously simplified. In place of a reform of the educational system, an overhaul of Catholicism, a new labelling of public space, a rethinking of the social foundations of prewar anti-Semitism and, above all, a systemic transformation of the Holocaust into a building block of contemporary connectedness, there was merely a simple ritual. In it, the Holocaust appeared as a utilitarian *sacrum* in the service of individuality.<sup>33</sup>

31 Michael Rothberg, in his inspiring book *Multidirectional Memory. Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009) writes that treating the Holocaust as an exceptional event leads to a hierarchization of suffering and sustains various forms of discrimination in the contemporary world. The method of counteraction proposed by the author is to analyze genocide together with slavery and colonialism.

32 See Dorota Krawczyńska, "Empatia? Substytucja? Identyfikacja? Jak czytać teksty o Zagładzie?," *Teksty Drugie* 5 (2004).

33 A profanation of this *sacrum* was a play by the duo Paweł Demirski / Monika Strzępka, *Sztuka dla dziecka* [A play for children] (Jeleniogórski Theatre, January 23, 2009). The authors invented an alternative past (Germany wins the Second World War) leading to a non-alternative present: after 1968, the whole of Europe is systematically plunged into the religion of the Holocaust. The lives of the younger generations are built on the dominant trauma, leading to the disappearance of non-Holocaust sensibilities and a weakening of historical consciousness: "For in the post-Nazi Europe invented by

This individualistic aspect is perhaps what led this first legitimate culture to be characterized by an organizational nonchalance. This can be seen in the disproportion between the abundance of outstanding texts on the Holocaust and the deficit of sustainable infrastructure. The turn of the century saw a growing number of important works, for example prose by Henryk Grynberg, Hanna Krall, Ida Fink, Wilhelm Dichter, Michał Głowiński, Marian Pankowski and Piotr Matywiecki; films such as Agnieszka Holland's *Europa, Europa* (1990), Dariusz Jabłoński's *Fotograf* [Photographer] (1998), Jan Łomnicki's *Jeszcze tylko ten las* [Just beyond this forest] (1991), Andrzej Wajda's *Korczak* (1990) and *Wielki Tydzień* [Holy Week] (1995) and Paweł Łoziński's *Miejsce urodzenia* [Birthplace] (1992); scholarly monographs by Barbara Engelking, Jacek Leociak, Jan Tomasz Gross, Jan Grabowski and others – but no mechanisms had emerged to translate these works into educational programs;<sup>34</sup> this growing Holocaust library was not matched by the growth of institutions whose activities included issues concerning the Holocaust, Jewish culture or Polish Jewish relations; controversy grew,<sup>35</sup> but the law protecting the independence of

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Strzępka and Demirski, no one attaches any importance to national roots any more, the sense of guilt has spread uniformly like the "piggery" in Witkacy's well-known poem, and the cultivation of trauma has become the only ritual that is universal and arouses strong emotions," Grzegorz Niziołek, "Ale to nieprawda i groteska," *Didaskalia* 1 (2009). The authors of the performance showed "a story in which only one narrative dominates, only one group of victims has the right to survive in people's memories. Other problems have to give way to the only rightful trauma" (Joanna Derkaczew, "Mechaniczny płacz po Holocauście" (*Gazeta Wyborcza*, January 31, 2009). The performance was satirically exaggerated, but for all its bias it revealed the paradox of contemporary society (including Polish society), which looks for the sources of life in trauma and finds that trauma turns the living into puppets.

34 The Holocaust, Polish Jewish relations, blackmail, and the Jedwabne massacre were not included in the teaching content of Polish history and language textbooks until after 2010; see Hanna Węgrzynek, "Problematyka Zagłady w polskich podręcznikach szkolnych," *Studia Żydowskie. Almanach* 6 (2016): 160–172, accessed August 19, 2023, <https://doi.org/10.56583/sz.162>. Sylwia Karolak in her monograph *Doświadczenie Zagłady w literaturze polskiej 1947–1991. Kanon, który nie powstał* (Poznań: Nauka i Innowacje, 2014) analyses (based on teaching programs, reading lists and textbooks for primary and secondary schools) the ineffective process by which the school canon of texts on the Holocaust was shaped.

35 The most important public disputes of the 1980s and 1990s included: the conflict over the construction of the Carmelite nuns' convent at Auschwitz (1985–1993); the conflict over the location of a church in Birkenau (1994); the dispute over the presence of crosses in the "field of ashes" at Birkenau (1996–1997); the dispute over the "papal cross" in Auschwitz's gravel pit (1998–1999); the debate around two articles by Michał Cichy: "Wspomnienia umarłego" (a review of Calel Perechodnik's memoir *Czy ja jestem mordercą?* [Am I a murderer?]) in *Gazeta o Książkach* 11 (1993), supplement to *Gazeta Wyborcza*, Decem-

cultural and scientific institutions was not strengthened. Individual initiatives were numerous, while organizational networks remained weak and financial support irregular and uncertain. The Holocaust was not tethered to collective life through educational initiatives in schools and churches, was not accompanied by coverage in government-funded media, and was not supported by initiatives to introduce signs of either Jewish life or death in Poland into public space. As a result, Holocaust-related works and activities came to resemble a movement to build a road network solely for its own use.

However, the movement had the strongest possible legal protection. In 1999, a parliamentary act established the Institute of National Remembrance – Commission for the Prosecution of Crimes against the Polish Nation. The Act defined the duties and prerogatives of the new institution, which included the right to prosecute certain acts. The most important provision concerning the Holocaust – Article 55 – stated that “Whoever publicly and contrary to the facts denies the crimes referred to in Article 1(1),<sup>36</sup> shall be subject to a fine or imprisonment for up to 3 years.” This was the foundation of the first legitimate culture: it pointed to past crimes, set the boundaries of freedom of speech, allowed for punishment to be meted out for lying, included Jews within the category of Polish citizens, and expanded the chronological field of inquiry to 1990. A tool was created to protect the search for truth.

A year later (2000) Jan Tomasz Gross’s book *Sąsiedzi: Historia zagłady żydowskiego miasteczka* was released in Poland (published in 2001 in English translation as *Neighbours: The Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne, Poland*). An unprecedented debate began, consisting of some 800 newspaper articles, a dozen or so books, hundreds of media interviews, and numerous seminars and conferences. The main dispute over the book’s claims ended

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ber 15, 1993; and “Polacy – Żydzi: Czarne karty powstania” (*Gazeta Wyborcza*, January 29, 1994). For a discussion of these conflicts, see Piotr Forecki, *Od “Shoah” do “Strachu.” Spory o polsko-żydowską przeszłość i pamięć w debatach publicznych* (Poznań: Wydawnictwo Poznańskie, 2010); Bartłomiej Krupa, *Opowiedzieć Zagładę. Polska proza i historiografia wobec Holocaustu (1987–2003)* (Kraków: Universitas, 2013).

36 “The acts specified in Article 1, point 1 of the Act are: a) those committed against persons of Polish nationality or Polish citizens of other nationalities in the period from 1 September 1939 to 31 July 1990:

- Nazi crimes,
- communist crimes,
- other crimes constituting crimes against peace, humanity or war crimes.”

[Note: I have omitted point “b”] Source: *Act of 18 December 1998 on the Institute of National Remembrance – Commission for the Prosecution of Crimes against the Polish Nation* (based on *Dziennik Ustaw* [Journal of laws], 2023, item 102).

after two years, but the aftermath ultimately provoked the birth of a second legitimate culture.

### An Exchange in Legitimate Cultures

In August of 2001, at the height of the debate surrounding Jan T. Gross's book *Neighbours*, the daily *Rzeczpospolita* published an article by Andrzej Nowak entitled *Westerplatte or Jedwabne*.<sup>37</sup> According to the author, in contemporary Polish historiography one of two models is practiced: monumental or critical. The monumental model is "a succession of lofty examples, a teacher of honour," while the critical model "finds corpses and tracks down criminals; it aims to uncover the sins of our past and condemn the perpetrators." The clash between them "is a clash between the history of national glory and the history of national disgrace, or rather an aggressive assault by the latter on the former."

Neither of the two historiographies, the author writes, strives for truth, as both interpret the past "for the use of the present." The first idealizes to evoke pride, the second demonizes to evoke shame ("in essence [it is – P. Cz.] idealization *a rebours*. Critical history is the result of a quest not for truth but for shame"). The difference between these historiographies lies in their social objectives: "[...] m o n u m e n t a l history, the history of heroes, serves to build a community, most often a national one; it sustains a reflexive loyalty to it." In contrast, "the aim of the creators and propagandists of c r i t i c a l history is, of course, to stop this drive towards collectivity, to inhibit this reflexive allegiance. But they offer no real community in return. It is impossible to create a community of shame.<sup>38</sup> Pride in shame is an absurdity that sooner or later reveals itself. We can feel proud as a community at the monument to the heroes of Westerplatte; at the monument in Jedwabne, we will not be able to feel the unifying pride of being able to afford being collectively ashamed about what happened there."

In Nowak's text – a mixture of philosophical suspicion and political conclusions – one finds a new set of rules for dealing with the Holocaust, and thus the outline of a second legitimate culture. This culture, of course, did not

37 Andrzej Nowak, "Westerplatte czy Jedwabne," *Rzeczpospolita*, August 1, 2001.

38 As an aside, it is worth noting that Nowak viewed as impossible that which constitutes the foundations of Christian morality (experiencing shame is the result of the ability to distinguish between good and evil, so it is a source of pride for the Christian and the building block of the bond that forms a community). Understandably, the author used the word "absurd" in a negative sense, although the term had appeared in Christian thought (Tertullian, Pascal, Kierkegaard) as a means serving to reconcile contradictions (between faith and reason, existential uncertainty, ethics...).



come into being immediately after the article appeared or even because of it. Its birth was a process that had either slowed down or accelerated at different points throughout the 1990s. The two-year debate surrounding Gross's *Neighbours* provided this process with a discursive critical mass, that is a set of rationales, methods and goals. These found their expression in Nowak's article, which was so frank as to compromise its lofty cause.

Central to this new strategy towards the Holocaust was the imagining of the fundamental addressee of political action as an affective community. Such a collective, according to the new legitimate culture, is not a ready-made nation – for the members of the collective subject are united not by a uniform origin or symbolic culture, but by a common need for recognition. This need, felt by individuals, can only be satisfied by providing recognition to the collective as a whole. It is therefore necessary to create a reservoir of common sublime experiences and to exclude compromising experiences.

For a legitimate culture constructed in such a way, anything that helped strengthen the affective community was considered important, while anything that threatened to fracture it was considered dangerous; anything that had no influence on it was considered irrelevant. For this reason, this new approach to the Holocaust, initiated during the debate on Gross's book, began with declarations about limiting the autonomy of historical researchers and the instrumental suspension of truth. Truth as an object of scientific inquiry had shown itself to be something undesirable, since the aim of historiography should be to create a collective bond. According to this second legitimate culture, we study the past not to discover the truth, but to reign over the present. This control – according to another argument that diminishes the importance of historiography – is affective, not discursive: only by arousing pride can historiography determine collective identity, establish strategic divisions and set collective goals. What is desirable, therefore, is a historiography that can transform the past into pride and thus create the broadest possible community.

The new principles, enunciated during the debate over *Neighbours*, heralded the transference of Holocaust issues from the plane of facts to the plane of affects. The founding act in this treatment of the new legitimate culture was Article 132a, passed in October 2006 by the Sejm and introduced into the Kodeks karny [Penal code] in March 2007. The article was entitled "Pomówienie Narodu Polskiego" [Slandering the Polish Nation] and stated that "Whoever publicly slanders the Polish Nation for having participated in, organized or been responsible for communist or Nazi crimes shall be punished with imprisonment of up to three years." It was placed in the Code between Article 132, which stated the punishment for "misleading the intelligence services of the Republic of Poland," and Article

133, which set out the consequences for “publicly insulting the nation or Poland.” Article 132a itself exonerated Poles from involvement in communist and Nazi crimes, and thus provided legal protection for the nation’s claim of innocence. The nation, as is evident from the similarities between Articles 132a and 133, was protected primarily from the emotional side, thereby acquiring the status of an affective subject. The physical proximity of these three articles blurred the boundaries between the state and nation, and allowed for legal action in response to any claim that Poles had murdered Jews.

The substantive proximity of Articles 132a and 133 was quickly confirmed in practice. Shortly after Jan Tomasz Gross’s book *Fear: Anti-Semitism in Poland after Auschwitz: An Essay in Historical Interpretation* was published July 2006, a group of right-wing Polish senators demanded that Gross be prosecuted under Article 133 of the Penal Code (for “publicly insulting the nation or Poland”).<sup>39</sup> A preliminary investigation was initiated by the District Public Prosecutor’s Office in Krakow to determine whether the content of Gross’s book likely violated Article 133 or the newly added article 132a (“Slandering the Polish Nation”). On February 11, 2008, after concluding its preliminary investigative proceedings, the Public Prosecutor’s Office issued a decision not to launch a formal investigation.<sup>40</sup> However, if an investigation had been launched, it would have had to have been limited to Article 133 of the Criminal Code, as during the course of the investigative proceedings, Article 132a came under legal scrutiny: in January 2007, Polish Ombudsman Janusz Kochanowski challenged the article and requested a ruling by the Constitutional Tribunal as to its legality. On September 19, 2008, the Tribunal ruled that the article was incompatible with the Polish Constitution.<sup>41</sup>

This legal episode thus consisted of a lawsuit concerning an existing “paragraph” and a parliamentary vote to add a new article. The complexity of these actions helps to illuminate the differences between the first and second legal

39 For more on the right-wing reception of the book, see Łukasz Opozda, “Lęk przed ‘Strachem’: recepcja książki Jana Tomasza Grossa w środowiskach polskiej skrajnej prawicy,” in *Antysemityzm, Holokaust, Auschwitz w badaniach społecznych*, ed. Marek Kucia (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, 2011), 139–167.

40 The grounds for the refusal included both articles (132a and 133 of the Penal Code) and stated that “no statements constituting slander, insulting the Polish nation or incitement to hatred on the basis of national differences were found in the publication.” The full text of the “Decision to refuse to open an investigation” is available at: <https://bip.brpo.gov.pl/pliki/1202889384.pdf>, accessed August 19, 2023.

41 Wyrok Trybunału Konstytucyjnego, sygn. akt K 5/07, accessed September 7, 2023, <https://sip.lex.pl/akty-prawne/dzu-dziennik-ustaw/wyrok-trybunalu-konstytucyjnego-sygn-akt-k-5-07-17487119>.

cultures. The first treated the Holocaust as a lesson in distrust of all collective entities – especially the nation and the religious community, that is, collectives formed on ideological grounds and defined by strong negations (Poles vs. Jews, Catholics vs. dissenters/non-believers). Enlightenment thinking was manifest in this; according to it, it was assumed that individuals could liberate themselves from any sort of social affiliation, that rationality in humanity was stronger than emotion, and that truth, apart from constitutional protection, did not need institutional support. Holocaust content was meant to strengthen social criticism in rational individuals. Possible differences of opinion in public debates are conducive to social life, as individuals confronted with opposing claims about the Holocaust can (must) arrive at their own view. Under the pressure of individualized positions – transmitted primarily by science and the media – the attitude of politicians and the position of the Catholic Church will change. Messages about the Holocaust therefore do not need to be coordinated, as social communication is the most powerful and influential sphere for the free exchange of views.

The second legitimate culture begins with the assumption that human beings are emotional rather than rational and social rather than individual. Consequently, the only addressee of political action should be the affective community – a collection of separate people united by the desire to feel pride in belonging to a community. In relation to the Holocaust, this means treating cultural institutions as distribution points for a unified message.

The formulation of such a message, however, faces an obstacle. This was concisely expressed by Nowak, who stated: “at the monument in Jedwabne, we will not be able to feel [a] unifying pride.” This meant that the Holocaust should be left to the Jews.<sup>42</sup> Accordingly, the second legitimate culture proceeded to repartition the Holocaust according to nationality. The boundaries between persecutors, victims and bystanders were to coincide closely with national identity: the victims of the Holocaust were Jews, the executioners were Germans, and the bystanders were Poles. Such a division allowed for recognition that the murder of Jews was the rule on the German side and the exception on the Polish side. This served to maintain a division in accounts: Germans were to feel guilty, Jews were allowed to mourn, Poles were allowed to show sympathy. *Neighbours* disrupted these divisions: the Germans remained the persecutors, but some Polish outsiders were turned into perpetrators; the murders committed by the Poles turned out not to be exceptional but

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42 Tomasz Sommer (editor-in-chief of “Czas”), uttered a sentence during a discussion about Gross’s *Fear* that is the quintessence of isolationist thinking: “Let’s forget about the Jews, let’s finally start dealing with Poland” (Tomasz Sommer, “Zapomnieć o Żydach,” *Czas*, January 19, 2008).

the result of “ordinariness,” that is a stable and deeply rooted set of beliefs that dehumanized the Jews; the guilt of the Germans did not disappear, but this did not exempt the Poles from facing a re-examination of their conscience.

Unlike the representatives of the first legal culture, who learned nothing and changed nothing, the organizers of the second culture learned their lessons very quickly. They recognized that in order to protect the impermeability of national borders, it was necessary to use existing legal regulations and introduce new ones. Their content – focused on protecting the affective comfort of the nation rather than the truth about the Holocaust – was to serve not only to mete out punishment for words already published, but also to deter the publication of such texts in the future.<sup>43</sup> The failure of the legislative initiative (Article 132a) meant that a national division of the Holocaust was impossible and that the fate of the Jews could not be isolated from the attitudes of the Poles. Consequently, another method emerged within the second legitimate culture. This consisted in legitimizing the violence used by Poles against Jews.

Marek Jan Chodakiewicz became an exponent of such a concept as the author of the books *Massacre in Jedwabne, July 10, 1941. Before, During, and After*<sup>44</sup> and *After the Holocaust. Polish-Jewish Relations 1944–1947*.<sup>45</sup> In both publications, the author affirmed the factuality of the killings carried out by Poles both during the occupation (in Jedwabne) and after the end of the war. However, he stated that the violence was justified. In *After the Holocaust*, he wrote that the killings of Jews after 1944 were a reaction to “the actions of Jewish Communists who fought to establish a revolutionary Marxist-Leninist regime in Poland,” to “the deeds of Jewish avengers, who endeavored to exact extrajudicial justice on Poles who allegedly harmed Jews during the Nazi occupation” and to “the efforts of the bulk of members of the Jewish community, who attempted to reclaim their property confiscated by the Nazis and subsequently

43 The repressive censorship is allowed by Polish law, the preventive one is illegal. However, the combination of repressive and preventive censorship was openly discussed by Mateusz Piskorski in a parliamentary speech, during which he justified the need for Article 132a: “Why is this relevant? It is important in the context of, among other things, the speeches of some revisionists such as Jan Tomasz Gross, at the moment publishing another book in the United States spitting on the Polish nation. This book is to be published in Poland next year, according to an announcement, and perhaps the publisher will pause to think before deciding to publish this book here, in the context of the regulations we are adopting. (Applause).” Quoted from *Stenographic report of the 22nd sitting of the Sejm of the Republic of Poland on 20 July 2006*, Warszawa 2006, 300.

44 See Marek Jan Chodakiewicz, *Massacre in Jedwabne, July 10, 1941. Before, During, and After* (Boulder: East European Monographs, Columbia 2005).

45 Marek Jan Chodakiewicz, *After the Holocaust. Polish-Jewish Conflict in the Wake of World War II* (Boulder: East European Monographs, Columbia 2003).

taken over by the Poles.”<sup>46</sup> Furthermore, on the basis of his calculations, the author concluded that between 1944 and 1947 “in self-defense or in revenge, acting independently or in concert with the Stalinists, denounced, abused, and despoiled at least 7,000 Poles, even killing some of them,” while during the same period “probably a minimum of 400 and a maximum of 700 Jews and persons of Jewish origin perished” in Poland.<sup>47</sup> From the author’s reflections, it therefore appears that the killing of Jews after the war was: 1) part of the general struggle against communism, or 2) an act of self-defense against 2a) self-appointed avengers, or 2b) self-appointed revindicators of Jewish property. A comparison of Chodakiewicz’s statistics further proves that the losses suffered by Poles exceeded those on the Jewish side tenfold.

Chodakiewicz’s book was a moral and scientific curiosity. Nonetheless, it needs to be included within a discussion of the second legitimate culture, as it hinted at a way out of the trap created by attempts to isolate the Holocaust from the “Polish nation.” Segregation, based on the claim that the Holocaust was a mass crime perpetrated on Jews by Germans, required the negation of Polish participation in the killing, which, in the face of thousands of pieces of evidence, proved impossible. It was even more difficult to deny the postwar killings of Jews by Poles. The way out proposed by Chodakiewicz was to create a legitimacy embedded in a narrative of independence. Together with the legitimization of violence against Jews, the second legitimate culture opened up to a discourse of radical anti-communism. It was based on recognition of the struggle against the postwar regime as a supreme rationale justifying any action. Thus, crimes committed against Jews became part of a war of independence; Jewish victims (including women and children) were labelled functionaries or beneficiaries of communism, while the perpetrators of crimes – if they belonged to the partisans – were granted the status of heroes.

The legitimization of violence against Jews as a fight against the communist regime was linked to a project, ongoing since 2001, to establish a day of remembrance for soldiers of the anti-communist underground. On 14 March 2001, the first resolution of the Sejm was passed recognizing “the merits of the independence organizations and groups who, after the end of the Second World War, decided to undertake an unequal fight for Poland’s sovereignty and independence”;<sup>48</sup> in the original resolution only the *Wolność*

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46 Chodakiewicz, *After the Holocaust*, 1.

47 Ibid., 213.

48 Uchwała Sejmu Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej z dnia 14 marca 2001 r. w sprawie hołdu poległym, pomordowanym i prześladowanym członkom organizacji “Wolność i Niezawisłość” [Resolution of the Sejm of the Republic of Poland of March 14, 2001 on paying tribute to the

i Niezawisłość [Freedom and Independence] organization was mentioned by name. Over the following years, the list was expanded, with such general terms as “soldiers of the second conspiracy,” “soldiers of the anti-communist underground” and “cursed soldiers” being used interchangeably. In 2009, veterans’ organizations asked the Sejm to establish March 1 as the Day of Soldiers of the Anti-Communist Underground. In 2010, a legislative initiative to establish the holiday was sponsored by President Lech Kaczyński. After his death, the project was continued by President Bronisław Komorowski, who on February 9, 2011 signed the “Act of February 3, 2011 on the Establishment of the National Day of Remembrance of the Cursed Soldiers.”<sup>49</sup>

The establishment of the new holiday, I should make clear, did not legitimate antisemitism, but it did blur the line between it and anti-communism, and above all – from the point of view of the Jewish victims – sanctioned violence as a social tool for self-organization and self-help. At this point, further differences between the two legitimate cultures become apparent. The first was founded on the renunciation of violence and the recognition of the Other as the model human being of postmodernity; representing a non-majority identity, the Other was exposed to discrimination, so the attitude towards him or her became a test of the tolerance of democratic society and a challenge for the law. The second legitimate culture was oriented towards the majority, so that the social, cultural or legal needs of the majority were considered the primary responsibilities of the state and politics. The collective was not given the right to use violence, however, it was equipped with qualities (dignity, pride) that were presented as values threatened by unethical external actions. This legitimated the treatment of inconvenient truths (“Poles helped the Germans murder Jews”) as attacks on the nation’s good name, which in turn led to violence against the “outsider” being considered a means of defence. This perverse reversal was well illustrated by the title of a public discussion devoted to *Fear* and annotated by one daily newspaper: *Spór o książkę Grossa. Polacy-Żydzi: kto się kogo bał?* [The dispute over Gross’s book. Poles-Jews: Who was afraid of whom?].<sup>50</sup> Jews, as Jerzy Robert Nowak argued in public speeches, were and still are to be feared, because “the Jews

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fallen, murdered and persecuted members of the organization “Freedom and Independence”], accessed March 3, 2024, <https://isap.sejm.gov.pl/isap.nsf/download.xsp/WMP20010100157/O/M20010157.pdf>.

49 Ustawa z dnia 3 lutego 2011 r. o ustanowieniu Narodowego Dnia Pamięci “Żołnierzy Wyklętych”, accessed March 3, 2024, <https://isap.sejm.gov.pl/isap.nsf/DocDetails.xsp?id=WDU20110320160>.

50 *Rzeczpospolita*, January 11, 2008.

are attacking us.”<sup>51</sup> The Polish majority, it thus follows, did not use violence and did not commit crimes – it was and is a victim defending itself against someone else’s onslaught. The portrayal of the majority as threatened by the minority, though, was rather rarely used by mainstream politicians. There were two reasons for this: firstly, the inversion carried a genetic burden, as it was first used against the Jews in the Third Reich; and secondly, it opened up a pathway from anti-communism to fascism.<sup>52</sup>

The weaknesses of the two methods discussed – the nationalization of the Holocaust and the legitimization of violence against the Jews – led to the creation of another method: the Polonization of the Holocaust. This method was used on a smaller or larger scale throughout the entire postwar period – after all, the basic message of the communist authorities was that the Poles were the nation that suffered most under Nazi occupation, and that Auschwitz was a symbol of the mass martyrdom of Poles. However, after 1989, reliable monographs were published that presented with great accuracy the total number of Holocaust victims (1.1 million) and the number of Jews exterminated at Auschwitz (1 million).<sup>53</sup> The use of this method by the second legitimate culture has little in common with the propaganda of the communist regime; what is common to both is the solicitation of victim status. The Polonization of the Holocaust, which serves this purpose, places a strong emphasis on Polish Jewish relations, with a special focus on Poles providing aid to Jews.

It is worth discussing the infrastructure behind this method in more detail. If the first legitimate culture was lacking in terms of infrastructure, the second culture has shown a tendency to place all cultural institutions under its jurisdiction – whether by legal, semi-legal or illegal means – and control its message concerning the Holocaust. The infrastructure supporting the second legitimate culture is, moreover, more extensive and complete, as is well demonstrated by the example of the Ulma family from Markowa – Poles murdered

51 On the series of speeches given by Jerzy Robert Nowak, see Marta Cobel-Tokarska, “Bo ‘Żydzi atakują nas’... Tournée Jerzego Roberta Nowaka z wykładami potępiającymi ‘antykatolicką i antypolską książkę’,” *Zagłada Żydów. Studia i Materiały* 4 (2008): 634–635.

52 In December 2021, the District Court in Hajnówka sentenced the organizer of the March in Memory of the Cursed Soldiers to one year of “restricted freedom,” consisting of the obligation to perform 40 hours of volunteer social work per month, in connection with the propagation of fascism (*Dziennik Gazeta Prawna*, December 3, 2021; accessed August 19, 2023, <https://www.gazetaprawna.pl/wiadomosci/kraj/artykuly/8306141,wyrokmarszu-zolnierzy-wykletych-w-hajnowce.html>).

53 See, for example, Franciszek Piper, *Ilu ludzi zginęło w KL Auschwitz. Liczba ofiar w świetle źródeł i badań* (Oświęcim: Wyd. Państwowego Muzeum w Oświęcimiu, 1992).

on March 24, 1944 by German gendarmes for hiding Jews.<sup>54</sup> At the end of 2007, the idea of creating the Ulma Family Museum of Poles Saving Jews during the Second World War in Markowa was first proposed; after all of the necessary formalities were completed (2009: Podkarpackie provincial assembly adopts a resolution; 2011: Museum-Castle in Łańcut assumes oversight over construction work; 2013: the local government of the Markowa municipality provides land for construction) the Museum officially opened on March 17, 2016. In 2018, by decision of the President of the Republic of Poland, the anniversary of the death of the Ulma family (March 24), was declared the National Day of Remembrance of Poles who rescued Jews under German occupation.<sup>55</sup> On October 19, 2018, an Orchard of Remembrance (modelled on the Garden of the Righteous Among the Nations at Yad Vashem) was created at the Ulma Museum; illuminated plaques were placed in the Orchard with the names of 1500 Polish towns and cities where Polish Righteous Among the Nations rescued Jewish people.

The infrastructure created in this example is made up of points which suggest the existence of a larger whole: the museum is dedicated to Poles who saved Jews, and not only to the Ulma family, which makes it possible to treat the institution as being a representation of a broader, still unexplored community of the Righteous. A single point thus becomes a link from which lines of a network run out in different directions: from Markowa to the towns and cities where Jews were helped; from the Ulma family to thousands of other Poles; from the Court of Remembrance to the Garden at Yad Vashem. All of this is reinforced in the state order by a holiday that officially consecrates both a particular family and all Poles who saved Jews.<sup>56</sup> One museum and one garden – remarkable in their effect – create an implicit network that, with its vastness, inverts the previous proportions: if Gross's and other "revisionist" books showed indifference and denunciation, blackmail, the looting of property, rape and murder as the rule, one that grew out of pre-war antisemitism,

54 Those killed were: Jozef Ulma, his wife Wiktoria (who was heavily pregnant), their six children, and the eight Jews hiding in the Ulma home from autumn 1942 to 24 March 1944.

55 Dziennik Ustaw, 2018 [Journal of laws], item 589, Ustawa z dnia 6 marca 2018 r. o ustanowieniu Narodowego Dnia Pamięci Polaków ratujących Żydów pod okupacją niemiecką [Act of March 6, 2018 on the establishment of the National Day of Remembrance of Poles Rescuing Jews under German occupation].

56 The beatification of Józef and Wiktoria Ulma and their children is scheduled for September 2023. In order to coordinate the related activities and disseminate knowledge about the Ulma family and the memory of other Poles who saved Jews during the Second World War, the President of the Republic of Poland, Andrzej Duda, appointed the Committee for the Celebrations Accompanying the Beatification of the Ulma Family.



then “Markowa” (Museum, Orchard, Day of Remembrance) says that helping was the norm.

The official commemoration of the Righteous crowned a decade-long effort to shut down research on the Holocaust as a Jewish tragedy and open up research on the Holocaust as a Polish experience. In 2006, the project “Poles rescuing Jews” was added to the national registry of Central Research Projects of the Institute of National Remembrance (IPN), while an earlier project, “Holocaust of Jews on Polish Lands,” was designated “completed.” The culmination of this project was a collection of articles titled *Poles and Jews under German Occupation, 1939–1945. Studies and Materials* with a foreword by Jan Żaryn, director of the IPN’s Bureau of Public Education. At the time, Żaryn stated explicitly: “We are now closing a certain stage of research. [...] in the following years the BEP [Bureau of Public Education] will take up new issues.”<sup>57</sup>

The Ulma family thus provided a complement to research and education programs, justified state consecration, and allowed the phantasms of national innocence to be reactivated. This innocence – threatened by slander – was to be defended by another effort to introduce an article into the Criminal Code protecting Poland and Poles from being accused of complicity in the Holocaust. The initiative in this case came from the Polish government, which in 2018 proposed an amendment to the Act on the Institute of National Remembrance. It proposed the introduction of Article 55a, which stated: “Whoever, publicly and contrary to the facts, attributes to the Polish Nation or the Polish State responsibility or co-responsibility for Nazi crimes committed by the German Third Reich [...] or for other crimes constituting crimes against peace, humanity or war crimes, or otherwise grossly diminishes the responsibility of the actual perpetrators of such crimes, shall be subject to a fine or imprisonment of up to three years.” The amendment was passed by the Sejm in January 2018 and became effective in March of that year; however, harsh criticism from Israel and the United States (and Ukraine), as well as the President’s recommendation to refer the legislation to the Constitutional Court, led the Sejm to pass further amendments to the IPN Act in June 2018, which repealed Article 55a.

The article focused, like a lens, on the most important actions regarding the Holocaust undertaken within the second legitimate culture. Above all, it pointed to a constancy in terms of purpose, which was (and is) to take control of the Holocaust narrative. The essence of these actions consists in 1) establishing an official version of event that says: “Poles are innocent of any crimes against the Jews and, moreover, numerous Poles saved Jews during the

57 *Polacy i Żydzi pod okupacją niemiecką 1939–1945. Studia i materiały*, ed. Andrzej Żbikowski (Warszawa: Instytut Pamięci Narodowej, 2006), 6.

Holocaust at the cost of their own lives"; 2) placing this version under legal protection. Constancy in these efforts is evidenced by the fact that Article 55a of the Act on the IPN repeated (the previously discussed) Article 132a of the Penal Code, which provided for a sentence of three years' imprisonment for slandering the Polish Nation "of involvement, organization or responsibility for Communist or Nazi crimes," and which was declared unconstitutional in 2008. Article 132a of the Penal Code, as we recall, was situated between an article stipulating the punishment for "misleading the intelligence services of the Republic of Poland" (132) and the article specifying the consequences of "publicly insulting the nation or Poland" (133), which gave the Nation the status of a State. An attempt was made in 2018 to insert Article 55a into an even more important piece of legislation by adding it to Article 55 of the Law on the IPN (of 1998), a fundamental provision providing punishment for denial of the Holocaust, also known as the "Auschwitz lie." In this context, Article 55a was a perfectly symmetrical creation: it placed an equal sign between the Nation and the State, and statutorily declared the Nation/State an entity innocent of any crimes committed against Jews. If Article 55a had been approved, punishment for the "Jedwabne lie" (my term) would have appeared alongside punishment for the "Auschwitz lie." The foundation for the second legitimate culture would thereby be laid out alongside the foundation for the first culture.

The article was strongly criticized and subsequently rescinded. However, the very fact that it made references to earlier initiatives demonstrates that the methods discussed as part of the second legitimate culture towards the Holocaust followed one another and were not mutually exclusive. Each of them could return at any time, albeit in a modified version: Article 55a of the Act on the IPN (which essentially says that all mass crimes are the work of Nazism or Communism, ideologies for which the Polish Nation/State bears no responsibility) was intended to supplement Article 55 of the Act on the IPN, and in this respect, was a paraphrase of Article 132a of the Penal Code (of 2006) guaranteeing legal protection to the Polish Nation against slanderous claims about Polish complicity in the Holocaust; the legitimization of violence against Jews argued for during the debate over Gross's *Fear* (2006–2008) returns each year during Remembrance Marches for the Cursed Soldiers; the Polonization of the Holocaust, which consists in treating the few righteous as a synecdoche for society as a whole, serves to delegitimize research on anti-Semitic violence and justifies subsidizing research on the mass nature of aid given to Jews.

In doing so, the repeated recurrence of legislative initiatives demonstrates that, within the second legitimate culture, the Holocaust is treated as a test of governmental effectiveness. Controlling the content of public discourse on

the Holocaust has become a test of the government's ability to control public debate and maintain control over any conflict. Without mastery over the Holocaust, sovereign power cannot be firmly established.

### Summary

In no country and in no society is it possible for two legitimate cultures to co-exist. Their simultaneous existence, after all, is not simply a manifestation of pluralism or an element of the culture wars being waged in the media. Two legitimate cultures produce two opposing orders, and thus tear the state apart. What tears the state apart here is duplication – the duplication of structures, of organizational arrangements, of teaching content and, above all, of the laws and institutions that enforce it. This is precisely the kind of doubling and tearing apart of the state that we are dealing with now in Poland today.

This does not mean that the truth about the Holocaust can resolve this conflict. It does mean, however, firstly, that ending the doubling of state structures is inconceivable without taking the Holocaust into account and, secondly, that neither of the two legitimate cultures I have discussed here can help in this regard. Both – not necessarily equally – are responsible for the current crisis, so they are part of the problem, not the solution.

The first of these cultures, whose legitimizing power extended from 1989 to 2015, granted freedom to culture and science because it did not value culture and science, seeing them merely as areas of individual achievement; the second of these cultures, which legitimated political power in the period from 2005 to 2007, and then again from 2015 to 2023, treats art and science as tools for the production of collective emotions, and thus limits their freedom. The former fostered the production of many outstanding works but lacked a stable infrastructure; the latter has an increasingly powerful network of institutions to keep texts within the boundaries of their propaganda functions.

Despite essential differences, the two legitimate cultures share certain similarities. They both attempt to separate the present from the Holocaust: the first claimed that after the Holocaust no jointly planned history is possible anymore (thereby legitimizing critical attitudes towards the “nation” and other collective subjects), while the second argued that the heroic rescue of Jews defined Poles' relation to the Holocaust and that no further reckoning was required (thereby legitimizing censorship or violence towards claims that Poles persecuted Jews). Both cultures also shared in common their instrumentalization of the Holocaust: the first transformed the Holocaust into a justification for the dismantling of social bonds, the second uses it as a means for reactivating the “nation”; the first feared collective pride, the second cannot accept shame being cast on the collective; the first treated the

Holocaust as a problem to be solved by each of us alone, the second recognizes the Holocaust as a problem that only the nation can and has the right to solve. As a result, neither culture is able to translate past mass crimes into today's collective "mass" life: the first allows one to hold the delusion that it is sufficient to reject antisemitism in order to create a society free of conflicts, the second propagates the notion that it is sufficient to restore the nation in order to manage conflicts.

For Holocaust scholars – historians, sociologists, literary critics – the result is a task that is easy to identify, but difficult to carry out. Since both legitimate cultures have their share in the crisis of the state and since neither of them can do anything about it, the measure of the value of research should therefore be to remain independent of both. On this basis, we can formulate a necessary question, but one that represents only a point of departure: is it possible to have a legitimate culture that does not use the truth about crimes once committed by Poles either to weaken social bonds or to nationalize them?

*Translated by Thomas Anessi*

## Abstract

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*Managing Death. Polish Legitimate Cultures Concerning the Holocaust*

The article deals with two legitimate cultures that were created in Poland after 1989. „Legitimate culture” means the axiological frame of reference that defines the criteria of prestige and dishonor, that is, the criteria of supreme values and anti-values. No authority (in Poland or any other country) can exist without controlling legitimate culture. However, legitimate culture in Poland is threatened by a history of domestic violence against Jews (massive pre-war Polish anti-Semitism, the murder of Jews during the Holocaust, the murder and persecution of Jews in the post-war period). Consequently, any Polish authority must control Holocaust-related content. The first concept of Holocaust management, created within the framework of the first legitimate culture (corresponding to the legal and institutional arrangements of 1989–2005 and 2007–2015) treated the Holocaust and Polish attitudes toward Jews as: an affirmation of the need to weaken the “nation,” the religious community and other collective entities; a problem that each Pole individually solves on his/her own. The second legitimacy culture (2005–2007; 2015–2023) works to: recognize the Holocaust as a problem that only the Polish nation can resolve; criminalize claims that Poles murdered Jews; present (and justify) violence against Jews as a struggle against communism; and portray Poles helping Jews as the norm, which the majority met during the occupation. The first culture of legitimacy used the Holocaust to weaken the social bond; the second uses the Holocaust to reactivate nationalism. Both cultures are responsible for the current crisis of social communication, and therefore another legitimate culture is needed to emerge from this crisis.

## Keywords

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legitimate culture, power, Holocaust, anti-Semitism, Poles murdering Jews, nationalism, anti-communism, Poles saving Jews

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Kris Van Heuckelom

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## From Spectral to Real Jews: Recent Trends in Flemish Writing about the Holocaust

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TEKSTY DRUGIE 2024, NR 1, S. 52–69

DOI: 10.18318/td.2024.en.1.4 | ORCID: 0000-0003-1188-916X

### Introduction: Dutch-language Literature and the Holocaust

The generic label “Dutch-language literature” is usually applied to the output of writers originating from the Netherlands and the northern part of Belgium (Flanders). Although both countries had a sizeable Jewish presence at the outset of Second World War – mostly concentrated in large metropolitan areas such as Amsterdam, Antwerp and Brussels – the different historical genesis of these communities exerted considerable impact on the way in which the Holocaust would be dealt with in literary production. The Jewish community in the Netherlands, to begin with, came into being already in the early modern period – including both Sephardic and Ashkenazi groups – and was largely integrated into Dutch society by the beginning of the twentieth century (both linguistically and culturally speaking).<sup>1</sup> The Jewish population in

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<sup>1</sup> It is estimated that some 100,000 Jews were living in the Netherlands around 1900 (a number that would rise to 140,000 right before the outbreak of Second World War). For an extensive overview of Jewish contributions to literary production in the Netherlands, see Daphne Meijer, *Levi in de Lage Landen: 350 jaar Joodse schrijvers in de Nederlandse literatuur* (Amsterdam: Contact, 1999).

interwar Belgium, in contrast, largely consisted of much more recent arrivals – economic immigrants and political refugees from Central and Eastern Europe – as a result of which it was much less visible (and integrated) within local cultural practices.<sup>2</sup> In addition to this, an equally significant difference in demographic dynamics between the Jewish population in the Netherlands and Belgium respectively can be observed in the Holocaust survival rates: while it is estimated that no less than three quarters of the Dutch Jewish community perished during Second World War, only 40% of the Jews residing on Belgian soil prior to 1940 did not make it until the end of the war.

Paradoxically, however, although only a limited number of Dutch Jews survived Second World War – especially when compared with the much higher percentage of survivors in Belgium – most Dutch-language testimonies and documents about the Holocaust came into being in the Netherlands, including works by both adult survivors (Marga Minco, Hanny Michaelis, Abel Herzberg) and child survivors (Ischa Meijer, Jona Oberski, Gerhard Durlacher, Judith Herzberg, Harry Mulisch).<sup>3</sup> Dutch-speaking writers from Belgium, for their part, tended not to write about the Shoah, focusing instead on the massive cultural and social impact of wartime collaboration and postwar repression (a topic to which we will return in the middle part of this article).<sup>4</sup> An

2 A case in point is the city of Antwerp: while it is estimated that the harbor city in northern Flanders had no more than 5,000 Jewish inhabitants in the late nineteenth century (some of them becoming increasingly active in the diamond trade), the interwar period saw a rapidly growing influx of Jewish newcomers, first from Polish provinces and cities such as Warsaw, Łódź, Krakow and Lwów and then – after Hitler's rise to power – from the German-speaking lands. Significantly, around 1930, half of the entire Jewish population living in Belgium – some 50,000 in total – was located in the wider Antwerp area, but only a small number of these Jewish city-dwellers (some 8%) had Belgian nationality. At the outset of Second World War, their number had risen to approximately 35,000 (and some 70,000 for the entire country). See Lieven Saerens, *Vreemdelingen in een wereldstad: een geschiedenis van Antwerpen en zijn joodse bevolking (1880–1944)* (Tielt: Lannoo, 2000), 10–11; 19–20.

3 See Dick van Galen Last and Rolf Wolfswinkel, *Anne Frank and After: Dutch Holocaust Literature in a Historical Perspective* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 1996) and Elrud Ibsch, *Overleven in verhalen: Van ooggetuigen naar "jonge Wilden"* (Antwerpen: Garant, 2013).

4 This is not to say, of course, that the Holocaust experience has not been documented by Belgian camp survivors. Significantly, however, barely any of these texts has gained wider societal and cultural resonance. For an exhaustive overview of the corpus, see Gie Van den Berghe, *Getuigen: een case-study over ego-documenten. Bibliografie van ego-documenten over de nationaal-socialistische kampen en gevangenis, geschreven of getekend door "Belgische" (ex)-gevangen: Belgen, personen die in België gedomicilieerd waren of verbleven, en andere uit België gedeporteerde personen* (Brussel: Navorsings- en Studiecentrum voor de Geschiedenis van de Tweede Wereldoorlog, 1995).

in-between position, finally, can be attributed to the Antwerp-born Holocaust survivor Ida Simons, who operated both in Belgium and the Netherlands and who would become known as the author of the bestselling (semi-autobiographical) novel *Een dwaze maagd* [*A Foolish Virgin*, 1960].

While some representatives of the so-called second generation entered the Dutch literary scene already in the 1970s and 1980s (Leon de Winter, Jessica Durlacher, Marcel Möring) – turning the Holocaust into a prominent theme of their creative output – the 1990s saw the emergence of new writers and new approaches. On the Dutch side, its most prominent manifestation is the literary output of Arnon Grunberg (born in 1971 out of a mother who survived Auschwitz and a father who lived through the war by hiding). In the decades to come, the prolific novelist, editor and essayist Grunberg would develop a very ambivalent (and highly ironic) attitude to his Jewish background and the legacy of the Holocaust.<sup>5</sup> Flemish literature of the turn of the century, for its part, slowly shifted away from the predominant focus on wartime collaboration and saw a growing number of novels looking into the dramatic fate of Jewish characters, many of these stories being set, however, not in Belgium, but in distinctly foreign surroundings such as Germany and Italy.<sup>6</sup> This brings us, finally, to another essential difference that sets the vast body of Dutch literature about the Holocaust apart from its Flemish counterpart, namely the extent to which the writers involved narratively engage with the metropolitan environment that hosted the largest group of Jewish residents right before and also during Second World War. Significantly, while the city of Amsterdam has come to occupy a prominent position in Dutch literature about the Shoah – starting already from early documents about wartime hiding such as Anne Frank's diary (1947) and Marga Minco's fictionalized chronicle *Het bittere kruid* [*Bitter Herbs*, 1957] – this is much less the case for the city of Antwerp which, until recently, has only occasionally appeared as the spatial backdrop of Holocaust-related fiction and non-fiction.

In view of this state of affairs, this article brings into focus two recent books by Flemish authors that refrain from relegating the Jewish residents of Antwerp and their profound entanglement in the Holocaust to the diegetic margins, namely Jeroen Olyslaegers's novel *Wil* [*Will*, 2016] and Margot Vanderstraeten's literary reportage *Mazzel tov. Mijn leven als werkstudente bij een Orthodox-joodse familie* [*Mazel Tov. The Story of My Extraordinary Friendship with*

5 See Yra Van Dijk, "Uitblinken in overleven: de erfenis van de Shoah bij Arnon Grunberg," in *Het leven volgens Arnon Grunberg: de wereld als poppenkast*, ed. Johan Goud (Kampen, Kapellen: Klement; Pelckmans, 2010), 74–104.

6 See Jan Lensen, *De foute oorlog: schuld en nederlaag in het Vlaamse proza over de Tweede Wereldoorlog* (Antwerpen: Garant, 2014), 204.



*an Orthodox Jewish Family*,<sup>7</sup> 2017]. As I will argue, not only do these two books represent a new stage – or at least a new quality – in the Flemish literary engagement with the Holocaust, they also nicely complement each other in terms of narrative approach and in terms of historical scope.

### **Second World War and the Shoah Through a Flemish Lens**

As already indicated in the introductory section of this article, the profound differences between Dutch and Flemish Holocaust representation in the long post-war era can partly be attributed to the fact that the Jewish population in interwar Flanders was much less linguistically and culturally integrated into the social fabric of the host community (notwithstanding the strong Jewish economic involvement in the Antwerp diamond trade). An equally important factor that turned out to have a decisive impact on Holocaust representation and the memory of Second World War in Flemish literature is the nationality conflict that started to dominate Belgian politics from the early twentieth century onwards, deepening the political divide between the Francophone elites, on the one hand, and Flemish nationalists striving for cultural and political autonomy, on the other. Importantly, while a considerable number of supporters of the so-called Flemish Movement actively engaged in wartime collaboration or even went to fight, alongside the Germans, on the Eastern Front, the repression that befell these wartime collaborators in the immediate aftermath of Second World War was used by people within the Flemish Movement to turn the perpetrator-victim dyad upside down and to shift focus to the disproportionate injustice and violence suffered by the victims of the postwar repression who, in their view, deserved to be rehabilitated by the Belgian state. Along similar lines, there has been a very strong thematic focus on the idealistic intentions of these Flemish collaborators, preoccupied, first and foremost, with the noble cause of Flemish autonomy and with the Catholic struggle against Communism rather than with the spread of national socialist ideology and antisemitism.

In his book *De foute oorlog* [The wrong war], literary scholar Jan Lensen offers a detailed overview of Flemish literary responses to the Second World War, from the early postwar years up to the first decade of the new millennium.<sup>8</sup> The final chapter of Lensen's book is exclusively dedicated to the Holocaust and seeks to describe some of the patterns that return in Flemish literary

7 J. S. Margot, *Mazel Tov: The Story of My Extraordinary Friendship with an Orthodox Jewish Family*, trans. Jane Hedley-Prôle (London: Pushkin Press, 2021). First edition: 2017.

8 Ibid.

Holocaust memory.<sup>9</sup> As Lensen's analysis neatly reveals, rarely if ever does the Holocaust occupy center stage in Second World War fiction from Flanders: Jewish suffering was perceived as only one element of many atrocities committed during the Second World War, and if there was a narrative focus on the concentration and extermination camps, then the predicament of the Jewish inmates would typically be focalized from the perspective of Belgian or Flemish resistance fighters. As the opposite side of the same coin, those war-time stories that do have a Flemish setting and feature Jewish characters, tend to highlight the Otherness of the Jews, on the one hand by foregrounding their foreign (non-Belgian) origins, on the other hand by connecting their outsider position to the long-standing tradition of antisemitism among Flemish Catholics. Finally and perhaps most significantly, there have barely been any novels that locate the action in the Belgian city that had the largest community of Jewish residents at the outset of the Second World War, namely Antwerp.<sup>10</sup>

Quite ironically, one of the very few early books that do hint at the climate of wartime antisemitism in the Antwerp area was written by a contemporary Dutch writer, namely the bestselling novel *Twee koffers vol* [*The Shovel and the Loom*,<sup>11</sup> 1993] authored by the Amsterdam-based Carl Friedman.<sup>12</sup> The story is told in retrospect through the lens of Chaya, a student of philosophy who works in Antwerp as a nanny for the Kalmans – a large family of strictly observant Hasidic Jews – and whose (largely assimilated) Jewish parents are Holocaust survivors. Significantly, however, the girl's parents display strongly diverging attitudes towards the Shoah and its aftermath: whereas her mother wants to move on and tries to leave behind the past as much as possible, her father is obsessed with two suitcases full of personal belongings which he buried in the ground in Nazi-occupied Antwerp, shortly before being arrested as a member of the local

9 Ibid., 197–207.

10 For the sake of completeness, it should be added here that there have been two novels set in the Antwerp region that feature Jewish protagonists, namely *De muggen* [The mosquitos, 1973] by Jos Vandelloo and more recently *Bewegingen* [Movements, 1999] by Rony Van Gastel. These books, however, concentrate on postwar and present-day antisemitism rather than on what happened to the Antwerp Jewish community during the war. Another case in point is Tom Lanoye's recent novel *De draaischijf* [The turntable, 2022] which – very much like Olyslaegers's *Will* – focuses on wartime collaboration and antisemitism in Nazi-occupied Antwerp and equally draws on recent historical research, but features as its main non-Aryan character an assimilated Jewish actress from the Netherlands, and not from Antwerp itself (Lea Liebermann).

11 Carl Friedman, *The Shovel and the Loom* (New York: Persea, 1997). First edition: 1993.

12 Friedman's book has been translated in English, French, German, Russian and Hungarian and was adapted for the screen in 1997, under the title *Lost Luggage*.

Jewish resistance. The final part of the novel features a highly symbolic scene that centers around two Antwerp police officers who have been summoned to escort the perpetually digging Jewish father back to his apartment:

“This afternoon we were called because this gentleman, your husband, was digging a hole in soil that is private property,” declared the older one of the two. He threw my mother a questioning glance. “The manager of the property had enjoined him to leave, but he refused. He said he was searching for two valises. Then we became involved and talked with him.”<sup>13</sup>

The intervention of the police crew ends on the following warning given by the second officer:

“The damage isn’t much. You’ll receive the bill, and that will be the end of the matter. But if you start digging again tomorrow or next week, then you’ll make things difficult for us. We’ll have to take other measures, whether we like it or not. Do you understand?” My father nodded. “After all, Antwerp is not a sandbox. If everyone were to start digging here and there, nothing would be left. That’s why we’re going to take possession of your shovel.”<sup>14</sup>

Through the lens of hindsight, the confiscation of the shovel by two Antwerp police officers who want to prevent their city from being transformed into a “sandbox” may be said to symbolize the long-standing absence of thorough academic research into the wartime fate of the Antwerp Jews in general and the involvement of the Antwerp police in their persecution in particular. Since the late 1990s, however, our knowledge about the specific situation in Nazi-occupied Antwerp has been significantly expanded and adjusted, most notably thanks to the efforts of two Belgian historians, namely Lieven Saerens – author of the book *Vreemdelingen in een wereldstad: een geschiedenis van Antwerpen en zijn joodse bevolking (1880–1944)* [Foreigners in a metropolis. A history of Antwerp and its Jewish population (1880–1944)] – and Herman Van Goethem – author of the recently published book *1942: het jaar van de stilte* [1942. The year of silence].<sup>15</sup> In both monographs, the year 1942 is granted particular importance not only because it was the starting date of the deportation of some 25,000 Bel-

<sup>13</sup> Friedman, *The Shovel*, 154.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 155.

<sup>15</sup> Lieven Saerens, *Vreemdelingen in een wereldstad: een geschiedenis van Antwerpen en zijn joodse bevolking (1880–1944)* (Tielt: Lannoo, 2000); Herman van Goethem, *1942: het jaar van de stilte* (Kalmthout, België: Polis, 2019).

gian Jews to Auschwitz-Birkenau, but also because it marked a series of violent incidents that point to the active involvement of the Antwerp police in anti-Jewish raids and roundups, under the supervision of the then Catholic mayor of the city (Leo Delwaide sr.). The compliant attitude of the local authorities vis-a-vis Nazi policies and instructions at least partly explains why a rather substantial amount of the Jewish residents of the city fell victim to persecution and extermination (bringing the survival rates of the Antwerp Jewish population much closer to the Dutch average than to the higher Belgian average). Importantly, although allegations against the mayor and the local police force had been made already in the early post-war decades, the historians involved managed to substantiate these lingering claims by means of extensive archival research (which would lead up, in turn, to a series of commemorative actions and symbolic interventions in the public sphere, most notably the official apologies on behalf of the city council offered in 2007 by the then mayor of Antwerp Patrick Janssens). Along similar lines, the first of the two books under discussion in this chapter – Jeroen Olyslaegers's thoroughly documented historical fiction *Will* – can be seen as a literary follow-up to these recent advances in Flemish Holocaust historiography. Its most obvious diegetic exemplification is the book's protagonist and narrator Wilfried Wils who, at the very end of his life, looks back at – and tries to justify – his involvement as an auxiliary policeman in antisemitic violence in Nazi-occupied Antwerp.

### **Will Wils: Facing the Jewish Spectre in Wartime and Postwar Antwerp**

Quite obviously, with its focus on the ambiguities surrounding Flemish wartime collaboration, Olyslaegers's *Will* may be said to further develop certain tendencies and topics that have been central to Flemish literature throughout the long postwar period. From the very outset of the book, the first-person narrator puts much effort into portraying his opportunistic behavior against the backdrop of the increasingly chaotic and confusing playing field of wartime occupation. Through the eyes of Wilfried Wils, it is Pieter Bruegel's world-famous painting of the "Dulle Griet" ("Mad Meg") – twice referred to in the novel – that captures most aptly this chaotic playing field:

Mad Meg rages and rants through an insane landscape full of war and memories, rendered in bright reds, blacks and browns. Eyes wide to see everything and nothing. Has she caused this horror or is she just caught up in the general bastardry and playing along?<sup>16</sup>

16 Jeroen Olyslaegers, *Will*, trans. David Colmer (London: Pushkin Press, 2020), 19.

After joining the Antwerp police force and “playing along” with the local Jew hunter Meanbeard in the early 1940s, Will’s personal situation becomes even more complicated when the relatives of his girlfriend Yvette decide to involve him in providing (remunerated) assistance to a hiding Jew, Chaim Lizke. The ambiguity of Will’s position is nicely captured by the very name of his function in Dutch (“hulpagent,” which literally means “auxiliary policeman”): rather than being a mere bystander, he is an agent who offers – not quite disinterestedly – help on both sides, to the German perpetrators and the persecuted Jews alike. What is more, since the novel presents itself as a story being told in retrospect by an unreliable and manipulative narrator complicit in war crimes, Olyslaegers’s book could be seen as another variation on what has been called “first-person perpetrator fiction” about the Holocaust.<sup>17</sup> In addition to this, the very fact that the narrator repeatedly addresses his great-grandson – the fourth generation – as the narratee of the text raises a series of questions about the role of familial and communicative memory some seventy-five years after Second World War has ended.

For the specific purpose of this article, however, more significant and important is the protagonist’s repeated engagement with the novel’s most prominent Jewish character, the aforementioned Chaim Lizke. The scene of their very first encounter – depicted in the first part of the book – is a key moment in the storyline, as it portrays Will and his colleague Lode quite literally acting as *Mitläufer* vis-à-vis the Nazi occupiers: the two Antwerp cops serve as city guides for two German field gendarmes who are expected to bring the Lizke family to the point from which they will be deported. As such, the scene marks the very beginning of the slippery slope on which Will begins to move as a “helping agent” and which culminates in his active involvement in the anti-Jewish raid of August 28, 1942:

And off we go. Us in front with one of the Germans beside us, behind us the foreigners with the other field arsehole. The woman won’t stop crying. Her husband whispers quietly, trying to keep her spirits up. In Polish, I think, but it could be Hebrew or God knows what. [...] But we’re a part of it, we’re walking along, we’re being obedient and respectable and accompanying the stinking gang to an address on a scrap of paper.<sup>18</sup>

17 Erin Heather McGlothlin, *The Mind of the Holocaust Perpetrator in Fiction and Nonfiction* (Detroit, Michigan: Wayne State University Press, 2021).

18 Olyslaegers, *Will*, 10–11.

The linguistic and cultural distance that separates the narrator from the Lizke family – a “stinking gang” of “foreigners” – is made even more palpable in the scenes that are set in Lizke’s hiding place (after the Polish Jew has managed to escape from deportation, in the second part of the book).

Importantly, there is one particular qualification that the narrator repeatedly uses in his close encounters with the hiding Jew, namely “enigma.”<sup>19</sup> In the original version of the book, Olyslaegers uses the Dutch word “raadsel,” which can be translated either as “riddle,” “enigma” or “mystery.” As it appears, its meaning can be situated at three different, but interrelated levels, namely the cultural, the cognitive and the psychological. First of all, the motif exemplifies the (perceived) cultural distance that separates both characters and the profound lack of communication that goes along with it.<sup>20</sup> In this line of interpretation, it is fair to say that Olyslaegers’s novel builds further on the profound atmosphere of Otherness that has tended to surround the portrayal of Jewish characters in Flemish Holocaust writing of the past few decades. Meanwhile, however, in view of the fact that the text of *Will* abounds in metaphors taken from the semantic fields of performance, playing and gaming, the notion of “mystery” may be said to operate on a different level as well. In fact, there are two types of games that play a prominent role throughout the novel – chess and card-playing – each of which evokes different associations. Inasmuch as game theory defines the first type as a game with “perfect information” – meaning that each player has the ability to make calculated decisions based on the knowledge of previously occurred events and actions – most card games, in contrast, strongly rely on secret and fragmented information (epitomized by those cards that remain hidden from view for the other players) and on chance (lack of control over which cards each player will be dealt).

Both as the novel’s main character and as its narrator, Wilfried Wils may be said to act and behave as a player of sorts, which also informs his transformation from being a mere bystander to becoming a helper, on the side of the collaborators and the resistance movement alike. As a matter of fact, one could argue that the first important calculated decision he makes at the very outset of the war – becoming an auxiliary policeman in order to avoid forced labor in Nazi Germany – is a chess move based on “perfect information.” Soon after, however, the playing field generated by Nazi occupation becomes much

19 “Knock-knock, the door opens and I am welcomed by the enigma Chaim Lizke. [...] That was how, soon afterwards, I came to appear before the enigma Chaim Lizke with a linen bag full of books, all German.” Ibid., 152–53.

20 Significantly, throughout the novel, Will and Lizke exchange no more than seven or eight sentences, and the only common ground between them, as it appears, is their joint interest in literature, embodied by the German-language books that Will brings along.

more chaotic and replete with fragmented information (of which the previously quoted reference to the “Mad Meg” painting bears obvious evidence). Will’s repeated encounters with the Jewish diamond trader Lizke add to his profound confusion, as he tries to figure out how the relationship and the interactions between Lizke and the relatives of his girlfriend actually look like. Significantly, when he is speculating about the actual nature of their “deal,” the motif of card-playing resurfaces once again.<sup>21</sup> However, in spite of the narrator’s claim that the “cards are on the table,” Lizke and his intentions ultimately remain an enigma to him, and Will continues to be cognitively struck by the Jew’s apparent indifference and detachment.

Last but not least, Will’s encounters with the Polish Jew Chaim Lizke do not only constitute a cultural and a cognitive challenge, but also turn into a psychological burden. While, initially, it is Will who tends to “appear before Lizke” in the Jew’s secret Antwerp hideout, the roles are soon reversed, when Lizke starts to appear before Will, outside the narrow confines of his hiding place, first of all, in the policeman’s dreams:

I can’t have him staying here much longer. He’s started appearing in my dreams, sometimes wordless, but very present. [...] Lizke has to go. He’s getting under my skin, without me being able to work out why.<sup>22</sup>

Lizke’s next unexpected and unsettling appearance is situated against the backdrop of the antisemitic roundup in the city reception hall in late August 1942, during which the Antwerp Jew hunter Meanbeard tries to catch as many Jews as possible, not without Will’s direct involvement as a “helping agent”:

Cries of horror pass through the hall. Then I finally recognize the shadow on my left as he takes advantage of the confusion to make himself scarce. For less than a second our eyes meet. Chaim Lizke. I don’t know if he recognizes me and before I’ve had a chance to let it sink in, he’s gone. It’s almost incomprehensible.<sup>23</sup>

Significantly, as the story further develops, the “enigma” Lizke begins to take up yet another form, that of a shadow or a specter, located somewhere between

<sup>21</sup> “Am I the first one to think of this or have father and son considered it too? Can the father still think clearly without being distracted by greed and profit? Because the cards are on the table. If this is just about the money, it’s the stowaway who’s in charge of the boat.” *Ibid.*, 153.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 155.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 147.

life and death, presence and absence. Even after his mysterious disappearance at the Antwerp railway station, Lizke's silhouette continues to haunt Will, for instance at the public presentation – already after the war – of his poetry debut (ambiguously titled *Confessions of a Comedian*):

The door opens and I think, “Not him, surely?” No, it's not Chaim Lizke. Just some wanker who looks like him. He's been swallowed whole by history and then discreetly puked up in a corner as a ghost. He sometimes appears here in this bar, on other occasions, somewhere else. Sometimes his spirit demands atonement, sometimes he's melancholy. Sometimes he seems to belong, mostly not at all. That's no way to find peace, anyone could tell him that. But having a wandering ghost that terrifies everyone now and then is preferable to being forced to admit that he was ever real.<sup>24</sup>

Slowly, but surely the unresolved enigma “Lizke” – ephemeral rather than real – becomes the main figure onto which the first-person narrator projects his feelings of remorse and regret, in a desperate attempt to render the decisions he made during the war comprehensible for his great-grandson, the addressee of the text. Quite obviously, the trope of the Jewish revenant can be closely connected to what has been called the “spectral turn” in memory studies, that is, the increasing attention for the supernatural and the fantastic – ghosts, spirits and other spectral creatures – in contemporary artistic responses to the Holocaust and other traumatizing events.<sup>25</sup> Lizke's uncanny reappearances throughout Olyslaegers's novel may be said to epitomize the enduring lack of closure caused by enforced disappearance – of Lizke himself (within the diegetic world of the novel) and the more than 10,000 deported Jews who did not return to Antwerp after the war (outside the story world). What is more, the trope of the wandering (Jewish) ghost in *Will* cannot be separated from the particular way in which urban topography is dealt with throughout the novel: more often than not, Will's retrospective narration is physically anchored in specific places which the protagonist revisits in the long post-war period and which set in motion a wide range of associations and reminiscences related to the space and time of Nazi-occupied Antwerp.

The haunting reappearance of the “spectral Jew” strongly intertwines with the particular narrative framework within which Wilfried Wils tells his story, in the seemingly confidential form of a testament and a testimony written for and addressed to his great-grandson. The familial context adds a sense

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 234.

<sup>25</sup> Zuzanna Dziuban, ed., *The Spectral Turn* (Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2018).



of sincerity and confession to the story which the narrator shares with his offspring. Along similar lines, as a result of the familial narrative setup, the reader becomes part of an intimate relationship and is made familiar with what seem to be long-hidden family secrets. The need for authentic and sincere intergenerational communication about the lingering legacy of Second World War and the Holocaust gains additional salience and prominence when we are informed – only at the very end of the novel – that Will's one and only granddaughter has committed suicide after learning (indirectly) about her beloved grandfather's double-faced behavior and actions during Second World War (leaving behind a death note with the telling message "Granddad is a bastard"). Importantly, however, unlike many trauma-laden stories created by representatives of the second or third generation, Will's account is not told from the perspective of a child or grandchild that embarks on a detective-like quest for the truth about the war, but rather by the perpetrator himself. To return, once more, to the motif of card-playing, it is ultimately the narrator who holds the cards against his chest and decides which information will be revealed at what point, which – apart from being a common suspense strategy in mystery fiction – can also be related to the common technique of shielding in first-person perpetrator fiction.<sup>26</sup> Perhaps not surprisingly, the most astonishing "revelation" comes at the very end of the storytelling act, when the unreliable and manipulative narrator plays his last trump and the reader suddenly learns that there is no great-grandson at all.

While the metafictional *coup de théâtre* at the end of the novel may leave the reader with a feeling of unease and discomfort – urging them to reconsider the entire narrative construction of the book – it also reveals an alternative, artistically attractive way of evoking a sense of connectedness and communality with the wider audience in a time when the Second World War and the Holocaust cease to be the direct object of communicative familial memory. Not coincidentally, in the closing sentences of the novel, the narrator addresses his imagined audience not with the word "reader," but with the word "listener," which adds a sense of spatial proximity between sender and receiver. While, on the one hand, the suicide of the granddaughter and the non-existence of the great-grandson epitomize the problematic lack of intergenerational communication and continuity within the Wils family itself, Olyslaegers's engaging text about the legacy and impact of Second World War and the Shoah, on the other hand, displays a strong desire to establish a "living connection" with the "fourth generation" as the first one deprived of a direct

26 Significantly, from the very outset of the novel, the narrative act is associated with card-playing: "Does that name ring any bells? It may very well. But I'm not going to lay all my cards on the table at once. Read on and all will be revealed." Olyslaegers, *Will*, 8.

physical bond with those who actually made it through the war (inflictors, observers and targets of antisemitic aggression alike).

### **The Flemish Nanny in *Mazel Tov*: Facing Jewish Reticence after the Holocaust**

Inasmuch as Olyslaegers's thematic focus on the active involvement of the Antwerp police in anti-Jewish wartime violence adds a particular twist to the shovel confiscation scene from *The Shovel and the Loom*, Margot Vanderstraeten's literary reportage *Mazel Tov* at least partly resonates with another prominent motif from Friedman's 1993 novel, namely the main character's part-time occupation as a nanny employed by a large family of Hasidic Jews based in Antwerp. In three chronologically ordered parts that cover a period of almost thirty years, from the late 1980s up till the 2010s, the Flemish journalist Vanderstraeten extensively relates about her former work as a tutor for the children of the Schneiders, an Orthodox family living in the Jewish district in Antwerp. If *Will* revolves around the forced disappearance of the Antwerp Jews during wartime occupation, then *Mazel Tov* is all about their reappearance and reemergence in the long postwar period. What is more, in contrast with the unreliable narration developed by Olyslaegers in *Will*, Vanderstraeten's *Mazel Tov* is much more solidly grounded in an autobiographical and referential pact with the reader (which urges us to believe that the first-person narrator indeed worked for and engaged in a close friendship with an Orthodox Jewish family during her college days in Antwerp).

Significantly, although the primary purpose of the book is to gain and provide insight in the world of contemporary European Jewry, the experience and the legacy of the Shoah run like a leitmotiv through the three subsequent parts of *Mazel Tov*. Throughout the book, the Second World War is repeatedly brought up by the narrator and her interlocutors, seemingly only in passing, but with increasing resonance (of which the repeated recurrence of signifiers such as "the Holocaust," "Auschwitz" and "the camps" bears obvious evidence). The inevitable interconnectedness of the author's present-oriented (semi-journalistic) approach and a past-looking reflex is aptly exemplified in the scene that describes the female narrator's first encounter with the grandmother of the Schneider children, Auschwitz survivor Gabriella Pappenheim:

Before I knew the Schneiders, I'd never met any Orthodox Jews. Now, for the first time, I was in the company of someone who'd been in a camp, who'd survived the Holocaust.<sup>27</sup>

27 Margot, *Mazel Tov*, 56.

Characteristically, the legacy of the Holocaust moves center stage in four subsequent conversations, each one of which represents a different generational perspective. It opens with a conversation with Jakov Schneider (the grandson), in chapter 16 of Part 1, about his school visit to the former Nazi internment camp Fort of Breendonk (located 20 km south to Antwerp) and the Anne Frank House in Amsterdam, then followed by a longer conversation between the narrator and Aaron Schneider (the son) about his mother's wartime experiences and his own (as a child survivor), in chapter 22 of Part 1, and culminating in a conversation with the mother herself, in Chapter 42 of part 1. In each of these three cases, however, Vanderstraeten's curiosity about the Holocaust experience is met with great reserve from the part of her Jewish interlocutors. At the core of this omnipresent reticence is the repeated claim that the Shoah is definitely not a taboo topic for the Schneiders, but first and foremost something that should be dealt with within the familial context. Characteristically, another lexical signifier that often reappears in this context – some 15 times throughout the entire book – is the word “silence.” As Aaron Schneider tries to explain to the Flemish tutor of his children:

We Jews have always had a great feel for language. But all the words in the world would not suffice to describe what it was like in the camps or to comprehend the manifestation of so much evil. How could anyone who has not experienced these horrors talk about them? When even those who *have* gone through these things and survived are unable or unwilling to find words to describe them? Do you understand why we choose to be silent? Silence is the way of least betrayal.<sup>28</sup>

Later on, this viewpoint is seconded by his mother Gabriella in the following way:

“After our first anniversary, my husband and I resolved never again to speak of the war and the camps,” she said. “Only if the children asked us about it. Then we would answer their questions. But they rarely if ever did.”<sup>29</sup>

As a result, the reader is given only very scarce information on the wartime fate of the Schneiders. We learn, in passing, that the Antwerp-born Aaron Schneider survived the war as a child, but whether he eventually ended up with his mother in Auschwitz can be deduced only indirectly. Along similar lines, we can only speculate to what extent the Schneider family was directly

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 58.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 163.

affected by the violent events in Antwerp that have been extensively documented by Second World War historians such as Saerens and Van Goethem and subsequently portrayed by a novelist like Olyslaegers. As such, *Will* and *Mazel Tov* nicely complement each other in their thematic engagement with the Holocaust experience in a distinctly Flemish (Antwerp) context and invite to be read in tandem. Whereas Olyslaegers gives an – admittedly rather enigmatic – face to the direct victims of the collaborationist tendencies of the Antwerp authorities under Nazi occupation, Vanderstraeten's investigative approach offers a rich sociological panorama of the city's Jewish community, both through an historical and a present-day lens.

In the final part of *Mazel Tov*, Vanderstraeten's learning process as a non-Jew comes full circle in her fourth and final conversation, this time with a representative of the fourth generation, Benjamin Schneider (son of Yakov, grandson of Aaron and great-grandson of the late Gabriella), who turns out to be very eager to ask his grandparents about their war experience. If these curiosity-driven conversations point to Vanderstraeten's desire to approach the Holocaust in a rather direct and straightforward manner, then most of the book, however, bears evidence of a different strategy. More often than not, in her approach of Jewish issues, Vanderstraeten combines a dialogic stance – asking questions in order to further understanding – with what could be called a relational perspective: when engaging with her Jewish acquaintances, their values and their experiences, she tends to look for points of connection within her own familial, social and cultural background. This applies, for instance, to the numerous references to the childhood years she spent in the multiethnic and multireligious environment of the coal mining region in the eastern part of Belgium (the province of Limburg). The same goes for the way in which some of her relationships – most notably her two partners, first the Iranian refugee Nima and then the Dutchman Martinus – are inscribed into the Jewish storyline and serve to shed additional light on her experiences and interactions within the Antwerp Orthodox Jewish community. Less prominent, but equally striking are the fragments in which the narrator suggests a sense of communality between the position of Holocaust survivor Gabriella Pappenheim and that of Nima's mentally tormented sister, the Iranian refugee Marjane. The aforementioned quote about the Jewish grandmother continues as follows:

I felt a deep longing to tell her [Gabrielle Pappenheim – author's note] all about Marjane. It seemed to me she'd be able to understand Marjane's pain, and perhaps know how we should deal with it.

Granny Pappenheim took my hand. Looking at her hand, it was impossible to conceive that less than fifty years ago, this imposing woman had been taken

off to Auschwitz. That *that* hand had experienced the camp. She smiled at me, then looked at the chair next to her, which I took to be an invitation to sit down. [...] She continued to hold my hand for a while, squeezing it as children do, and lovers. Her warmth spilt over into me, but the sweat on my back felt cold.<sup>30</sup>

Importantly, the sense of intercultural and intergenerational connection that is suggested here takes on a purely physical and affective form, without being expressed on the verbal level. This fragment, alongside many others in Vanderstraeten's book, bears evidence of the narrator's attempt to strike a balance between the universal and the particular, the familiar and the unknown, the generic and the unique, without falling in the trap of either universalist generalizations or culturalist reductionism.

Last but not least, Vanderstraeten's both prudent and thoughtful engagement with the delicate legacy of the Holocaust is in line with another element that gains prominence and significance over the course of the book, namely the awareness that cultures should not be seen as enclosed static entities that allow for easy categorization and clear-cut distinctions. Already in the first part of the book, the complexity of national, religious, ethnic and linguistic identities and affiliations is neatly exemplified when Aaron Schneider introduces himself to his female interlocutor – and to the readership of the book – as “a French-speaking Flemish Jew born in Antwerp, with roots that started off somewhere in Hungary, but also lie in the Netherlands”<sup>31</sup>. One could say, of course, that this kind of transnational self-identification ties in with the well-established perception of Jews as the “ultimate Europeans.” Towards the end of the book, however, the historically rooted identification with Europe is given a more pessimistic twist, especially when it turns out that most of the Schneider children and their offspring ultimately seek their fortune beyond the European continent, either in Israel or in North America. Along similar lines, the centrality of Antwerp as the spatial backdrop of the story – most notably in the 44 chapters that cover the first “phase” of the book (1987–1993) – gradually gives way to the growing prominence of more distant locations such as New York and Tel Aviv. That being said, it should be noted here that the publication of *Mazel Tov* in 2017 – followed by multiple reprints and foreign-language editions – has been one of the key drivers in the growing public interest in the cultural, religious and professional activities of the Antwerp Jewish community (of which the recent Israeli-Belgian Netflix series *Rough Diamonds* is perhaps the most obvious international example).

<sup>30</sup> Margot, *Mazel Tov*, 56.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 32.

### Concluding Remarks

It would, undoubtedly, be a broad interpretive stretch to state that the Holocaust experience occupies center stage in the two recently published Flemish books under scrutiny in this article. Quite obviously, the two authors involved remain at great distance from the “concentrationary universe” of ghettos, railway platforms, cattle trains, extermination camps and gas chambers as it has been depicted in so many documents, testimonies and texts about the Shoah. At the same time, however, by bringing into view both the city and the community that were most deeply affected by antisemitic violence in Nazi-occupied Belgium, both Olyslaegers and Vanderstraeten and the first-person narrators of their respective Antwerp-set books may be said to bring the Holocaust “home” to a Flemish readership. What is more, in their close engagement with the wartime fate of the Antwerp Jews, *Will* and *Mazel Tov* may be said to represent two opposite sides of the same coin. Whereas Olyslaegers’s novel deploys the framework of imaginative literature to foreground and criticize the homogenizing features of antisemitic discourse – the radical racialization of Jewishness that ultimately led up to the Holocaust – Vanderstraeten’s anthropological and investigative perspective turns its eyes and ears to the complex amalgam of national, religious, ethnic and linguistic identities and affiliations that has shaped (and continues to shape) the Jewish world both before and after the Shoah. While Olyslaegers’s largely fictional, but extensively researched approach uses the mysterious figure of diamond trader Chaim Lizke to tackle the long-standing silence surrounding the wartime fate of the Antwerp Jews and the complicity of local officials in their extermination, Vanderstraeten combines a past-looking perspective with a present- and future-oriented point of view, using her close encounters and conversations with the family of the much less fictional and much less mysterious diamond trader Aaron Schneider to equally fill up some of the historical and memorial gaps that have arisen over the course of the long twentieth century. Returning, by way of conclusion, to some of the motifs introduced by Carl Friedman in her 1993 novel *The Shovel and the Loom*, one could say that both Olyslaegers and Vanderstraeten have been eagerly digging holes in the “sandbox” of twentieth century Jewish Antwerp, equipped with very different tools and starting out in quite different places, but eventually bumping into each other somewhere halfway.

## Abstract

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*From Spectral to Real Jews: Recent Trends in Flemish Writing about the Holocaust*

This article looks into contemporary Dutch-language prose related to the Holocaust, with a particular focus on two recent bestselling books authored by Flemish writers, namely Jeroen Olyslaegers's novel *Wil* [Will, 2016] and Margot Vanderstraeten's literary reportage *Mazzel tov. Mijn leven als werkstudente bij een Orthodox-joodse familie* [Mazel Tov. The Story of My Extraordinary Friendship with an Orthodox Jewish Family, 2017]. After sketching out the specificity of Flemish Holocaust representation and memory within the broader context of Dutch-language literary and cultural production, the article concentrates on the diverging ways in which the two Antwerp-set books under discussion thematize the presence of a significant Jewish community in the largest city of Flanders as well as its profound historical entanglement in the Holocaust. As will be argued, not only do these two books represent a new stage – or at least a new quality – in the Flemish literary engagement with the Shoah, they also nicely complement each other in terms of narrative approach and in terms of historical scope.

## Keywords

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Dutch-language literature, Holocaust memory, Flanders, Second World War, Antwerp

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## Remembering the Shoah and the Second World War in German Third-Generation Literature<sup>1</sup>

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TEKSTY DRUGIE 2024, NR 1, S. 70–87

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DOI: 10.18318/td.2024.en.1.5 | ORCID: 0000-0002-4150-8922

### Literature of the Third Generation

To speak of first-, second- or third-generation authors at all, means to posit the Shoah as the beginning of a new temporal and generational reckoning. In this perspective, the Shoah is an event that, as Vanessa F. Fogel writes in her novel *Sag es mir* [Tell me] (2010), stands “at the beginning of everything, at the beginning of my whole existence.”<sup>2</sup> This insistence correlates with an understanding of the transgenerational influence of the European Jewish experience of persecution and murder.

Hannah Arendt’s famous dictum in a conversation with Günter Gaus in 1964 continues to hold true:

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- 1 This essay is a slightly modified translation of my article “Erinerte Erfahrung und Erfahrung der Erinnerung. Selbstreflexivität und Erinnerungshandeln bei Vanessa F. Fogel, Channah Trzebiner und Johannes Böhme,” *Yearbook for European Jewish Literature Studies* 10 (2023): 11–26.
  - 2 Vanessa F. Fogel, *Sag es mir*, trans. Katharina Böhmer (Frankfurt/M.: Weissbooks, 2010), 96. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.



Before that we said: Well, one has enemies. That is entirely natural. Why shouldn't a people have enemies? But this was different. It was really as if an abyss had opened. Because we had the idea that amends could somehow be made for everything else, as amends can be made for just about everything at some point in politics. But not for this. *This ought not to have happened*. And I don't mean just the number of victims. I mean the methods, the fabrication of corpses and so on [...]. This should not have happened. Something happened there to which we cannot reconcile ourselves. None of us ever can.<sup>3</sup>

A first crucial insight is that this "we" of those who cannot reconcile themselves to what happened refers to both the survivors and – as we now know – their descendants. The children and grandchildren of survivors cannot re-present – that is, make present again in their minds – the events of the past through direct remembrance. Yet they can be confronted with inherited "postmemories" that, as Marianne Hirsch has shown, are perpetuated in families through stories, images, objects, and behaviors.<sup>4</sup> Hirsch developed her concept of postmemory with the second generation in mind, meaning the intergenerational exchange of direct confrontation between survivor-parents and their children. If – as I want to do in the following – we inquire into the specifics of third-generation remembrance, the focus must shift to transgenerational modes of remembering.

My interest here centers on the questions of how the Shoah and Second World War are remembered in German-language literature of the third generation and how literature itself becomes a space of possibility for acts of remembrance. I will discuss three texts: Vanessa F. Fogel's *Sag es mir* [Tell Me] (2010), Channah Trzebiner's *Die Enkelin oder Wie ich zu Pessach die vier Fragen nicht wusste* [The granddaughter or how I didn't know the four questions during Passover] (2013), both of which are narrated from a third-generation Jewish perspective, and Johannes Böhme's *Das Unglück schreitet schnell* [Misfortune moves quickly] (2019), which presents a third-generation non-Jewish German perspective. All three texts are written from the perspectives of autobiographically informed first-person narrators who explicitly present themselves as grandchildren in the generational chain after the Shoah and Second World War. They approach history via their grandparents' life stories and in doing so, explore their ability as descendants to both remember and narrate history.

3 Hannah Arendt, "What Remains? The Language Remains: A Conversation with Günter Gaus," in *Essays in Understanding, 1930–1954. Formation, Exile, and Totalitarianism*, ed. Jerome Kohn (New York: Schocken, 1994), 1–23; 13f.

4 Cf. Marianne Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory. Writing and Visual Culture after the Holocaust* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012).

After a brief contextualization of third-generation literature in contemporary memory debates and literary politics, my aim is to identify dominant narrative strategies of third-generation literature in three readings focused on literary practices of remembrance.

### **Remembrance of the Shoah and Second World War in the Third Generation**

The third generation – grandchildren mostly born in the 1970s and 1980s – face specific challenges in their attempts to commemorate the Shoah and Second World War in literature. For the witnesses themselves (retrospectively named the first generation) and – in direct confrontation with their words, or their silence – their children, the central question had been about how to bear witness, remember, and represent National Socialism, the Second World War, and the singularity of the Shoah.<sup>5</sup> The generation of the grandchildren, however, is confronted with an additional difficulty: an acute awareness of the mediatedness of history. The always precarious relation of remembrance and reconstruction on the one hand, and of narration and construction on the other, is a central concern for the third generation. This generation has only ever been confronted with the historical events in a mediated way, by way of narration or instruction. The third generation's own lived memory or historical context is the time of remembrance, and the act of learning from history must also encompass learning from remembered history.<sup>6</sup>

Relative to the Second World War and the Shoah, the third generation is positioned at the transition to what Jan Assmann called cultural memory.<sup>7</sup> With increasing distance to the direct conversation with contemporary witnesses – a prerequisite of communicative memory – the process of collective remembering is culturally formed to ensure the transmission of memories and remembered experiences. The third generation finds itself at this point of transition from the immediate to the mediated, from the private to the public, from familial remembering to an institutionalized 'culture of memory.' Its literature inscribes itself into the opening of this transition. Third-generation

5 Cf. e.g. James E. Young, *Writing and Rewriting the Holocaust: Narrative and the Consequences of Interpretation* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988).

6 Cf. Astrid Messerschmidt, "Aus dem Umgang mit der Geschichte lernen – Ansatzpunkte einer feministischen Kritik der Erinnerung in der dritten Generation nach dem Holocaust," in *Jahrbuch Frauen- und Geschlechterforschung in der Erziehungswissenschaft. Geschlechtstypisierungen im Kontext von Familie und Schule*, ed. Sabine Andresen and Barbara Rendtorff (Leverkusen: Verlag Barbara Budrich, 2006), 77–90; 77f.

7 Jan Assmann, *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis. Schrift, Erinnerung und politische Identität in frühen Hochkulturen* (München: C.H. Beck, 1992).

literature should not be understood as the mere reproduction of memories, but rather as the production of acts of memory – as memory or remembrance work in the sense of approaching the past from an emphatically present position:

The use of the term “memory action” is explicitly about the active process of dealing with the past, about “memory work.” In the younger generation and all generations to come, referencing, reflecting, participating (in) the past will only be possible with “conscious efforts,” so that the term “memory work” refers especially to the active, dynamic process and the accompanying more or less strong efforts as well as the fundamental incompleteness of this at times conflictual process.<sup>8</sup>

Third-generation literature explicitly narrates the past from the perspective of those born later. On the one hand, it attempts to preserve the memories and experiences of contemporary witnesses. On the other hand, it always reflects on how and to what extent this is even possible and what part today’s investigators and narrators play in this.<sup>9</sup> The literature of the third generation is situated amidst a more general proliferation of historical narratives, which Aleida Assmann described as a new memory literature [*neue Erinnerungsliteratur*].<sup>10</sup> Since emerging in the 1990s, this literature has presented “a new surge of remembering and a late response to the violent history of the twentieth century.”<sup>11</sup> “New memory literature” represents a “new genre” because in addition to “attention, linguistic ability and imagination as the primary driving forces of literature [...] one’s own experience is added, which becomes the impetus or raw material of literature.”<sup>12</sup>

The special significance of the autobiographical foundation of recent memory literature, which Assmann sees as its genre-defining feature, is explained in the case of third generation literature by the contemporary

8 Kirstin Frieden, *Neuverhandlungen des Holocaust. Mediale Transformationen des Gedächtnisparadigmas* (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2014), 19f.

9 Cf. Daniel Fulda and Stephan Jaeger, “Einleitung. Romanhaftes Geschichtserzählen in einer erlebnisorientierten, enthierarchisierten und hybriden Geschichtskultur,” in *Romanhaftes Erzählen von Geschichte. Vergegenwärtigte Vergangenheiten im beginnenden 21. Jahrhundert*, ed. Daniel Fulda and Stephan Jaeger (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2019), 1–54; 10.

10 Aleida Assmann, “Wem gehört die Geschichte? Fakten und Fiktionen in der neueren deutschen Erinnerungsliteratur,” *Internationales Archiv für Sozialgeschichte der deutschen Literatur* 36 (1) (2011): 213–225; 216.

11 Assmann, “Wem gehört die Geschichte?,” 216.

12 Ibid.

historical position of the authors: As the “bridging generation,”<sup>13</sup> that is the last generation that still personally knew survivors of the war and Shoah in adulthood, the third generation considers itself responsible for shaping the transition from the witnesses’ direct remembering to the mediated remembering of future generations. One reaction to this liminal position at the transition from immediacy to mediatedness is a valorization of the direct possibilities of remembering, in particular the direct exchange with members of one’s own family, which are experienced as dwindling, and thus fragile and valuable. In third-generation literature, this manifests itself in the dominance of autobiographical or autofictional approaches to history. In much of second-generation literature, the focus remains on the binary parent-child relationship and on measuring the rupture with – or distinction between – the experiences of child and parent(s). Third generation literature extends its focus to encapsulate other generations, or more precisely: one additional generation, that of the grandparents. It is interested not in ruptures but in continuities. This is why third-generation literature mostly recounts history from a transgenerational perspective, while the narrative situation often evolves around an autobiographical first-person narrator in search of the historical experiences of older family members.<sup>14</sup>

Third-generation literature questions the workings of past, present, and possible future transmissions of memories. It focuses on the ways in which history is mediated through stories. This is the meta-perspective inherent to third-generation literature’s confrontations with National Socialism, the World War and the Shoah: the question how historical knowledge can be remembered, narrated, and passed on.<sup>15</sup> The resulting self-reflexivity is – as I will show in my readings of three works that are paradigmatic in that respect – a striking characteristic that unites the otherwise heterogeneous literary works by authors of the third generation. In third-generation literature, the remembered experience and the experience of remembrance become inseparable.

13 Esther Jilovsky, *Remembering the Holocaust. Generations, Witnessing and Place* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015), 103.

14 Cf. Fulda and Jaeger “Einleitung. Romanhaftes Geschichtserzählen,” 9; who propose the new genre term “autobiographical generational narrative” for this.

15 Cf. Meike Hermann, “Spurensuche in der dritten Generation. Erinnerung an Nationalsozialismus und Holocaust in der jüngsten Literatur,” in *Repräsentationen des Holocaust im Gedächtnis der Generationen. Zur Gegenwartsbedeutung des Holocaust in Israel und Deutschland*, ed. Margit Frölich, Yariv Lapid and Christian Schneider (Frankfurt/M.: Brandes & Apsel, 2004), 139–157; 140.

### Vanessa F. Fogel, *Sag es mir* (2010)

*Sag es mir* [Tell me] by Vanessa Fogel (\*1981) was written in English but published only in German translation. First-person narrator Fela shares a number of biographical traits with her author: both born in Germany, but growing up in Israel and the US. The novel recounts the story of this young woman traveling from New York to Poland with her survivor grandfather Mosha to visit the places of his childhood, the sites of persecution, and the concentration camp in which he was incarcerated. This storyline recalls the trope of revisiting the lost old world of Eastern Europe, the root search or heritage trip familiar from American Jewish literature. Interwoven with the story of her journey to Poland, however, are other stories: of Fela's childhood in Israel and of her coming of age, sexual and otherwise in the US; of her memories, associations, and musings on her family; her Jewishness; her being a girl and a woman; and above all, her reflections on the Shoah, the World War and the present possibilities of remembrance.

Fela begins her trip to Poland listening to her grandfather's life-story with the certainty,

that I have heard these things before, that I remember them, from the fragments of stories that he has told me again and again, that have always been present, that have always been the basis of everything.<sup>16</sup>

In Poland, she visits the cemetery that houses not only the grave of her grandfather's mother but also "a path full of roots."<sup>17</sup> In tracing these metaphorical roots, she is following her conviction that the Second World War is the war "that stands at the beginning of everything, at the beginning of my whole existence."<sup>18</sup> But where does this conviction and knowledge come from?

For as long as I have been able to think – in a body of the size that one already remembers but has not yet learnt to read and write – I have been watching documentaries on television on Holocaust Remembrance Day.<sup>19</sup>

The fact that she has been confronted with Holocaust knowledge in a mediated form since before she was herself literate both corresponds to and goes beyond postmemory experiences because TV-documentaries are a form of

<sup>16</sup> Fogel, *Sag es mir*, 31.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 90.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 96.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 127.

institutionalized – in the case of the Israeli Yom haShoah also ritualized – remembrance beyond the scope of memories transferred within the family unit. Fela remembers having always already known about the Shoah; she has always lived – in Eva Hoffman's words – “after such knowledge.”<sup>20</sup> And she specifies the source of this knowledge: mediated representations, films (re)presenting history.

She notices the effects this mediated history has on her present when she visits a former concentration camp. On the journey, the real landscape directly in front of her eyes and the mediated, remembered, imagined landscape overlap.

Instead of the landscapes outside, instead of the Polish landscape passing by outside, inner landscapes run before my eyes as if from a film reel that is part of my brain, my memory, my library, my memory.<sup>21</sup>

The real landscape becomes a screen on which Fela projects mediated accounts of that same landscape from films and from her grandfather's story.

So what does this young protagonist, who defines herself, primarily or even exclusively, as the granddaughter of survivors, do? Exposed to traumatic images as a child, she continues to expose herself to them – and thus to a trauma that is not hers and yet is hers. She is – and this too is made clear by the ritualized moment of her confrontation with the trauma – trapped in a rigidity. She explains her whole existence to herself from something that she neither understands nor describes, but which she sees and which superimposes itself over the perception of her own reality. Only by contrasting these images with a reality – that of her grandfather and of their shared journey in Poland – does this rigid form begin to change. Towards the end of the novel and in the course of a narration of her experiences – meaning through a productive engagement with them – she realizes,

that, having been in Poland, the gravity of the Holocaust has changed its shape within me – almost physically. It has taken the form of something round, of something concrete and finished.<sup>22</sup>

In *Sag es mir*, the history of the Shoah is always already mediated history for the granddaughter-narrator. This is why questions of mediation, medial

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<sup>20</sup> Eva Hoffman, *After Such Knowledge. Memory, History, and the Legacy of the Holocaust* (New York: Public Affairs, 2004).

<sup>21</sup> Fogel, *Sag es mir*, 128.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 277.

representation and the possibilities of passing on historical knowledge are debated again and again. And it is why the self-reflexive thematization of the granddaughter's position as both recipient and possible writer of her grandfather's story runs like a red thread through the book. The grandfather repeatedly wishes to have his memories written down; the first-person narrator doubts she could write this book of memories at all.

His book, I think, the book he wants so badly; could I be his voice? Would Grandpa want me to write down his story if he knew I might upset the order [...]. And if I changed a word or even a sentence, would he still tolerate me as his witness, as an observer when he tells his story or wouldn't he? What truth could I possibly tell and pass on [...].<sup>23</sup>

As the thoughts and doubts of the first-person narrator become part of the narrative, a meta-perspective opens up, a moment of self-reflexivity.

Narrative self-reflexivity can also be seen elsewhere in Fogel's auto-fictional novel, as the first-person narrator not only defines herself as the granddaughter of survivors, but explicitly inscribes herself in the generational chain of her family. Fela is named – this is Jewish custom and a familiar motif in Holocaust literature – after her great-aunt, the grandfather's sister who perished. While listening to her grandfather's stories, Fela is particularly interested in the fate of the elder Fela. At one point, she is even convinced that her own life story – in particular an episode during her adolescence when she suffered from an eating disorder – has been determined by the fate of her eponymous ancestor who died of starvation. Between such identification and the recognition of the fact that she knows very little about her great-aunt's life, Fela struggles to find her own position in the family and its history. Eventually, by gradually accepting her grandfather's task of writing his book of memories, she takes her place in the generational chain of her family. On her mother's skeptical remark that she does not need to find a place for herself in every story she hears, Fela thinks:

It is his story, I know that. I hear stories and maybe I don't have to find a place for myself in them, but I have found one [...]. I have found a place for myself in his stories – in his stories of life and death, past and present – and I have also found Fela; and it is a place that is more concrete and real and at the same time more imaginary than any other place, and it is mine and only mine.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 191.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 243.

When Fela sets out on her journey to Poland, she wants to “make herself disappear”<sup>25</sup> so as to give space to her grandfather and his stories. At the end of the novel, she wants something different: the granddaughter will pass on her grandfather’s story, but only by telling both the story itself, and the story of how he told her. Paradigmatic for third-generation literature, questions of remembering, mediating, and transmitting history stand at this self-reflexive novel’s core.

**Channah Trzebiner, *Die Enkelin oder Wie ich zu Pessach die vier Fragen nicht wusste* (2013)**

Self-reflexivity also features prominently in Channah Trzebiner’s (\*1981) autobiographical text from 2013 entitled *Die Enkelin oder Wie ich zu Pessach die vier Fragen nicht wusste* [The granddaughter or how I didn’t know the four questions during Passover]. In terms of content, the entire text is a self-reflection by the first-person narrator on her position as a third-generation German Jew after the Shoah. In terms of form, moments of self-reflexivity are visible in the text’s conspicuous multilingualism. In the case of Trzebiner, who was born and raised in Frankfurt am Main, this multilingualism is not the consequence of migration – as it is for so many authors of contemporary German-language Jewish literature who did not learn German as their first language. Rather, it stems from the survival of her Yiddish-speaking grandparents, whose linguistic, historical, and emotional heritage the first-person narrator takes on.

Trzebiner’s narrator describes her childhood as the granddaughter of survivors and her knowledge of being “a substitute for murdered lives.”<sup>26</sup> The novel opens with an explicit, albeit conflicted, self-positioning:

I accept who I am. I am happy to be able to do that. For years, I had cut off the connection to my innermost self, making sure that my own feelings had no space. [...] I did this for my loved ones, in order to fill a hole in history, to be a substitute for murdered lives. To make two out of one, to let those who have disappeared live on. How could I have done otherwise. My name is Channah, like my grandmother’s youngest sister.<sup>27</sup>

The inescapability of her familial position as a “substitute” – already hinted at in the rhetorical question that closes not with a question mark but with

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 62.

<sup>26</sup> Channah Trzebiner, *Die Enkelin oder Wie ich zu Pessach die vier Fragen nicht wusste* (Frankfurt/M.: Weissbooks, 2013), 11.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.



a full stop – is connected to the first-person narrator's realisation that she is at once necessary to her family and necessarily overlooked:

When my grandparents looked at me, they must have seen others. My person was not important. I was proof that there had been others. Children, spouses, mothers, fathers, brothers, sisters.

How could they have loved me at all costs?

My grandpa said: *Daine hur sind glach zi di hur fin mainem sin.*

What his son's name was before the war, how old he was when, hopping on one leg, he and his heavily pregnant mum were herded into the gas chamber before my grandfather's eyes, I don't know.<sup>28</sup>

Her life in Germany, as well as the time spent in Israel and the US, is marked by omnipresent, though rarely explicit, memories of (her grandparents' memories of) the Shoah. The novel's central concern is transgenerational traumatization and its impact on the second and especially third generation, represented by the first-person narrator.

The grandparents play a decisive role. After her father's early death, the narrator's grandfather takes over the paternal position within her family unit. In everyday scenes rich in dialogue, the grandfather's speeches are rendered exclusively in transcribed but not translated Yiddish, so that the text is in parts bilingual (wherein Yiddish words and sentences – unlike English ones, for example – are set in italics and thus already emphasized in the typeface).

"Channah, Channale," it sounds through Gottfried-Keller-Straße. My aunt is not calling me, she is shouting for me. Why does everyone have to shout like that? As I walk through the garden, Rahel says, "I didn't know where you were. Where have you been?"

"I'm here," I say. "I'm here with you. Forever, because you would always scream if I were gone."

Grandpa: „*Wi bist di gewein?*“

Me: „*A minite far di tir,*“ um zu atmen, denke ich.

Granpa: "*Me tar nisht loifn a soi fil oif die gassn.*"

Me: "*Iech bin do.*"

Silence. Grandpa stares ahead, Rachel stares ahead. There is utter silence. Why should I always be here for silence, I ask myself. For sitting shiva.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 52.

The linguistic closeness between German and Yiddish is obvious here. At the same time, however, the differences owed to Hebraic and Slavonic influences and especially to a syntax different from German are accentuated – with potentially alienating effects for a German readership (as a concession to the fact that Yiddish is another language, Trzebiner adds a Yiddish glossary as a translation aid).

On one level, the novel's multilingualism underwrites the authenticity of the characters' way of speaking. But perhaps more significantly, the simultaneity of closeness and distance and similarity and strangeness that is characteristic of the relationship between German and Yiddish itself mirrors the ambivalent relationship between German and Jewish in post-Shoah Germany (this holds true for both the first-person narrator's inner conflict about being both German and Jewish as well as for encounters between non-Jewish and Jewish Germans).

And most importantly, Yiddish metonymically represents the murdered community of Yiddish-speakers. In the novel, it is spoken exclusively by the grandparents and the granddaughter-narrator; it becomes the medium of trauma. By speaking Yiddish as a matter of course despite being born in 1980s Germany, the young narrator takes on her self-professed familial task of "filling a hole in history."<sup>30</sup> The incorporation of longer Yiddish dialogues in the novel without commentary or compromise reproduces the confrontation with the trauma and its transgenerational persistence. For all its nameability and approximability, the trauma remains unspeakable and untranslatable.

The matter-of-factness with which the first-person narrator speaks and writes Yiddish, the language of the dead and the living, also illustrates her inescapable attachment to the history of her family's persecution and murder: "I didn't have the choice to say it was too much for me. History is everywhere in our home."<sup>31</sup> The ubiquity of the history of the Shoah means the presence of loss, of trauma: "It remains an open wound."<sup>32</sup> Thus, the granddaughter not only understands it as her task to "fill a hole in history"; by taking on the traumatic legacy, she also takes in the "hole" within herself: "the black hole [...] that exists within me and from time to time demands its attention and threatens to swallow me up."<sup>33</sup>

In trying to name her traumatization by naming the trauma of her survivor grandparents, Trzebiner's autobiographical narrator attempts to free

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 224f.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 239.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 115.

herself from her omnipresent “feelings about the Holocaust.”<sup>34</sup> This omnipresence is evident in her family shaped by transgenerational traumatization: “Some may think that I am exaggerating at this point, but I simply did not have any temporal or spatial distance to my grandparents, my aunt or my mother in any phase of my life. Their feelings and thoughts have covered me like a second skin.”<sup>35</sup> But mediated representations of the Shoah also play an important role here, with Trzebiner reflecting on the various medial forms conveying something of that history. She describes her handling of documentary photo and film materials<sup>36</sup> as well as her inevitable association of train journeys with deportation trains: “My brain plays the music from *Schindler’s List* to it.”<sup>37</sup>

Her awareness of the presence of the history of the Shoah repeatedly clashes with non-Jewish Germans of her generation who avoid or fail to take an interest in their own family histories:

I am always amazed that so many think that their grandparents had nothing to do with the regime of injustice. Most of my non-Jewish friends have never asked their grandparents what they did during the war. I’m not bewildered by this so much because my grandparents were affected, but because my friends simply don’t know who their grandparents are, what they experienced and how they had to adjust after the war. What was on their minds.<sup>38</sup>

Trzebiner’s autobiographical reflection “on the consequences of the Holocaust”<sup>39</sup> also takes into view the third generation of descendants of perpetrators and bystanders of National Socialism. Her book thus undertakes a threefold attempt at understanding: first, at self-understanding that seeks to find words for the “hole” she has internalized as a granddaughter; second, at making her position as the granddaughter of survivors comprehensible to a German-speaking (meaning mostly non-Jewish) reading public; and finally, it attempts to understand the unnamed, undiscussed consequences of the murder for the descendants of the murderers.

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 125.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 125.

<sup>36</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, 138f.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 125.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 226.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 205.

Slowly the world is realizing that the genocide continues to have an effect in the following generations. [...] What about the poor blind youths who are not connected to history at all because they have nothing to do with the victims of the Holocaust. They don't even know that the actual poison of the regime is still affecting them [...]. Poor Germany, it was only liberated in small parts. What remains after such a catastrophe: broken relationships between people. On both sides.<sup>40</sup>

### Johannes Böhme, *Das Unglück schreitet schnell* (2019)

Johannes Böhme's (\*1987) *Das Unglück schreitet schnell* [Misfortune moves quickly] is the autobiographical examination of a non-Jewish third-generation German of his own family history. It is the grandson's attempt to understand the lives of his grandmother and her first husband during National Socialism and the Second World War. The two were, in Christopher R. Browning's (1992) term, "ordinary Germans": she worked as a secretary, he was a soldier in the Wehrmacht, "an unfanatical National Socialist, a reflexive anti-Semite, an adherent of military virtues, if only because they were the only ones he had internalized."<sup>41</sup>

Böhme's book does not tell of an intimate family relationship, but offers a decidedly detached attempt to understand something about the lives of two people: the grandmother Anny with whom the autobiographical narrator was never particularly close and who died when he was 14 years old, and her first husband, the Wehrmacht soldier Hermann Bartens who had died decades before Böhme was born. His most important sources are the letters Bartens sent from the Eastern Front to Anny, which the author retrieved from the proverbial (and in his case, literal) attic long after her death. Other historical sources also play a major role: Böhme, a journalist, presents a meticulously researched book. He describes his painstaking efforts to learn about military history, his travels to present-day Volgograd, where Hermann Bartens disappeared in January 1943, and his attempts to get as accurate a picture as possible of Bartens's time and deeds in the Wehrmacht. Throughout, he expresses a deep appreciation and at the same time a deep mistrust of his historical source material:

Anny always had a tendency to lies, half-truths, retouching [...]. Did she really keep all the letters? Did she feel she was the guardian of all his words? Or was she afraid of our judgement of her love? Did she, after all, burn some pages in her oven that tormented her too much or that perhaps allowed conclusions to be

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 242f.

<sup>41</sup> Johannes Böhme, *Das Unglück schreitet schnell* (Berlin: Ullstein, 2019), 201.

drawn about certain cruelties or attitudes that were no longer acceptable at least since the 1970s?

And what about Hermann: can I trust his observations? What does he leave out? Where did he spare Anny from overly cruel details?

[...]

There are the official documents, the battle reports and diaries that the infantry division sent to Berlin. There, the war was a movement of forces seen from a great height, a constant advancing, retreating and the bare numbers of dead, missing, captured. A detailed view that cannot answer what is most important.

And the letters I do have trigger their own kind of blindness. I cannot read them.

The Sütterlin in which they are written to me is only spikes, curls and loops [...] <sup>42</sup>

The letters were transcribed – in a remarkable move of transgenerational collaboration to pass on and preserve family knowledge – by Böhme's father.<sup>43</sup>

Self-reflexivity – introduced by Böhme's treatment of his source materials and his descriptions of his efforts at research and reconstruction – plays a crucial role in this text too. By placing history and family history – the “detailed view” of general history and the details of private stories – in relation to each other, Böhme is equally interested in the preservation and transmission of the testimonies of contemporary witnesses and the question of how his treatment of these very testimonies shapes history in the process of writing. The nodal point of this actualization of the tension between history and story is the first-person narrator.

Böhme's book is explicitly dedicated to examining this tension: he alternates long passages reconstructing Hermann's marches and battles in Eastern Europe with portrayals of his grandmother's everyday life in Germany and descriptions of his own efforts to understand both. However, he does not present his reconstructions and findings (only) as a factual narrative (which also features black-and-white photographs as proof of authenticity). Rather, he interweaves them with reflections on their inherent inescapable uncertainties and, above all, with poeticizing and fictionalizing elements. Intertextual references, allusions, paraphrases and quotations from very different historical, philosophical and literary pre-texts – reports by Wehrmacht soldiers, folk songs, poems, Wittgenstein's diaries and many more – are woven into the text. Typographically detached dialogues of fragmented witness statements are periodically interspersed throughout the text, creating polyphonic, dramatic dialogues. The historical is thus presented in an explicitly poetic way:

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 254f.

<sup>43</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, 255.

Otto  
*From afar, the masses of Russians looked like black clouds;*  
 Karl  
*The sergeant looked at the wounded man*  
 Otto  
*when you aimed into that,*  
 Karl  
*and said*  
 Otto  
*then so many*  
 Karl  
*"Nah, leave that one"*  
 Otto  
*fell*<sup>44</sup>

By mixing factual and fictionalizing-poeticizing narrative elements, Böhme points to the precarious relationship between historical reconstruction and literary construction. Imagination plays an important role in this self-reflexive approach to history via stories:

Since I have known him, since I have been reading his thoughts, his wishes, hopes, fears, it happens to me that I look at my fellow passengers on the underground and imagine how easy it would be to turn them. That it would not be so difficult to convince them of the usefulness of a steel helmet, of the sense of fighting to the last, of the necessity of an execution.

And I sometimes imagine, without wanting to, being in his place: wearing this uniform [...]. I imagine what fear of death might feel like when an indiscriminate killing machine rages around you. And what it is like to be that machine yourself. It is one of the stranger human characteristics that we do not manage to remain completely with ourselves when someone tells us their life story. That our imagination escapes and goes along no matter where the narrators take us. That we always imagine, at least for a few moments, what it would be like to be like them. We excuse this by saying that it is only our imagination that we are giving away. Something that, so we think at least, we can reclaim at any time with no harm done.<sup>45</sup>

The implied doubts about the harmlessness of the imagination point to an underlying understanding of the power of words and images – from the effects

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 298f.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 202.

of which Böhme, while making use of them himself, does not exclude himself. Through words, images, and the power of his imagination, he approaches the history of the Second World War and the story of a Wehrmacht soldier. And while he had initially wished that soldier to be more interesting – that is, more eloquent and more imaginative<sup>46</sup> – it is perhaps precisely his ordinariness and banality that make him appear exemplary.

Böhme's autobiographical approach to the lives of his grandmother and her first husband includes a reflection on his own position as a descendant of Nazi Germans. During his research visit to Volgograd, for example, he knows that he is viewed as a descendant of former enemies and accepts the discomfort that comes with this:

The retired Russian major said it when he saw me: 'A really German face.' He had not seen such a German face for a long time. He did not say it, but well, for the sake of completeness: a Stahlhelm visage. I cannot blame him, even if it still makes me uncomfortable at this moment that I write it down. He drew the direct connection that I would have liked to complicate: that my body is in some way a revenant of *them*.<sup>47</sup>

Trzebiner's autobiographical text expressed surprised discomfort at the lack of knowledge among the descendants of perpetrators and bystanders about their own family history.<sup>48</sup> Böhme's autobiographical book strives for precisely this knowledge and can thus be read as an indirect response. And it is in this sense that we can speak of one literary discourse of the third generation, whose shared foundation is the positioning as grandchildren.

### Concluding Remarks

The literature of the third generation, which I have presented here via three very different but paradigmatic texts, opens with a generational inscription that leads from the past into the present and from the stories told in the present directly into history. Precisely because the descendants of perpetrators, bystanders, and victims describe radically different experiences and memories of the Shoah and Second World War, the commonalities of their narrative strategies are all the more striking. First and foremost, the authors explicitly position themselves as grandchildren, and thereby inscribe themselves in the

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 201.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 344.

<sup>48</sup> Cf. Trzebiner, *Die Enkelin*, 226f.

chain of generations “since 1945.” They accept their respective family-historical heritage. This heritage, however, is rarely as clear-cut as it appears with the three authors discussed here. Often, it is complicated by belonging to both Jewish and non-Jewish German families and/or families not from Germany but from countries of the victorious powers.

The self-reflexive consideration of one's own generational position illustrates just how urgent and inescapable the confrontation with the Shoah remains even in the third generation. In Böhme's case, this is encountered as the “direct connection”<sup>49</sup> – uneasily drawn – to the historical legacy of National Socialism; in Trzebiner's case, the Shoah-survivor grandfather is “the reason why I am the way I am”;<sup>50</sup> in Fogel's case, the Shoah stands “at the beginning of my whole existence.”<sup>51</sup> These autobiographical or auto-fictional self-definitions are part of an approach to history rooted in personal family history. The texts are literary acts of remembrance; they are active approaches to the past. The self-reflection and self-positioning as grandchildren open meta-perspectives in thinking about how the Shoah and Second World War can be remembered by those born after, and how (family) historical knowledge can be passed on and renewed in narratives of the present. Thematic self-reflection is linked in the texts with other moments of self-reflexivity: From Fogel's discussion of the book of memories that the grandfather wants the first-person narrator to write, which is taken almost to the point of *metalepsis*, to Trzebiner's multilingual text design, to Böhme's incorporation of intertextual and poeticising elements into his factual reconstruction. Two questions are always at the centre: how can those born later bear witness today to the remembered experiences of the contemporary witnesses, retrospectively referred to as the first generation? And how is the experience of confronting these memories shaped through research and retelling, and how can it itself be shaped through literature?

By thinking through – and literarily working through – the possibilities of the relationship of later generations with the history of the Shoah and Second World War, third generation literature is not only a mirror but rather a motor of generational remembrance. The mediatedness of history, the foundation of all Shoah and World War remembrance in the third generation, is thus brought into focus as the knowledge of the past is necessarily presented together with its transmission: The remembered experience and the experience of remembrance become inseparable.

49 Böhme, *Das Unglück schreitet schnell*, 344.

50 Trzebiner, *Die Enkelin*, 122.

51 Fogel, *Sag es mir*, 96.



## Abstract

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*Remembering the Shoah and the Second World War in German Third-Generation Literature*

In this article, the author examines how the Shoah and Second World War are remembered in German third-generation literature. After contextualising third-generation literature in contemporary debates about *memory*, she offers readings of three paradigmatic works: Vanessa F. Fogel's *Sag es mir* [Tell me] (2010), Channah Trzebiner's *Die Enkelin oder Wie ich zu Pessach die vier Fragen nicht wusste* [The granddaughter or how I didn't know the four questions during Passover] (2013), and Johannes Böhme's *Das Unglück schreitet schnell* [Misfortune moves quickly] (2019). She identifies self-reflexivity as an essential narrative strategy in the writings of third-generation authors. Their self-reflection and self-positioning as grandchildren open meta-perspectives in thinking about the possibilities of remembering the Shoah and the Second World War by succeeding generations. The remembered experience and the experience of remembrance become inseparable.

## Keywords

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Holocaust/Shoah Literature; Second World War; German Literature; Third Generation; self-reflexivity

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Elisa-Maria Hiemer

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## Entangled Identities and the History of Spaces in Twenty-First-Century Jewish Literature from Germany and Poland

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TEKSTY DRUGIE 2024, NR 1, S. 88–106

DOI: 10.18318/td.2024.en.1.6 | ORCID: 0000-0003-2223-6172

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Still later I learned to be proud of what I am: a crazy German-Russian-Jewish mixture. Or is it rather Russian-German-Jewish? Do I have to decide now? Or do I just tell myself that?<sup>1</sup>  
My past sits in me deeply, but when I try to reach it, I encounter a void, as if I were born yesterday.<sup>2</sup>

Self-descriptions, both literary and personal, do not fit into a binary system of categorization. The above quotes by the writers Lena Gorelik and Piotr Paziński are united by the fact that Jewishness is that part of the identity which remains subject to question and needs to be constantly reassessed. Meanwhile, a pluralistic understanding of identity, meaning a personal definition formed of a combination of nationality, religion or other beliefs, can be uneven, contradictory, even baffling. Although the existence of diversity within single identities has become

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1 Lena Gorelik, *„Sie können aber gut Deutsch!“. Warum ich nicht mehr dankbar sein will, dass ich hier leben darf, und Toleranz nicht weiterhilft* (München: Pantheon, 2012), 138. All translations are by the author, unless indicated otherwise.

2 Piotr Paziński, *The Boarding House*, trans. Tusia Dabrowska (McLean, IL, Dublin: Dalkey, 2018), 89.

an unquestioned fact, this acceptance does not seem to have been extended to acknowledging its existence within Jewish identities. Public and scientific discourses on the literature of this group reveal certain automatisms: we assume that their texts must refer to the Holocaust and the fate of their family members. Many excellent publications provide a systematic analysis of motifs and generational issues<sup>3</sup> but usually maintain their focus on the Holocaust as *leitmotif*.

This article examines how autobiographical texts approach the apparently volatile nature of Jewish identity and how they manage to emancipate it from the trauma narrative. With reference to Gaston Bachelard's<sup>4</sup> idea of *topophilia* (positive places) and theories on personal reappropriation of so-called non-places,<sup>5</sup> particular attention is paid to the spatial organization described in the texts: according to the conception of Marc Augé, a non-place is deprived of history and does not possess any function in identity building. In the case of lost or overwritten Jewish places, exploring the nature of these sites means conducting a critical assessment of that past and repositioning it within the frame of family and individual identity narratives. The act of reappropriation turns a non-place into a space that is "familiar, localized, historic, organic, and meaningful to its occupants, a space where identities, relationships and a story can be made out."<sup>6</sup> I consider the texts to be not only a movement of the narrator between physical

3 Monika Adamczyk-Garbowska, *Odcienie tożsamości. Literatura żydowska jako zjawisko wielojęzyczne* (Lublin: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Marii Curie-Skłodowskiej, 2004); *Jewish Space in Contemporary Poland*, ed. Erica T. Lehrer and Michael Meng (Bloomington, Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2015); *Reconstructing Jewish Identity in Pre- and Post-Holocaust Literature and Culture*, ed. Lucyna Aleksandrowicz-Pedich and Małgorzata Pakier (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2012); *Żydowski Polak, polski Żyd. Problem tożsamości w literaturze polsko-żydowskiej*, ed. Alina Molisak and Zuzanna Kołodziejska (Warszawa: Elipsa, 2011); *Osteuropäisch-jüdische Literaturen im 20. und 21. Jahrhundert. Identität und Poetik / Eastern European Jewish Literature of the 20th and 21st Centuries*, ed. Klavia Smola (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2013); Joela M. Jacobs, "Die Frage nach dem Bindestrich. Deutsch-jüdische Identitäten und Literatur," in *Hybride jüdische Identitäten. Gemischte Familien und patrilineare Juden*, ed. Lea Wohl von Haselberg (Berlin: Neofelis Verlag, 2015), 169–182.

4 Gaston Bachelard, *Poetik des Raumes* (Frankfurt: S. Fischer Verlag, 1975), 37–38.

5 Matthias Däumer, Annette Gerok-Reiter and Friedemann Kreuder, "Einleitung. Das Konzept des Unorts," in *Unorte. Spielarten einer verlorenen Verortung: kulturwissenschaftliche Perspektiven*, ed. Matthias Däumer, Annette Gerok-Reiter and Friedemann Kreuder (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2010), 12.

6 Peter Merriman, "Marc Augé on Space, Place and Non-Places," *Irish Journal of French Studies* 9 (2009): 16.

spaces, but, above all, to be a movement across psychological boundaries which are also subject to shifts – especially regarding the normative notion of identity. In doing this, the examples challenge the binary character of the commemorative debates. Agata Tuszyńska's *Rodzinna historia lęku* [*A Family History of Fear*, 2017] from 2005; Lena Gorelik's *Hochzeit in Jerusalem* [Wedding in Jerusalem] from 2008; Piotr Paziński's *Pensjonat* [*The Boarding House*, 2018] from 2009; and Channah Trzebiner's *Die Enkelin oder Wie ich zu Pessach die vier Fragen nicht wusste* [The granddaughter or how I didn't know the four questions during Passover] from 2013; all deal with opposing yet crucial conflicts, that is post-memory vs. future perspectives, Polish and Jewish "victim rivalry," and post-Soviet Jewry vs. German Jewry.

The analysis provides a new perspective on Jewish writing which is intended to diversify our notion of Jewishness in Central Europe. It also includes a closer look at contemporary misconceptions of Jewish life as imagined or perpetuated by the non-Jewish majority in Poland and Germany respectively. For this reason, a short introduction into the specific national discourses is also provided, to help contextualize the literary examples.

### Rethinking Jewishness? The Challenges Faced by Jewish Communities in Germany since 1989

In 1991, a conference of German interior ministers decided to facilitate the granting of asylum to people from the former Soviet Union who could prove their Jewish roots. By 1999, 120,000 people had taken advantage of the simplified emigration procedure and they came to Germany over the next 15 years as *Kontingentflüchtlinge* (quota refugees).<sup>7</sup>

Although the local Jewish community saw an increase in its numbers, its members remained skeptical: Doron Kiesel, a member of the Central Council of Jews in Germany, argues that, on the one hand, the secular orientation of immigrants cannot be linked to the points by which German Jews identify, which are the Holocaust and religion.<sup>8</sup> The reference with which the

7 Barbara Dietz, "German and Jewish Migration from the Former Soviet Union to Germany: Background, Trends and Implications," *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 4 (2000): 635. From 1990 until 2005, the HumHAG, *Gesetz über Maßnahmen für im Rahmen humanitärer Hilfsaktionen aufgenommene Flüchtlinge* [Law on measures for refugees admitted within the framework of humanitarian aid operations] allowed Jews and people with Jewish ancestry from the Soviet Union at its successor states to immigrate to Germany.

8 Doron Kiesel, "Neuanfänge. Zur Integration jüdischer Zuwanderer aus der ehemaligen Sowjetunion in Deutschland," in *Juden in Deutschland – Deutschland in den Juden. Neue Perspektiven*, ed. Micha Brumlik and Michal Bodemann (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2012), 159–166.

immigrants identified was Russian culture, not Jewish culture, he argues. The emotional relationship with the Soviet Union was, in many cases, tantamount to identification with the fate of their parents' generation under communism.

From today's perspective, the generation of immigrants from the former Soviet Union is in the majority in the Jewish communities of Germany. However, it should be added that the age of the immigrants, and therefore the age of the new members, was already advanced when they arrived, meaning that the effect of the rapid growth has diminished over time. Today, the Jewish community, like every other religious group in Germany, is struggling with a lack of interest and involvement from the young. Conservatives argue that the cause is to be found in increasing secularization. But Toby Axelrod, in his 2013 study,<sup>9</sup> concedes that German communities are too resistant to accepting new members who deviate from established norms in terms of either historical experience or ancestry: the issue of recognizing patrilineal Jews is crucial in a discourse where the question of "who belongs to us?" is raised. It is precisely this narrow definition of any assignation of identity, which seems far detached from the realities of the lived experience that becomes the central theme of Lena Gorelik's oeuvre.

### Lena Gorelik: Jewishness "in the Making"

Authors of Jewish origin who hail from the former Soviet Union belong to a group of authors whose works are both popular and prolific. This is evidenced by the numerous publications of Vladimir Kaminer, Olga Grjasneva and Lena Gorelik, among others. In recent years they have co-created "post-migration literature" as a response to the label of *Migrationsliteratur* (migration literature), which is used in both academic discourse and feuilletons and which consigns them to a position as outsiders. Recent texts indicate that they are weary of being confined to the subject of migration, as if their value were only to serve as a good example of integration. Lena Gorelik has contributed an essay to the discourse entitled *But You Speak German Well! Why I No Longer Want to be Grateful for Being Allowed to Live Here and Why Tolerance does not Help*. In this text, the author challenges stereotypes and addresses the role assigned to Jews in the "theater of memory" (*Gedächtnistheater*) that is created by German self-presentation during the performance of the ceremonies of Holocaust and Second World War commemoration.<sup>10</sup>

9 Toby Axelrod, *Jewish Life in Germany: Achievements, Challenges and Priorities since the Collapse of Communism*, 2013, accessed May 3, 2023, <http://www.jpr.org.uk/documents/Jewish%20life%20in%20Germany.pdf>.

10 Max Czollek, *Desintegriert euch!* (München: Hanser Literaturverlage, 2018), 64–65.

Gorelik describes the experience of a woman who attended her author's evening. The woman states that she "actually visits the Days of Jewish Culture every year, specifically to feel bewildered. And this year she wasn't, unfortunately, because of my book."<sup>11</sup> The use of a sarcastic tone while depicting Jewish immigrants is a way of confronting readers with the absurdity of thinking of her solely as "an author who has actually integrated so well that she writes books in German" – as one reviewer wrote.<sup>12</sup>

In 2004, Gorelik's book *Meine weißen Nächte* [My white nights], in which her alter ego, Anja Buchmann, tells the story of emigrating to Germany and growing up in a new environment, achieved success. In the novel discussed here, *Hochzeit in Jerusalem* [Wedding in Jerusalem], Gorelik describes the further life of Anja, who, plagued by the trials of love, registers on a Jewish online dating site. Here she meets Julian, who has recently learned of his father's Jewish background. He hopes to find a form of cultural and spiritual exchange as he is planning to go to Israel on a trip which he believes will enable him to understand his family history. Anja, both impressed and surprised by Julian's eagerness to become Jewish, decides to accompany him.

The main action of the novel therefore takes place in Israel. It transpires that we are not, in fact, dealing with a love story, but rather, Julian's journey leads Anja to confront and reconsider her own story. But it is only in the epilogue that we learn this and we then find ourselves compelled to recall the conversation of the prologue: "Do you really not think about who you are?" "No. Only when I'm asked such questions. I'm usually just myself."<sup>13</sup> Following Anja's denial of any engagement with the issue of identity at the beginning of the book, the epilogue, in which she listens to an interview she has recorded with her Jewish grandmother in order to preserve the older woman's life story, is even more surprising. The great ellipsis in the narrative indicates that, although she does not reveal the stories to the reader, Jewish family memory nevertheless plays an important role in Anja's life. Obviously, a physical distance from Germany and the Jewish community there is necessary for Anja to be able to ask herself questions about identity. However, we learn about the importance of Jewishness for Anja only indirectly; that is, through an analogy with Julian's fate. Upon arriving in Israel, the young man experiences situations and doubts similar to those that Anja experiences upon arriving in Germany. However, it is the contrast between the patrilineal Jew who is just discovering Jewishness and the Jewish woman who sees herself as German

11 Gorelik, "Sie können aber gut Deutsch!," 104.

12 Ibid., 11.

13 Lena Gorelik, *Hochzeit in Jerusalem* (München: Diana, 2008), 9.

and Russian that points to hybrid identity constellations. According to the terms first coined by Bethamie Horowitz, we are dealing here with examples of both the “sudden Jew” (Julian) and the “Jew by choice” (Anja).<sup>14</sup>

In Gorelik's case, sites representative of Jewish faith, such as synagogues or the Wailing Wall, are shown to be unnecessary to her Jewish identity. In the sixth chapter of the book, while the pair are still in Germany, Anja accompanies Julian on a visit to a synagogue. The rabbi does not recognize Julian as a Jew, which perpetuates Anja's negative view of institutionalized Judaism. At the same time, national boundaries present additional hindrances to Julian finding a form of Jewish self-confidence: While they are waiting for their turn to talk to the rabbi, an old woman, stunned by the fact that Anja and Julian are speaking German to each other, complains with a strong Russian accent: “Yeah, yeah, no German Jews in Germany. Not a single one. No German Jews. All foreigners.” “Russian Jews”, she says and proudly points to the other people around her, “Russian Jews in Germany. Without Russian Jews, no Jews in Germany.”<sup>15</sup> Reflecting on her visit, Anja concludes: “God and I, we work it out between us, even without a synagogue.”

The chapter that follows the depiction of Julian's first contact with institutionalized Judaism in Germany takes place during Anja's childhood. It shows her own first contact with the religion: following their first months in Germany, gaining the recognition of the Jewish community has become an important step for the family, but their attendance at a ceremony organized by the community is met with indifference at best and rejection at worst:

The German Jews, as we called them, did not notice us. They did not welcome us and did not ask where we were from. They chatted about what opera tickets who had bought and where they were going on vacation. I went to the playground to see the children, but they ignored me, just as their parents ignored my family. Only once did a girl call out in passing, “Eww, what is she wearing?” I was wearing my best Russian clothes.<sup>16</sup>

After the years spent silencing their religious background in the Soviet Union, Germany might have proven to be a safe space for Gorelik's family to explore being Jewish and to confidently pursue a life as Jews. However, they and others who shared their specifically post-Soviet-Jewish

<sup>14</sup> Katka Reszke, *Return of the Jew. Identity Narratives of the Third Post-Holocaust Generation of Jews in Poland* (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2013), 185.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>16</sup> Gorelik, *Hochzeit in Jerusalem*, 61.

backgrounds were marginalized and obscured twice over: first by the established Jews, who rejected them due their allegedly inferior living standards and non-Holocaust-focused approach to religion, and second by the non-Jewish Germans, who accepted the “quota refugees” only if they integrated quickly into German society by acquiring native level language skills (unobtrusive behavior through fast assimilation). Consequently, Jewish families from the former Soviet Union cannot be misused in the German *Gedächtnistheater* that regards contemporary Jewish life in Germany as the best proof of Germany’s rehabilitation. In Israel, however, Anja and her family are subject to harsh criticism for having emigrated to Germany. For Anja, the home provided by her parents is the secure space in which she can simply be herself, free of the expectations that accompany the roles ascribed to her. Forced to reinvent her Jewishness as a young teenager, she relies on the experiences and memories of her grandmother, who is the only silent character on the diegetic level.<sup>17</sup> After the wedding of a distant cousin, the book ends with Anja on a flight to Toronto, during which she listens to the recording of her grandmother’s voice. This minor character gains increased significance in the epilogue. She functions as a link between the previous generations of religious Jewish ancestors and the family now assimilated in Germany. Gorelik’s attempt to preserve her life story for the future is a part of the mnemonic reconstruction work of the family home or, as Bachelard puts it: “When we evoke memories of the house, we always add dream values; we are never real historians, we are always partially poets, and our emotion may express nothing but lost poetry.”<sup>18</sup>

Additionally, Gorelik’s case is an example of how Jewish space is intentionally created throughout the entire European continent. With her origins in Ukraine, emigration from St. Petersburg, settlement in Germany, and continued close ties to relatives in Israel, Gorelik embodies the divergent narratives and opinions on Jewishness.

### **Channah Trzebiner: Whose Life to Live?**

Channah Trzebiner is named after her maternal grandfather’s first wife, who died, together with their unborn child, in Auschwitz. Her motivation to write is her failed Jewish marriage. At first, the plot seems to fit into post-traumatic narratives. The first part of the book is devoted to the narrator’s relationship

17 Elisa-Maria Hiemer, *Autobiographisches Schreiben als ästhetisches Problem. Jüdische Vielfalt in der polnischen und deutschen Gegenwartsliteratur* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2019), 144.

18 Bachelard, *Poetik des Raumes*, 25.



with her grandfather, which proves difficult for every family member: it is ambivalent and oscillates between closeness and tyranny.

Later, however, the chapters dealing with the young narrator's professional career make the reader understand how her identity as a Jewish woman in Germany changes. Her main aim becomes the fusion of the Jewish and non-Jewish parts of her life. Herein lies the motif for the novel's development; most of its scenes deal with liberation from historical family trauma. Besides, her new, non-Jewish partner, Marco, greatly facilitates Channah's contact with the non-Jewish world. Despite Channah's family's disapproval of their mixed-faith relationship, the couple decide to move in together. The novel thus focuses on Channah's conscious rejection of the expectations made of her – just as in Gorelik's case – by her Jewish surroundings.

Channah's work place, a bank, is a zone with a lot of contrasting spatial semantics. To some extent, she retains the cynical worldview passed on to her by her grandfather, but she also starts to redefine the cruelties her family experienced as a powerful character feature that distinguishes her from her German environment. During a job interview at a bank in which the atmosphere becomes stressful and tense, she recalls:

My grandma had had to stand naked in front of SS men and bend over in time, had seen the woman next to her shot because she was too weak to walk fast enough. I was gaining confidence. I was amused. I was amused. Is this all the drama the big banks have? Yes please, what do you want to know? [...] Nothing about my person outwardly suggested this sarcasm that I have carried in me from birth.<sup>19</sup>

The grandmother whose name she was given also impacts Channah's way of thinking and behavior in everyday life by providing her with a source of confidence.

In the following years, however, Channah expresses appreciation of the empathetic environment at work: "I think at that point I really arrived in Germany – even though I didn't feel at home anywhere else."<sup>20</sup> By achieving recognition in the professional sphere, Channah "gets her own voice in Germany"<sup>21</sup> and she compares this to being born again. The rapprochement of the worlds that were previously separated reaches another stage by the end of the book: moving into a shared house represents a rejection of the

19 Channah Trzebiner, *Die Enkelin oder Wie ich zu Pessach die vier Fragen nicht wusste* (Frankfurt: Weissbooks, 2013), 91.

20 Ibid., 103.

21 Ibid., 106.

Jewish home that had previously been seen as vital ("Losing the Jewish home hurts").<sup>22</sup> The protagonist consciously makes this decision despite the advice and opinions of her Jewish friends, who, among other things, describe her relationship as "disgusting."<sup>23</sup> Since this is the final scene of the piece, the open-ended nature of the narrative, which still offers the potential of a (positive) development, becomes obvious. And so the reference to the emancipatory declaration that we find at the very beginning of the book is repeated:

I accept who I am. I am happy to be able to do this. I have cut the connection to my innermost for years and made sure that my own feelings have no room. I nipped them in the bud. I did this for my loved ones, for filling a hole in history, for being a substitute for murdered lives.<sup>24</sup>

### **Opposing the Polish-Catholic Norm: Jewishness in Post-1989 Poland**

According to Nick Lambert, historians in particular tend to construct an identity-shaping narrative of a tormenting past that is meant to serve as a point of reference for Jews worldwide.<sup>25</sup> This standpoint is not only Eurocentric, but also problematic because it forces narrow definitions onto countries and communities. Among others, the image of Poland as a Jewish cemetery<sup>26</sup> has become commonplace for describing the state of Jewry (or better: its non-existence) in that country. Yet it ignores not only manifold initiatives to make Jewish history visible and to reincorporate it into the narrative of the national history, but also the reestablishment of Jewish contemporary culture.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 135.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 222.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>25</sup> Nick Lambert, *Jews and Europe in the Twenty-First Century. Thinking Jewish* (London, Portland: Valentine Mitchell, 2008), 60.

<sup>26</sup> Especially the non-Polish perspective seems to pursue this opinion: Margaret Maliszewska, "Die Reise nach Polen in Jeannette Landers Die Töchter und Monika Marons Pawels Briefe," *Seminar: A Journal of Germanic Studies* 3 (2009): 223–237. Ruth Ellen Gruber's study *Virtually Jewish. Reinventing Jewish Culture in Europe* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), also supports the assumption that Jewishness in Europe has nothing "natural" nowadays.

<sup>27</sup> Izabela Suchojad, *Topografia żydowskiej pamięci. Obraz krakowskiego Kazimierza we współczesnej literaturze polskiej i polsko-żydowskiej* (Kraków: Universitas, 2010); Jagoda Budzik, "Topos Polski jako żydowskiego cmentarza w hebrajskiej literaturze trzeciego pokolenia," *Narracje o Zagładzie* 2 (2016): 88–100; Natalia Żórawska, *Dziedzictwo (nie)*

Since the 1980s, Polish Jewry has taken up a remarkable amount of space in public discourse. Well-known essays such as those of Jan Błoński (*Biedny Polacy patrzą na getto* [The poor Poles look at the Ghetto], 1987) or Artur Sandauer (*O sytuacji pisarza polskiego pochodzenia żydowskiego w XX wieku. Rzecz, którą nie ja powinienem był napisać...* [On the situation of the Polish writer of Jewish origin in the twentieth Century. It is not I who should have written this study....], 1982) scrutinize the complexities of Polish-Jewish relations and are not the only ones to do so. Sandauer was the first to coin the term *allosemitism* to mean the specifically Polish approach of defining Jewishness through otherness.<sup>28</sup> "Othering" means promoting a perception that a group of people are "the other" by emphasizing distinctive and differing features such as nationality, customs, appearance, or – as in this case – religion. The group that creates the definition tries to increase social distance from the other, whose beliefs and habits are perceived as deviating from its own, and thus "identities are set up in an unequal relationship."<sup>29</sup> These power imbalances are a common feature of the German integration fairy tale, which never aims for a comprehensive understanding of identity, but always expects subordination to the allegedly superior culture.

Around the turn of the millennium, manifold initiatives on enhancing the visibility of Jewish history can be observed in the former Eastern Bloc countries (e.g., erection of monuments, restoration of former Jewish residential areas and cemeteries). Recently, (social) media and urban lifestyles have also contributed to these developments (see the growing popularity of Jewish festivals and gastronomy in larger cities), aiming at a wider perception of contemporary Jewishness – one that, according to Monika Adamczyk-Garbowska does not exist.<sup>30</sup> For Gruber too, Central European Jewishness remains an artificial concept. She therefore questions the very idea of a true rebirth of Jewry in post-socialist states, although she welcomes the idea of cultural tolerance that such a thing would suggest.<sup>31</sup>

Similarly to the situation of the cases from Germany, there seems to be a large gap between the academic and public discourses, and the perspective

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pamięci. Holocaustowe doświadczenia pisarek drugiego pokolenia (Katowice: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego, 2018).

28 Hiemer, *Autobiographisches Schreiben*, 54.

29 Mike Crang, *Cultural Geography* (London: Routledge, 2004), 61.

30 Monika Adamczyk-Garbowska and Magdalena Ruta, "Od kultury żydowskiej do kultury o Żydach," in *Następstwa zagłady Żydów. Polska 1944–2010*, ed. Felix Tych and Monika Adamczyk-Garbowska (Lublin: Wydawnictwo UMCS, 2011), 732.

31 Ruth Ellen Gruber, *Odrodzenie kultury żydowskiej w Europie* (Sejny: Pogranicze, 2004), 245.

of the group that they are targeting. Furthermore, the “group” in question is actually very disparate; institutionalized Jewry, which relies to a large extent on religion as the main pillar of Jewish identity, stands in contrast to the increasingly diverse range of personal interpretations. Katka Reszke’s study of the narratives of third-generation Jews in Poland is a valuable contribution to the understanding of the realities of their lives: many of her respondents describe a liberal attitude towards Jewish identity and a desire to open up the Jewish community to those who might not be Jewish halachically. Reszke summarizes that “ironically though, more than half of the young Jews in today’s Poland are ‘non-halachic Jews.’”<sup>32</sup> Helise Lieberman, director of the Taube Center for the Renewal of Jewish Life in Poland since 2009, emphasizes:

If, however, someone wants to be a Jew only because others want him to be, then his path to self-knowledge becomes very difficult. Can one want to be a Jew at all, if only negative aspects are associated with it – in fact, nothing inspires one to search, but much tempts one to shut oneself in, to hide, to withdraw... That is exactly why we must try, each for him- or herself, to make possible a positive Jewish environment in which people feel at home.<sup>33</sup>

The following two examples from Polish literature precisely illustrate this discord between individual approaches and the communities they are trying to connect with.

### **Agata Tuszyńska: An Attempt to Unite the Separate Worlds**

At the age of 19, Tuszyńska learns of her mother’s Jewish origins.<sup>34</sup> At the age of 48, she publishes *Family History of Fear*, in which she traces her family history back to the nineteenth century via the help of witnesses and archive material. Consequently, the first memories she has of her own childhood home are mainly associated with her mother. The gendered lens is a common feature among female narrators.<sup>35</sup> The mother refuses to memorialize the past

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<sup>32</sup> Reszke, *Return of the Jew*, 121.

<sup>33</sup> Ewa Koźmińska-Frejłak, “Nie można być Żydem samotnie. Z Helise Lieberman rozmawia Ewa Koźmińska-Frejłak,” *Midrasz* 10 (2006): 15.

<sup>34</sup> A critical view on multiple identities and their literary constructedness takes Agnieszka Czyżak, „Biografie polsko-żydowskie i żydowsko-polskie: Rekonesans ponawiany,” *Poznańskie Studia Polonistyczne. Seria literacka* 22 (2013): 171.

<sup>35</sup> Magdalena Marszałek, “Von jüdischen Müttern: Geheimnistropen in der polnisch-jüdischen autobiographischen Gegenwartsliteratur,” in *Osteuropäisch-jüdische Literaturen im*

and breaks with the cultural narrative, partly because most of the socially relevant spaces of Judaism have already been made unrecognizable through reconstruction and conversion of purpose, but also because of the way post-war Poland had celebrated heroism. "She did not go to the unveiling of the monument honoring the heroes of the Warsaw Ghetto on April 19th of that year. [...] It was cut out of the same black granite from Sweden that Hitler had reserved for all the monuments to his own victories. She avoided that part of the city."<sup>36</sup> The mother had been trying to erase everything that was connected to the experience of being persecuted and threatened for being Jewish. However, too many things in her daily life reminded her involuntarily of her past and of having belonged to a group that was supposed to be exterminated. Postwar Polish authorities, for example, continued to ask for wartime addresses, which in her case was "58 Leszno Street, Ghetto."<sup>37</sup> Agata states that fear and shame had been the main reasons why they had turned away from their Jewish family history and although Agata aims to change this view, a "schizophrenic dichotomy"<sup>38</sup> is still inherent in all the stories. Agata chooses mostly female fates and describes them in a way that makes the realities of Jewish life in Poland seem almost tangible; for example, the feeling of not fitting in, of not being able to identify with the categories of being either Polish or Jewish. Street names being "the shortest narration of all"<sup>39</sup> proves to be problematic, as the example of *ulica Żydowska* [Jewish Street] shows. Here lives the historian Mirek, a character who is very supportive of Agata's historical investigations. The name of the address had had an impact on Mirek's attitude: when moving there, he "was ashamed of his address on Żydowska Street."<sup>40</sup> The narration emphasizes spaces that in the past had been private or had had especially positive associations. Spaces that evoke associations with positive memories are actively shaped by the narrator and are manifestations of self-agency. Through the close contact between Agata and Mirek and

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20. and 21. Jahrhundert. Identität und Poetik / Eastern European Jewish Literature of the 20th and 21st Centuries, ed. Klavdia Smola (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2013), 271–280.

36 Agata Tuszyńska, *Family History of Fear: A Memoir*, trans. Charles Ruas (New York: Anchor, 2017), 52.

37 Ibid., 49.

38 Agata Tuszyńska, *Rodzinna historia lęku* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2005), 407. The English translation does not include the closing remarks in full. Therefore I quoted from the Polish original.

39 Däumer, Gerok-Reiter, Kreuder, *Einleitung. Das Konzept des Unorts*, 12.

40 Tuszyńska, *Family History of Fear*, 137.

their mutual support, the street lives up to its name once more: "He wrote. I telephoned, and I rushed up as soon as I could to Żydowska Street to sit by the tile stove [...] to be able to speak of her as if she had just stepped outside the room for a moment."<sup>41</sup> According to Bachelard, space in literature is often an expression of the most elementary and ordering principles of being. He pays particular attention to the concept of *topophilia*, by which spaces are celebrated and defended with the power of memory. Their construction reassures the narrator that she is doing something important and right, whereas conflicting spaces are limited to the descriptive level.

Tuszyńska's writing is not restricted to Polish spaces, but also refers to global aspects which can be seen in an important chapter about those of her relatives who are living abroad: the events of March 1968 cause a feeling of loss and betrayal in Tuszyńska's family. Emotionally and politically, however, the Polish Jews are committed to Poland's socialist future: "Leave, why should he [the grandfather] leave, he had a homeland after all."<sup>42</sup> The maternal side of the family, her great-aunt and great-uncle, leave the country; they travel first to Denmark, before finally settling in the US. Not only the geographical distance, but also the cultural and socioeconomic changes the emigrants go through separate the family members from one another ("America took her from me completely."<sup>43</sup>) The narrator's journey to the US assists her in overcoming this negative perception and – again – this positive place of the Jewish diaspora is presented in a performative way.

I slowly began to come out of hiding. But the question of whether I was a Jew, I could not answer in the affirmative for a long time. [...] I was listening to klezmer music on the Lower East Side, which was full of traces of Jewish emigrants. I was catching up on my backlog. But a confession did not cross my lips. It wasn't about them, it was about me. In time, I stopped denying. Jewish? Polish?<sup>44</sup>

The quote allows for two interpretations. On the one hand, commercialized cultural heritage turns out to be effective for gaining access to Jewish culture, although its pure consumption might appear naïve in the quotation. On the other hand, the approach of focusing first on easily consumable cultural goods is an important part of the processes of self-questioning and self-recognizing

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 139.

<sup>42</sup> Tuszyńska, *Rodzinna historia lęku*, 213.

<sup>43</sup> Tuszyńska, *Family History of Fear*, 368.

<sup>44</sup> Tuszyńska, *Rodzinna historia lęku*, 407–408.

which are, according to Katka Reszke, typical for the generation of sudden Jews.<sup>45</sup>

As for the Polish outside world, the narrator's perception of its cultural, political, and historical dominance as a threat has been given to her by her mother: "At all costs, she wanted to spare me the fear and humiliation that had befallen her. She wanted to protect me from the Polish world, which – in her opinion – could be a threat."<sup>46</sup> The daughter's behavior mirrors this experience unconsciously: Agata operates in the background, evaluates archive material at home, does not want to draw attention to herself, yet it is only through her that it is possible to revive the Jewish space in the Polish town. The strongest gestures she performs are the attachment of the *mezuzah*<sup>47</sup> to her front door and the transfer of the *mazewot*<sup>48</sup> to the cellar of her home in Warsaw. In summary, her inherited fear of non-belonging turns into an acknowledgement of her Jewish descent. The Jewish remnants, which today are mainly found only on the periphery, are transferred to the capital. This act signifies that Warsaw will continue to be a place of Jews. On the last page, the narrator declares self-confidently: "I belong to both. And let it remain that way."<sup>49</sup> The attempt to recreate the Jewish part of one's identity is criticized in studies about post-1989 literature, since looking back through the perspective of a minority of which a person has not felt a part for most of their life is perceived as an artificial and therefore untrustworthy action.<sup>50</sup> The importance of the childhood home as an example of topophilia becomes obvious, since she finally expresses the wish to invite all of her relatives there and to gather them in one room: "Into my childhood room where you never came. Where you were missing. In this empty space, in this silence. There where I missed you so much although I didn't know of your existence, I am here and wait."<sup>51</sup>

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45 Reszke, *Return of the Jew*, 199.

46 Tuszyńska, *Rodzinna historia lęku*, 32.

47 Small capsule to be attached to the door frame of a Jewish house. On the parchment parts of the prayer Shma Yisrael are written.

48 Jewish grave stones.

49 Tuszyńska, *Family History of Fear*, 401.

50 Anna Siemińska, "Pamięć uniewinniona: Pochodzenie żydowskie a problem tożsamości i wyborów identyfikacyjnych na przykładzie utworów Romy Ligockiej i Agaty Tuszyńskiej," in *Polska proza i poezja po 1989 roku wobec tradycji*, ed. Aleksander Głowczewski and Maciej Wróblewski (Toruń: Wydawnictwo UMK, 2007), 122.

51 Tuszyńska, *Family History of Fear*, 401.

### Piotr Paziński: Living on the Ark

Feuilletonistic remarks and sales-promoting slogans place the novel within the survivorship narrative and therefore seemingly provide the interpretive frame. Paziński is said to be the “first literary voice of the third generation in Poland after the Holocaust”<sup>52</sup> and his Czech translator states, “the narrator of *The Boarding House* describes ghosts, those who no longer exist – the last Polish Jews, among whom he should also be.”<sup>53</sup> Paradoxically, the latter quote is a bold statement that deprives the author of the right to belong to that group. And indeed, the narrator of Paziński’s novel portrays an understanding of being Jewish in Poland that is increasingly a question of choice, but which also touches upon socio-political constructions. The story is about a young man visiting a Jewish guest house near Warsaw where he used to spend his childhood vacations. Taking a look at the spatial constructions, it is worth considering Gaston Bachelard’s statements on the house – the *topos* to which the whole plot of *The Boarding House* is reduced to: “For the house is our corner of the world. It is – it has often been said – our first universe.”<sup>54</sup> The spatial constructions in the case of *The Boarding House* can be described as “fixations of happiness”<sup>55</sup> as the vivid memories shared by the elderly show:

A name I’ve heard since forever. Like “Nalewki”, or “Plac Krasińskich,” “Gęsia 18,” and “Świętojerska 13,” where at the intersection with Nowiniarska our house was. That is, our house from before the war, however. Świętojerska was spoken of in the present tense, as if it hadn’t ceased to exist. And our summer boarding house.<sup>56</sup>

In the course of the novel, contrasting spatial semantics between the past and the present place become evident. The reconstructed, peace-loving image of the past is contrasted with the metaphor of the ark. An important feature for the development of the plot is the description of the dense fog and humidity<sup>57</sup> which annoy the elderly, who usually reply with a laconic comment: “End of the world! For sure, simply the end.”<sup>58</sup> The narrator does

52 Justyna Sobolewska, “Taniec z cieniami,” *Polityka* 31 (1999): 40.

53 Piotr Paziński, *Letní byt*, trans. Lucie Zakopalová (Praha: Havran, 2012), 117.

54 Bachelard, *Poetik des Raumes*, 36.

55 Ibid., 38.

56 Paziński, *The Boarding House*, 2–3.

57 Hiemer, *Autobiographisches Schreiben*, 138.

58 Paziński, *The Boarding House*, 92.



not present an unambiguous evaluation of this modern ark: for the older Jewish community, Śródborowianka would be the best place even in the future: "A tiny, dingy tabernacle in the desert, a place of rest during the journey. Our ark. Here, they were – we were – at home. And we will always be here."<sup>59</sup> The ambiguous character of the metaphor corresponds to the changing emotional load the narrator has to cope with: "the principle of Noah's Ark, because it is not the apocalypse, but also because it casts a pessimistic glance at the future, stands in the middle between paradise and hell, between apocalypse and the principle of hope", as Joanna Jabłkowska emphasizes.<sup>60</sup>

His relationship to his personal place of memory is indeed as ambivalent as Jabłkowska's description: the narrator often wonders about the significance of the elderly's discussions with regard to his life and how they might perceive the sudden visitor. "Stop snooping around, go back to your place, to your concerns, take to your heels and run fast, cut the ties. Forget and finally leave us alone."<sup>61</sup> The narratological parallels between biblical descriptions and the experiences are worth emphasizing:

For after seven days I will send rain on the earth for forty days and forty nights, for the destruction of every living thing which I have made on the face of the earth. (Genesis 7:4) And the waters overcame everything and were increased greatly on the earth, and the ark was resting on the face of the waters. (Genesis 7:18) Every living thing on the face of all the earth, man and cattle and things moving on the face of the earth, and birds of the air, came to destruction: only Noah and those who were with him in the ark, were kept from death. (Genesis 7:23)

A sharp, afternoon aroma of sand and warmed bark, wild herbs, and meadow flowers swept into the boarding house, paying no attention to the domestic scents. The world was taking up deep breaths, big swigs of resined air, and life in all its forms burst forth from everywhere. Indifferent to switched-off chandeliers and dimmed wall lamps, as if it sought to take revenge on the old walls for their misery and infirmity and to swallow them completely, leaving behind them not even the tiniest tremble of memory.<sup>62</sup>

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 109.

<sup>60</sup> Joanna Jabłkowska, *Literatur ohne Hoffnung. Die Krise der Utopie in der deutschen Gegenwartsliteratur* (Wiesbaden: Deutscher Universitätsverlag, 1993), 94.

<sup>61</sup> Paziński, *The Boarding House*, 106–107.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 111.

The quotes are united by the intrusive character of nature that seems powerful enough to erase (quote 1) or to disturb (quote 2) the human order or, more precisely, that Jewish refuge. At the same time there is no doubt that those in the ark will withstand the threat.

The Jewish residents of the guesthouse do not belong to Polish society either ontologically or spatially. At the same time, the Jewish community aims to preserve its own microcosm. The boarding house thus also holds the quality of a very fragile heterotopia, an identity bound to collective places of remembrance, which not everyone is equally able to access. I consider this a conscious act of demarcation. At the same time, the narrator creates an image of a group-specific memory space somewhere between daydreaming and disillusionment. Overall, the Jews' place in Poland is claimed and defended by Jewish solidarity but due to the autofictional character of *The Boarding House*, more space for interpretation is given: autofiction neither commits to the chronological order of an autobiography, nor to the logic of plots like in fictional literature. Therefore this type of narrative best reflects the fallible process of remembering and is, as Anna Turczyn calls it, the writing mode of the unconscious mind.<sup>63</sup>

## Conclusion

In both Polish works, Jews are located on the periphery, emphasizing their non-belonging to society. Tuszyńska tries to overcome this marginalization, whereas Paziński's narrator cultivates the marginal position, for which he contrasts the harmonious image of childhood in the boarding house with the metaphor of the ark. Warsaw, in its present form, connotes a refusal of Jewish origins, hence the meaning of the boarding house is its protective value. In Gorelik's work, all representations that refer to Jewish sacred places are conflictual and Jewish safe spaces are exclusively private. Jewishness is also detached from places of collective memory in Trzebiner's work, which points to a more individual approach to religion. The relationship between the narrated and real space is reciprocal in the case of these autobiographic writings: the denied or forgotten Jewish spaces (Tuszyńska, Paziński) force the individual to substitute their absence with actions. In the first case this means detective work, in the second case a retreat into fantasy and childhood memory through autofictional means. Religious spaces such as synagogues or Jewish family spaces make the individual think about the place he or she wants to Judaism to occupy in life (Trzebiner, Gorelik).

63 Anna Turczyn, "Autofikcja, czyli autobiografia psychopolifoniczna," *Teksty Drugie* 1–2 (2007): 209.

One can observe a clear change in Jewish autobiographical narratives: Whereas Susanne Düwell concluded in her 2004 article that most of the contemporary Jewish texts draw a pessimistic picture<sup>64</sup>, one has now to acknowledge that the cultural landscape in both countries has become increasingly diverse. The shift towards a “multi-option society” (*Multioptionsgesellschaft*) is noticeable.<sup>65</sup> The presented cases understand Jewishness no longer to be a mark of deprivation. The authors consciously try to design positive spaces that are indispensable for the formation of a new Jewish consciousness. In this respect, the German examples in particular deviate from their literary predecessors. Israel is no longer a denied homeland, since the center of life is Germany. The multiple traumatization of the parental and grandparental home is not met with powerlessness, but with determination to achieve emancipation from these narratives. In order to overcome the rupture between the generations that resulted from the absence of Jewish life in public life in Poland until 1989, Polish works create positive examples of family history and a (nostalgic) transformation of the past. Agnieszka Mroziak warned of a problematic perspective, since “by placing the family in the center of the novel, women disappear, dissolve in it.”<sup>66</sup> However, in the case of Jewish memories, the gendered perspective plays an important role because Jewishness is traditionally passed down through the maternal line. The female narrators gain self-confidence and power through their examination of the past.

My examples from the literature present fundamentally different definitions of Jewishness and Judaism, with some based on private, and some on socio-historical convictions. What they all have in common is that the writing seems to have a compensatory function. They feature fictional and factual modes of narration that suggest different possible interpretations, but which do not exclude each other. Being Jewish equals being part of an international community. “The emphasis shifts away from commemoration toward dealing with the complications of a vibrant, increasingly diverse community.”<sup>67</sup> That being said, these narratives can all support the detachment of academic research from national paradigms.

64 Susanne Düwell, *Fiktion aus dem Wirklichen. Strategien autobiographischen Erzählens im Kontext der Shoah* (Bielefeld: Aisthesis Verlag, 2004), 7.

65 *Kulturerleben nachgefragt. Generation Y, junge Eltern und 55-65-Jährige im Interview*, ed. Christoph Kochhan, Marion Lorenz Amezcua, Alexander Moutchnik and Helen Rhein (Wiesbaden: Springer VS, 2016), 65.

66 Agnieszka Mroziak, *Akuszerki transformacji. Kobiety, literatura i władza w Polsce po 1989 roku* (Warszawa: Znak, 2012), 321.

67 Axelrod, *Jewish Life in Germany*, 14.

## Abstract

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*Entangled Identities and the History of Spaces in Twenty-First-Century Jewish Literature from Germany and Poland*

1989 is a turning point for Jewish communities in Germany and Poland. A strong internationalization and diversification can be observed in both societal discourses and autobiographical writings. Applying the concepts of non-spaces and topophilia, the article is based on the assumption that recent literature actively seeks for a positive reimagination of Jewish spaces. Through explorations of the family memory and a critical examination of past private, public, and religious spaces, the authors affirm their place in their countries and try to break free from past-centered narratives.

## Keywords

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Jewishness, Germany, Poland, twenty-first century, autobiographical writing

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Erga Heller

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## The Creation of a "Survivor" in Contemporary Israeli Holocaust Novels

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TEKSTY DRUGIE 2024, NR 1, S. 107–124

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DOI: 10.18318/td.2024.en.1.7 | ORCID: 0000-0002-8330-7782

### Introduction

According to Yad Vashem, the World Holocaust Remembrance Center in Jerusalem, Israel, the term "Holocaust survivors" is used to relate to "Jews who survived the Holocaust period in Nazi-occupied Europe" but it also "includes Jews who did not actually come into direct contact with the Nazi murder machine."<sup>1</sup> This common term assumes that the survivors must have been alive during Second World War and the Holocaust period, hence they could not be born in Israel afterwards. However, in various contemporary Israeli novels about the Holocaust we come across a series of post-war Israeli-born protagonists who represent a kind of "new" survivor. While some of them are depicted as persons that display bizarre behavior or even suffer from mental illness – which makes them into a suitable object for psychological analysis – my aim here

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1 The common terminology for a Holocaust survivor is based on the 2007 Holocaust survivors law, accessed April 26, 2023, <https://main.knesset.gov.il/activity/legislation/laws/pages/lawprimary.aspx?t=lawlaws&st=lawlaws&lawitemid=2000308> (in Hebrew). See also: "Survivors," *Shoah Resource Center – Yad Vashem*, accessed April 26, 2023, [https://www.yadvashem.org/odot\\_pdf/Microsoft%20Word%20-%206057.pdf](https://www.yadvashem.org/odot_pdf/Microsoft%20Word%20-%206057.pdf).

is to show how the process of acquiring of a new identity is connected to the posttraumatic life story of these characters and their relatives. The first novel to be discussed is *Tmunot Hatuna* [Wedding pictures] by Gil Ilutowich (2006),<sup>2</sup> while the second book is *Anshei Pinot* [Corner people] by Esty G. Hayim (2013).<sup>3</sup> Some additional contemporary Israeli novels will be included in the discussion as well, in order to broaden the comparative scope of this article.

The contemporary Hebrew novels under discussion here concentrate on female protagonists who learn to accept themselves as Holocaust survivors. While the protagonist of *Wedding Pictures*, the old Polish-born Elka Stollar,<sup>4</sup> is a “true” survivor who tries to deny her horrible memories of Holocaust atrocities and her subsequent – very distressing – immigration to Israel, the protagonist of *Corner People*, the young Dvory Stern, is an Israeli-born woman who cannot escape “her” fate, hence lives the life of a Holocaust survivor. Even though both characters have quite different personalities, their process of acquiring the identity of a Holocaust survivor is quite similar.

Significantly, in most contemporary Hebrew Holocaust fiction, the process of creating female characters who identify as Holocaust survivors is different from that of male characters, basically because the female protagonists are traditionally associated with the Jewish concept of a “woman of valour” [*Eshet chayil*] (Proverbs 31:10–30) – a gendered concept that revolves around marital life, motherhood and livelihood. Hence, focusing on two novels about female Holocaust “survivors” will bring us to a larger discussion about the identity of Holocaust survivors in contemporary Israeli-Hebrew fiction – second- and third-generation protagonists – through the prism of gender, self-identification and post-memory.

### **Elka Stollar in *Wedding Pictures***

*Wedding Pictures*, to begin with, is the third novel by Gil Ilutowich, a second-generation author who was born and raised in Israel. The book offers

2 Gil Ilutowich, *Tmunot Hatuna* [Wedding pictures] (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 2006) (in Hebrew). This novel has no English translation, therefore the English quotes through this article are my translations.

3 Esty G. Hayim, *Anshei Pinot* [Corner people] (Or Yehuda: Zmora, Bitan-Modan, 2013). I would like to thank the author, and the Deborah Harris Agency, for letting me use the unpublished English translation of *Corner People*, translated by Sara Freidman, 2014, for my study. All quotations in English are Freidman's version.

4 Elka Stollar is an East European Jew from Wiszniewo; nowadays it is a part of Minsk in Belarus; from 1921 till the end of Second World War Wiszniewo was part of Poland. See *Tmunot Hatuna*, chapter 5.

a realistic story about an old lady's search for her husband whom she believed to be dead for almost forty years. The temporal setting of the story is the end of the summer of 1983 – about one year after the First Lebanon War broke out and just after Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin announced his upcoming resignation.<sup>5</sup> Elka Stollar is an old widow and a retired dressmaker who lost her baby and her husband, Israel, during the Holocaust in Poland. With a forged certificate under the name of "Sabina Gorek" she managed to immigrate with her other, surviving, son to Israel before she turned thirty-two years old.<sup>6</sup> Now she lives in the city of Ramat-Gan,<sup>7</sup> alone, after her only living son immigrated to the USA with his family. In her purse, she keeps her single souvenir from – or testimony of – her marital life, an old, small, fading wedding picture.

Although Elka has been living in Israel for many years, she cannot read or write in Hebrew, the local language. Even though she can cope with basic Yiddish and some East European languages, her lack of proficiency in Hebrew turns her into a kind of illiterate person. One day, without any previous warning, an unfamiliar young man knocks at her door, telling her that he is Israel Stollar's son with his second wife, whom he married after the Holocaust. His father, it turns out, lives in Kfar Saba<sup>8</sup> and is dying, so the young man advises Elka to visit him. All at once, Elka's faked stable life, inside her small city apartment, secured from the outer world by a door with too many locks, comes to an end, as a result of the the young man's visit. Elka decides to go to Kfar Saba and to find out whether this old dying man is Israel Stollar, her

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5 Within Israeli collective memory, the resignation of Prime Minister Begin's on August 28, 1983, and the First Lebanon War (known also as "1982 Lebanon War" and "Operation Peace for Galilee") are considered as connected events, and Ilutowich presents them as such in the opening of his novel. The First Lebanon War launched by Israel against Palestinian terrorists based in southern Lebanon, following their attempt to assassinate the Israeli Ambassador to the UK. The consequence of the First Lebanon War led to a large-scale political debate within Israel, which affected the 1984 elections, resulting in the formation of a government of national unity instead of a right-wing government like Begin's government.

6 Elka's immigration documents suggest that she moved to Israel with her son in 1951, about three years after the establishment of the new state of Israel and about six years after Second World War.

7 Ramat Gan is close to Tel Aviv and is considered to be one of the largest 15 cities of Israel. Ilutowich is familiar with the Ramat-Gan area since his childhood and often writes about this city and other cities in its vicinity, such as Givatayim.

8 Kfar Saba is a city in the HaSharon area in the center of Israel, about 20 km from Ramat-Gan. Kfar means "village" and Saba means "grandfather." The name is probably not a coincidental choice.

supposedly dead husband. She wants to tell him about her life, their son, her loneliness. She wants him to explain why she had to live as a poor widow, as a single mother for so many years while he was having a new family.

Elka travels by public transportation. During her trip from Ramat Gan to Tel Aviv, where she gets a bus to Kfar Saba, she meets Maya, a young Israeli history student and a fresh widow. Maya voluntarily joins Elka on her way to Kfar Saba, after hearing the first parts of her life story. When Elka arrives at last to the house of the old dying man – Maya waits for her in a coffee shop – Elka decides to return home without talking to him about their marriage(s). Once again Maya joins her. On the way home Elka decides to teach Maya how to cook a decent Jewish-Polish dish, as she would have taught her own flesh-and-blood daughter. Significantly, the novel avoids a happy or neat ending. Elka seems to accept her tragic fate when she meets Maya, who is a better version of herself. Maya is a young Israeli war widow, pretty, full of life, empathic, free, and childless. The open ending sees Elka daydreaming about teaching Maya how to cook Polish food, like the daughter she had never had.

### **Dvory Stern in *Corner People***

*Corner People* is the fifth novel by Esty G. Hayim, a second-generation author who – not unlike Ilutowich – often writes about the Holocaust. The story is told by a first-person narrator, Dvory Stern, who is also the protagonist. She is a fifty-one-year-old Israeli woman who lives alone in her childhood apartment in the Mediterranean port city of Haifa. Unmarried and childless, Dvory is an unsuccessful writer who still uses an Olivetti typewriter instead of a personal computer. In general, she is obsessed with the past. In addition to Second World War, her main obsession are the past Israeli wars, and she often recalls her childhood memories from the Six-Day War and the Yom Kippur War.<sup>9</sup>

Apart from working as a substitute teacher, Dvory is also an eternal student (of literature). What is more, she is the only living member of her family in Israel; her only brother moved abroad, escaping – as she presents it to the

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9 The Six-Day War is also known by the name “1967 War.” It was a brief war (for six days) in June 1967. Syria, Egypt, and Jordan signed a mutual defense agreement to invade Israel, but the Israeli Air Force attacked their airfield before the invasion. Nowadays both Jordan and Egypt have peace agreements with Israel. Yom Kippur War is also known by the name “1973 War.” On the holiest day in the Jewish calendar, Yom Kippur, on October 1973, a coalition of Arab armies surprised IDF. Although the war ended within 18 days, due to its timing and extremely high number of casualties, it is still considered to be the most traumatic war by Israelis. Many families learned about their sons and husbands’ deaths weeks and months after this war had ended.



reader – from their traumatic and Sisyphus-like second-generation existence in Israel. Like in the case of *Wedding Pictures*, the story is set during the First Lebanon War. Dvory feels lonely and insecure at home during the war, while Haifa and the north of Israel are under heavy missile attacks. War casualties, civilian casualties and the memory of her beloved dead relatives, all this combined drives Dvory to tell her story and to make her wish “to wake the dead from their rest, summon the dead family to tell its story.”<sup>10</sup> Yet Dvory’s narration, as well as her mental health, is not coherent at first. Through her child-like eyes, the reader learns that she is an Israeli-born daughter to a family of Holocaust survivors of Hungarian origin. Her wish is to become a famous writer; therefore, she receives for her Bat-Mitzva the Olivetti typewriter from her beloved aunt Esther.<sup>11</sup> But her greatest fears come at night, as she strongly believes – ever since her early childhood years – that the Nazis are going to catch her. Throughout *Corner People*, Dvory’s life story from early childhood up to the present is slowly revealed in its full terrifying meaning to the reader – Dvory believes that she herself is living during the Holocaust and that she is unable to escape from that fate. Her wish to save a displaced and haunted creature is given a tragical twist when she decides to shelter a dying jackal in her apartment (believing this gesture to be equal to giving shelter to a haunted Jew). The story ends in an open fashion, with Dvory’s decision to buy herself a computer instead of her old typewriter. However, not unlike Elka Stollar’s fantasizing – at the very end of *Wedding Pictures* – about teaching her substitute daughter Maya how to cook, the protagonist’s aspiration is left incomplete.

Within a historical frame of mind, the term “Holocaust Survivor” is typically used to designate a person who survived the Nazi atrocities during Second World War. Yet, modern historians are aware of the impact of artistic forms upon historical representation.<sup>12</sup> Instead of one canonical “history” fiction the reader is given multiple “histories” that bring the Holocaust “to life [...] in a way that ideology and philosophical abstractions cannot.”<sup>13</sup> To this state of affairs,

10 Esty G. Hayim, *Anshei Pinot* [Corner people], trans. Sara Freidman, 2014, “Forward.” This is an official unpublished translation of the Israeli Institute for Hebrew Literature and the Deborah Harris Agency. See note 3.

11 Bat-Mitzva is a Jewish ceremony for twelve-year-old girls.

12 Geoffrey Hartman, “The Holocaust, History Writing, and the Role of Fiction,” in *After Representation?*, ed. R. Clifton Spargo and Robert M. Ehrenreich (Piscataway: Rutgers University Press, 2009), 26.

13 Dvir Abramovich, *Fragments of Hell: Israeli Holocaust Literature* (Boston: Academic Press, 2019), 98.

one may add the fact that in contemporary works of Holocaust fiction, manipulated, embellished, and invented memories are no longer regarded as taboo.<sup>14</sup> The emotional aspect leads to a kind of life narrative that is not a testimonial nor accompanied by documentary pieces; in other words, we are not dealing with a literary catalogue of unbearable atrocities that happened to the protagonist, or his or her way to freedom, but we are given an emotional story about the past that offers a personal and psychological glance into a tormented soul. This shift transfers the uncanny conceptualization of the Holocaust into daily, simple, acceptable, and unthreatening concepts, transmitting the “survival mode” of the protagonist from the past war to the present, for instance by moving away from a basic stage of “staying alive” to a higher stage of “enjoying life.” The fundamental motivation for creating an analogy between the past and the present, for the protagonist’s potential shift from mere survival to enjoyment of life, is connected to the “traumatic memory” of the Holocaust and the character’s obsession with the past.<sup>15</sup> Hence the most powerful vehicle in such stories are the protagonist’s memory and traumas. It does not matter whether it is a true, false or “embellished” life story; the value of the texts is their literary function,<sup>16</sup> their ability to generate an emotional response among the readers, and their power to leave their mark on the collection of “canonical” Holocaust novels or – to put it differently – to become a legitimate part of “Hebrew Holocaust literature.” What is more, looking at the institutional context and the position of the two books under scrutiny within the field of “Hebrew Holocaust literature,” it should be noted that both novels were published by leading Israeli publishing houses: *Wedding Pictures* was published as title number 558 in the series of *Sifriya La’am* [People’s library] by Am Oved, whereas *Corner People* came out in the Hebrew literature series of the Kinneret Zmora-Bitan publishing house.

### **Authentic Memories vs. Adopted Memories: Elka vs. Dvory**

The plots of *Wedding Pictures* and *Corner People* are based, respectively, on the memories of Elka Stollar and Dvory Stern; their memories create the main conflicts and drive the plot. In various ways, however, these two female lead characters represent two opposites. Elka from *Wedding Pictures* is a Hebrew

14 Matthew Boswell, “Holocaust Literature and the Taboo,” in *The Bloomsbury Companion to Holocaust Literature*, ed. Jenni Adams (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014), 196.

15 Dominick LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), 90.

16 Sue Vice, “Questions of Truth in Holocaust Memory and Testimony,” in *The Bloomsbury Companion to the Holocaust Literature*, ed. Jenni Adams (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014), 59–60.

ignorant in contrast to the verbally skillful Dvory, the protagonist of *Corner People*; Elka tries to overcome her harsh memories of the past and builds a secure home for herself while Dvory, for her part, adopts others' memories of the past as her own and builds herself a shelter from the "Nazis" around her. Elka tries to liberate herself from painful memories, whereas Dvory feels she carries them inside her body, as a sort of DNA or a curse:

A child of survivor parents. Second generation. You get the feeling there's no patience anymore for us. For the second generation. People are tired of Holocaust-Holocaust-Holocaust. I understand. I'm tired of it too. But there's no escape. The Holocaust is inside me.<sup>17</sup>

Dvory never stops to embrace and collect more and more stories about "the War"<sup>18</sup> and other wars, seasoning them with Mediterranean tastes and flavors; for example, after buying cigarettes and a bottle of Arak, Dvory remembers her late Jewish-Hungarian grandfather in the following way:

In his rare moments of waking, Grandfather would smear arak on his body, claiming it was healthy. The smell of anise would fill the house. I inhaled it deeply. It's good for your memory, he retorted when Grandmother ordered him out of the kitchen. You stink, get out of here! It appears that arak actually did him good, especially his long-term memory: He kept repeating his stories of that other war, the first one, never forgot a single detail.<sup>19</sup>

The memories of others that Dvory collects are a kind of "phantom pains" for her, a cross-generation post-trauma that characterizes the second-generation.<sup>20</sup> By embracing the pain she becomes a secondary victim, a personification of suffering humanity who must survive to tell the story of her family.<sup>21</sup>

17 Esty G. Hayim, *Anshei Pinot*, "Forward."

18 Second World War is mostly referred as "the War" [Ha-Milxhamah] in Israeli literary, popular and/or quotidian context, see for example: Erga Heller, "הארץ כי אל ארצי ואל מולדתי תלך:", "Ki el artzi ve'el moladeti telech: Kolo shel ha'ben ve'kolo shel ben ha'aretz" [But thou shalt go unto my country and to my kindred: Ambivalence about family and homeland in Israeli songs about the Holocaust], *MORESHER ISRAEL* 19 (1) (2021): 191.

19 Hayim, *Anshei Pinot*, chapter II.

20 Erin Heather McGlothlin, "Introduction," in Erin Heather McGlothlin, *Second-generation Holocaust Literature: Legacies of Survival and Perpetration* (Suffolk: Camden House, 2006), 5–6.

21 Alvin H. Rosenfeld, *The End of the Holocaust* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011), 93.

Telling a life story – and especially a life story regarding the Holocaust – is an impulsive drive that both Elka and Dvory share. While Elka addresses a stranger (Maya) during a bus ride and talks to her, Dvory writes for nameless strange readers. Hence their life stories carry different degrees of intimacy and pain. Elka feels she could like Maya as her own daughter, and she shows Maya her tender and loving feelings through bodily gestures and by showing Maya her most secret item, her well-hidden old wedding photo. Maya, in turn, acts in the same way, as she uses friendly body language as well, and equally shows Elka her wedding photos. They use direct physical contact and vocal speech. Since they spend most of the story on buses – hence in public spaces – Elka does not tell Maya about everything. A large part of the represented “ghetto,” in her Holocaust and post-Holocaust stories, remains in the form of hidden memories, known only to the narrator (and to the reader). Elka’s old wedding photograph is used instead of the lost documents of her civil status, not only as the official proof of her old marriage but also as an imaging tool of her current emotions.<sup>22</sup>

Meanwhile, Dvory uses written words and addresses her message – her “complete book” – directly to the reader. Since she is a first-person narrator, she controls the telling act, and hence also controls the degrees of intimacy and pain. Dvory invites the reader into her chaotic painful life, occupied mostly with food and fear. Although she is alone and apart from the rest of the world, her stories are full of characters, subplots and side plots, hence they manipulate the reader to believe in a false intimacy. There is, however, no real intimacy between Dvory and the reader, although she encourages her readership to believe she writes about authentic protagonists:

But if somebody reads it and gets the feeling that now he knows these strangers, even for a moment, people he’s never looked at directly, then perhaps a temporary spotlight will be trained on the gray people, and for a short time they will be “heroes.”<sup>23</sup>

Elka, for her part, is presented as an elegant person like Dvory’s aunt, but unlike Dvory herself. She knows she is not a verbal person – unlike Dvory – but similarly to Dvory, Elka likes to tell stories. Her favorite stories are about strangers:

22 James E. Young, “Holocaust Documentary Fiction: Novelist as Eyewitness,” in *Literature of the Holocaust*, ed. Harold Bloom (Broomall: Chelsea House Publishers, 2004), 83.

23 Hayim, *Anshei Pinot*, “Forward.”

Elka doesn't know how to read Hebrew. She recognizes numbers and even some words in Yiddish, but even though she never admitted – not even to herself – words could not work into sentences for her. She likes to hold magazines in her hand and she looks at the pictures, looks at the photos and wonders who these people are and what they are doing.<sup>24</sup>

While Elka understands her affection for storytelling only after her retirement, the five-year-old Dvory is a natural storyteller, and her ambition to tell stories grows with time. As a grownup she keeps writing her few stories – which are always similar variations on her basic life story – on her Olivetti and publishes them in an exclusive literary journal without many readers.

As a consequence, both Elka and Dvory do not have many specific addressees, which reflects the intimacy of their telling act. Elka addresses Maya, a lonely war widow like herself, while Dvory addresses unknown recipients. The natural degree of unfamiliarity between Dvory and her addressees – meaning an author who directs her words to her readers – echoes her transparent literary aspirations, which none of her family members acknowledges except for her aunt Esther.<sup>25</sup> It seems that since her early childhood Dvory becomes transparent in the eyes of her family members, but more important is her belief that she becomes invisible to the Nazis:

Two knocks at the door.

I wasn't dreaming; this was for real. Maybe it was the Nazis. I knew that had been a long time ago and that the good guys had killed them and rescued my father and mother and grandmother, but maybe there were one or two left who had come looking for my father and mother and grandmother and my brother and me. My thoughts came fast. There were two possibilities for survival. First, I didn't have a Jewish nose. Completely Aryan. Fine blonde hair and a turned-up nose. I didn't look like I even belonged to Mother, with her dark hair. No resemblance whatsoever. The second possibility, which I adopted after some hesitation, was to disappear. [...] You don't see me because I don't exist. Disappearing. Disappeared. [...]

<sup>24</sup> Ilutowich, *Tmunot Hatuna*, 12–13. Unless otherwise noted, all quotes are translated by the author of this article.

<sup>25</sup> In Esty G. Hayim's novella *SID* [Plastered walls] the intense love story is fully revealed since the heroes are Dvory Stern's Father and his lover, Dvory's aunt Esther, an erotic author who is known by the alias "Frauline Böll" and whose purple book copies are hidden in her apartment (*Corner People*, "XVIII"). See Esty G. Hayim, *SID* (Tel Aviv: Achuzat Bayit, 2020).

Murky words with a pungent smell. Grandmother once said that anything sour, sweet, salty or bitter, with color and texture – exists. Words for me always had color, taste, and smell. I could sense them, so they were real.<sup>26</sup>

Dvory lives through words. She suffers from synesthesia, she catches words (not items, not denotations) through seeing, tasting, and smelling. According to the five-year-old Dvory sensing the words that construct a story shifts its ontological status from “fiction” to “fact”, from “tale” to “testimony”, hence enabling her self-creation as a Holocaust survivor.

### Literacy and Survival

It is interesting that Elka's visual literacy and Dvory's synesthetic verbal literacy are their unique characteristics, and in both cases, they are the generators of the self-creation process of a Holocaust survivor. In spite of the fact that Elka is an “authentic” survivor and Dvory is not, their “survivor” identity is developed thanks to their capacity of storytelling. After delivering their life story to the world, they both want to change their former way of living. Elka wants a new family through Maya, suggesting that she would like to have new Israeli “grandchildren,” and Dvory considers a fresh writing start on a computer, after hiding in a burial-like act her old Olivetti, suggesting the possibility of writing about new subjects which are not the Holocaust. Due to the open ending these possible futures remain vague. Yet these possible futures clearly point at the theme of motherhood or at least at a changing feminine life circle. The open ending conceives a wish for creating a new self, much more social, active, and vivid.

Significantly, when studying the tension between the protagonist's high literacy – either visual or verbal – and her self-identification as a Holocaust survivor, either true or faked, one realizes that this tension is found also in other contemporary Israeli novels. Take, for example, *Heshbon Radum* [Dormant account] by Nathan Shaham.<sup>27</sup> This first-person novel is not presented to the reader as a Holocaust novel since it is a sort of detective story that happens in the beginning of the twenty-first century and marketing this novel under the title of Holocaust fiction could ruin its surprising closure. The protagonist and narrator of *Dormant Account* is a literary editor and publisher by the name of Menashe Shahar; hence he has a high degree of verbal literacy. He is a grandson of a Polish-Hassidic Jew, Aharon Tzvi Morgenstern,

<sup>26</sup> Hayim, *Anshei Pinot*, chapter “I.”

<sup>27</sup> Nathan Shaham, *HESHBON RADUM* [Dormant account] (Or Yehuda: Zmora-Bitan, 2013).

a successful businessman and unfaithful husband, the owner of a large Yiddish publishing house in Eastern Europe before Second World War, but also a Holocaust victim. Menashe Shahar inherited the publishing house, and now he tries to manage it – unsuccessfully – from his Tel Aviv apartment. Shahar asks a befriended author to voluntarily write his grandfather's biography, and from that moment onwards scandalous old family secrets that were concealed during the Holocaust are revealed one by one in Tel Aviv, New York, Warsaw, and Frankfurt by his friends, family members, his business rivals, and even by a Neo-Nazi millionaire. At the end of the story, Menashe Shahar understands the impact of the Holocaust on his family and business, therefore he cannot continue with his former life – keeping the publishing house to himself – so he decides to sell it to Morgenstern's secret daughter, a Holocaust survivor, and moves to New York to live a rich man's life with his cousin's widow.

Another example of a very high literate protagonist can be found in Yishai Sarid's novella *Mifletzet Ha-Zikaron* [The memory monster].<sup>28</sup> Its protagonist (and first-person narrator) is a young Israeli father who holds a PhD in Holocaust history. Working as a tour guide in Poland, mainly with Israeli high school students, he suddenly finds himself in the middle of an identity crisis. He does not believe anymore that the Holocaust and its atrocities are locked in the past and he assumes that with the "right" form of thinking everyone can be a Nazi. At a certain moment, he is arrested and accused on the ground of plotting a violent crime against a German producer and an old woman, after which he writes a letter to his employer, the Yad Vashem chairman, to explain his behavior "for memory." The main trigger for his instable condition – and of his transformation into a monstrous predator – is activated when he accompanies a group of German filmmakers to Auschwitz-Birkenau and suddenly gets fired because they do not need to see more horror to understand. The narrator identifies himself as a soldier, but he is not aware of his post-traumatic state, which raises his hidden and dark drives, and creates a monstrous new ethical and behavioral mirror image of his former self.

Another post-traumatic memory that unveils the dark Holocaust secrets of a man with high literacy capacities is found in Gil Ilutowich's fourth novel, *Ochlay Ha-Gehalim* [The coal eaters].<sup>29</sup> Mordechai-Marek Greenstein is a non-talkative Holocaust survivor from a neighborhood close to Ramat-Gan. He used to work as an archive librarian, but is also an exceptional writer of

28 Yishai Sarid, *The Memory Monster*, trans. Yardenne Greenspan (New York: Restless Books, 2020). It was first published in Hebrew in 2017 as title number 752 of SIFRIYA LA'AM in Am Oved publishing house under the Hebrew name מַפְלֶצֶת הַזִּכְרוֹן, MIFLETZET HA-ZIKARON.

29 Gil Ilutowich, אוֹכְלֵי הַגֶּהָלִים [OCHLAY HA-GEHALIM, The Coal Eaters] (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 2009).

letters. In order to celebrate his “freedom,” the freshly retired Greenstein decides to join an Israeli organized tour to the Island of Bali. During this exotic tour, Mordechai turns back to his Polish name Marek and falls in love with Dora Blum, an Israeli Holocaust survivor from Budapest. Overwhelmed by his renewed emotions, the colors, the smells and the views, including that of people eating coal, the lead character is increasingly confronted with resurfacing traumatic memories. The dark and ambivalent role he played during the Holocaust starts haunting him, yet he keeps this shameful secret to himself, for no one knows he was a Kapo. Afterwards, in Israel, he continues his relationship with Dora, who is preparing herself to the upcoming marriage of her son. Marek feels uncomfortable with Dora because of his dishonorable past and his sudden understanding that as a Kapo he had ill-treated Dora’s late husband. In the final scene, Moishe Ziecher, the future bride’s father, recognizes Marek from Warsaw and addresses him by his Yiddish name – Mottel. Moishe wants to hit Marek twice, not only because Marek bullied him in Warsaw before the war, but also because on the train from Majdanek to Auschwitz the Kapo Mottel selected him to work and saved him from the “Gaz.” The novel ends with Moishe saying: “Come on, Mottel, [...] There is no time. We have kids to marry.”<sup>30</sup> At the very end of the novel, maybe due to his new romantic engagement with Dora, Marek’s tormented self-identity as a Kapo is settled, as he understands that he is a Holocaust survivor as Dora, Moishe and many other Jewish victims.

Another (final) example of a literate protagonist and the impact of post-memory on the lead character’s survival can be found in Zehava Kor’s young adult novel *Mispar* [Number].<sup>31</sup> The book is an important example for this discussion, because the protagonist is a woman, Rivtzuk, a Holocaust survivor and an autobiographer who joins Yad Vashem’s Israeli high school delegations to Auschwitz. This time, according to Yad Vashem’s administration, she is expected to go to Auschwitz with her granddaughter’s class. Rivtzuk’s son – the father of her granddaughter – is against the whole idea, and for the first time in his life, he tells Rivtzuk, his beloved mother, that her obsession with Holocaust testimony, writing and delegations, literally kills him. As a result, at the end, it is Rivtzuk who gets a heart attack and nearly dies. She is hospitalized and only then the scope and the implications of her testimonial Holocaust works are finally revealed to her family members. *Number* too has an open ending, as it combines the prospect of the beloved grandmother Rivtzuk’s healing and coming back home with her family members’ understanding

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 286.

<sup>31</sup> Zehava Kor, *MISPAR* [Number] (Tel Aviv: Yediot Books, 2015).



that her most important *raison d'être* has been – in a paradoxical way – her Holocaust testimonies and writings.

Looking at gender issues in these examples, an interesting pattern rises to the surface. The nexus between literacy and Holocaust survivor interactions wraps up differently in cases of female protagonists when compared with their male counterparts. In stories featuring female lead characters, the main conflict is typically resolved and so is the protagonist's obsession to testify or fabricate memories and stories. In *Wedding Pictures*, Elka not only wishes to build for herself a new home, but she also wants to make Maya a part of her new Israeli family (combined with old Polish cuisine). Dvory in *Corner People*, for her part, wants to buy a computer, which comes to serve as a symbol of modern life freed from the Holocaust. In Zehava Kor's *Number*, Rivtzuk wants to heal and move to an elderly village. The traditional role of 'home' is typically associated with motherhood and womanhood, but in the texts under discussion, this trope is used to incubate the protagonist's new identity. Hence, one may say that the female lead character's home is equal to an Israeli womb from which the protagonist is reborn with purified Israeli powers. In *Dormant Account*, *The Memory Monster*, and *The Coal Eaters*, on the other hand, the male protagonist leaves his allegedly safe and protective home to realize that he is actually possessed by demonic thoughts (Shahar pays a visit to Frankfurt, while the historian in *Memory Monster* relocates to Warsaw and Mordechai/Marek travels to see the coal eaters in Bali). Consequently, the male lead character experiences a significant degree of anxiety and fear. Shahar and Marek understand that they have to accept their dark shameful past, while the historian in Gil Ilutowich's novel loses his mind while becoming the monster himself. It seems that while the female characters become a better variation of themselves, the male characters – for a short time or permanently – become the evil ones.

### **From Death to Re-birth: Home as a Camp versus Home as an Incubator**

Looking closer into the particular role of spatiality in *Wedding Pictures* and *Corner People*, it should be noted that both Elka and Dvory live alone in typical Israeli apartment buildings from the mid-twentieth century in two of the largest cities in Israel. However, the two women are presented as detached from their immediate neighbors. In *Wedding Pictures*, to begin with, Elka is safe with her door locks and her calculated visits to the hair stylist and the grocery. Her tiny apartment in Ramat Gan is the first place she refers to as "home" in her adult life. She is not afraid to go outside on foot, and sometimes she even likes getting around by bus, but she often feels herself a stranger, especially when she comes across young mothers with their babies. The sudden appearance of

the young man, Israel Stollar's allegedly other son, at her doorstep is the sole event that enables the almost subservient past to threaten her again, initiating her voyage toward the mysterious old man:

A decision flashes in her mind, she must go, for so many years she has imagined this meeting, and always postponed it because of sorrow, rage, and insult. But now it seems that there is no other time. She is going to go, yes, despite everything she is going to go – today.<sup>32</sup>

Elka's decision to leave home at the end of the first chapter is a direct response to the strange young man's surprising visit, but it is also an indirect response to a random street view of a mother with her toddler playing in a sand box in the neighborhood's playground. The Israeli sand box reminds Elka of the burial of her baby in Poland, "in the other world" in her words. When Elka reaches the home of the dying Israel Stollar, she observes an unfamiliar look in his blue eyes. Therefore, the only thing she asks him is whether his place is for sale, and then she goes back home with Maya, while promising her a detailed explanation in her typical broken Hebrew: "I will tell you my home, now, no time, we must take bus back home."<sup>33</sup> The main conflict in *Wedding Pictures* is practically resolved at the very end, when Elka adopts the civilian status of "Elka Stollar, a widow, a single mother, a Holocaust survivor" that was given to her by the Jewish Agency upon her arrival to Israel.<sup>34</sup> Although this identity was offered to her more than three decades ago, only after her current eye-to-eye contact with her supposedly dead husband Israel Stollar, she realizes that he does not recognize her at all. Only then she accepts the widow-single-mother-Holocaust-survivor identity. Elka looks at the ideal past she could have had with Israel Stollar and their son: she was not a Kibbutznik and did not have many children. Yet, by adopting the war widow Maya as her Israeli daughter, she wholeheartedly embraces her new Israeli being along with her Jewish-Polish legacy. Quite symbolically, Elka miscalls Maya by naming her Mia. In Hebrew Maya implies both the month of May and the Aramaic word for water. The name Mia, for its part, has also two meanings, which are opposed to each other. One literal translation of Mia in Hebrew is "Who is [MI] God [YAH]?" which is a very loaded question in the context of the Holocaust. The other translation works in the same way, but has a different meaning: "From [MI<MIN] God [YAH<YEHOUAH]", in other words a divine

32 Gil Ilutovich, *Tmunot Hatuna*, 16.

33 Ibid., 212.

34 Ibid., 10.

gift. Since Elka is not religious, we may assume that Maya is a sort of a gift for Elka, a savior for golden years.

In *Corner People*, Dvory encages herself voluntarily at her old family home in Haifa, running away from her substitute teaching duties, although she knows that her home is full of hurting memories and death. She had been forced to leave her family home only once, for two years, during her military service, after which she left it voluntarily only for short periods of time, while trying to make a living in the "Big City" of Tel Aviv.

Like in the case of Elka in *Wedding Pictures*, Dvory's daily writing routine is broken by a *force majeure*. A neighbor of her beloved aunt Esther is worried about her and calls her father, so her father goes to Esther's place but never returns home. It takes Dvory a day to decide that she has to go to her aunt's apartment in order to look for them. Like Elka, on the very next day, Dvory takes a bus to her destination, her aunt's apartment. However, the familiar trajectory from her parent's place to her aunt's house along the busy streets of Haifa seems sad, as in a funeral. There, at her aunt's place, the shocked Dvory discovers the body of her aunt and her dying father. Esther is all dressed up in her double bed in her fancy bedroom, and Dvory's father is barely alive in the bathroom, after his fall while trying to hide Esther/*Fraulein Böll's* erotic novels in the bathroom's "Boidem" (the Yiddish name for an attic).<sup>35</sup>

I was the only mourner at Esther-nayni's funeral. The man from the burial society summoned his workers from other funerals to make up the quorum of ten men for reciting the *kaddish*. I opened drawers, rummaged in boxes; I climbed up to the overhead storage closet with the aid of the same ladder Father had used. I found typed pages in Hungarian. I found the paint-spattered book, with only its title still legible: *Fraulein Böll*. I sat on her bed, where I had found her. Now I would never know her secrets. Only questions remained. Had she been a spy? Was that her alias: *Fraulein Böll*? If she was a spy, who had she worked for? The Russians? The Americans? The British? Perhaps she had been the mistress of a high-ranking Nazi officer, just as a cover story? Or a partisan, a resistance fighter trying to save the doomed? Or a slut who had seen to her own needs, she was eighteen years old, so beautiful, perhaps she had taken on a false identity in order to survive? Or perhaps none of these? Did she have a baby with a Nazi officer? Or with a secret Jewish lover? Did she leave him behind? Maybe she never had a child?<sup>36</sup>

35 As mentioned before, an extensive version of Dvory's father's love story and his life story is given in Hayim, *SID*.

36 Hayim, *Anshei Pinot*, chapter "XVIII."

Esther's apartment was always a mysterious place in Dvory's eyes, but her old family home is her only "home" in which she has been hiding from the Nazis since her early childhood, but from which she could never escape; therefore, she believes, she is becoming an alcoholic:

Everything comes to an end. Even a bottle of Arak.  
My alcohol life offers an escape, but I don't know where or from whom I'm running. Perhaps I'm escaping *to* the writing of the story, not *from* it. [...] The danger of escaping is getting to a place that's much more frightening.<sup>37</sup>

In the end, after the death of her last relatives – except for Dvory's brother – Dvory takes care of the dying jackal at home. This is the first time she does not want to escape anymore. But it also is the first time that she is involved in a true violent event (being attacked either by the jackal or by her hostile neighbors). She serves her grandmother's best Hungarian dishes to the jackal, and believes it is waiting for her to feed him in the children's room; along with the cooking she switches to a silent mode:

Thus began the days of silence that marked my adulthood. Compared to the noise of my childhood, the silence was alternately soft and consoling or hard and indifferent.<sup>38</sup>

At the closure of both novels, the lead characters Elka and Dvory use their diasporic cuisine and their relatives' death to overcome their foreign identity and come closer to the common notion of Israeliness. But there is a difference between the two women: while Elka builds for herself a new Israeli future based on the possibility of a new alternative family, Dvory stays alone; her decision to withdraw the Olivetti typewriter is equal to the decision to stop writing, which is a death sentence for such a verbal person as herself. The ending sentence of *Corner People* that cites Dvory's thoughts ("Maybe I'll buy a computer after all.")<sup>39</sup> is an open ending; Dvory's future depends on the interpretation by the reader: is it the creation of a new life (and life story) or just the last thought of a lost person?<sup>40</sup>

37 Ibid., chapter "XIII."

38 Ibid., chapter "XVIII."

39 Ibid., chapter "XVIII."

40 One can find a small hint for an optimistic closure based on the chapter's number "XVIII" (18) is "יח" in Hebrew gematria, meaning "alive."

## Conclusion

*Wedding Pictures* and *Corner People* illustrate a new Holocaust survivor type within Hebrew literature at large, and within Israeli fiction in particular. The lead character is a person who survived the Holocaust with or without a direct contact with Nazi atrocities and whose entire existence revolves around escaping from the Nazi Hell. While the common Israeli sociohistorical terminology of the Holocaust survivor regards the survivor as a person that was probably born in Europe before the War, the new Israeli fiction undermines these spatiotemporal features and foregrounds a variety of Holocaust survivor protagonists: some are born in Europe before "the War" and some are born in Israel years after Second World War had ended.

As was discussed on this article, there are various *ad-hoc* narrative reasons for adopting a false survivor identity or re-adopting an unwanted one in current Israeli fiction about the Holocaust. Most of the protagonists, as Elka and Dvory, need the 'survivor' identity as a justification for reopening personal/marital/national past secrets, in their autobiographic journey of achieving a peaceful closure for their life story.

In the end, Elka Stollar, the protagonist of *Wedding Pictures*, liberates herself from all the pains of the past (her unhappy marriage with Israel Stollar, her suffering during the Holocaust, her loneliness) while she gladly takes on the identity of a Holocaust widow. Quite the opposite happens at the end of *Corner People*, when Dvory Stern wonders for the first time in her life about the possibility of going outside her cagy home (to buy a computer) and doing something else rather than relive the "no escape" Holocaust labyrinthian memories. Similar are the other protagonists from the additional texts in this article: all recognize in themselves the identity of the survivor and find a considerate solution for the rest of their lives (all except for the protagonist and first-person narrator of *The Memory Monster* who loses his mind).

Yet we should not disregard the fact that Holocaust surviving in Israeli fictional works becomes more than a historic testimony; the Holocaust is no longer a matter of family memories but a pan-Israeli issue based on collective memories; hence the Mizrahi historian in *The Memory Monster* can transform himself first into a victim and then into a "victimizer," and then turn, as a result of his deep understanding of the Nazi plan, into an insane perpetrator.

This protagonists' new identity can happen only now, in the 2020s, when not only the second generation but also the third generation is growing old. The fictional works discussed here bring to the surface an authentic painful voice of Israeli-born authors who transfer "facts" into "fiction" and vice versa. Their ability to play with truths of surviving is their greatest narrative power to create a story out of history, hence, to create a Holocaust survivor in

order to emotionally deliver the “never forget” past to a twenty-first century readership.

## Abstract

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*The Creation of a “Survivor” in Contemporary Israeli Holocaust Novels*

This article focuses on contemporary Hebrew fiction about the Holocaust and investigates how protagonists who belong to the second and the third generation identify themselves as “authentic” Holocaust survivors. As a result of this adopted identity and the misconception of reality that goes along with it, the relations between victims and perpetrators become fluid. While most of the protagonists embrace the faked fate of being a Holocaust victim, others fashion themselves as monstrous individuals or Nazis. While looking into the collective memory of the Shoah in twenty-first century Israel, this article seeks to provide an explanation for these literary developments.

## Keywords

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Holocaust fiction; contemporary Israeli fiction; Holocaust survivor (in fiction); woman protagonist; self-identity (in fiction)

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Yuliya Ilchuk

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## The Multidirectional Turn in the Literature about Holocaust in Post-Euromaidan Ukraine (On the Material of Sofia Andrukhovych's *Amadoka*)

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TEKSTY DRUGIE 2024, NR 1, S. 125–142

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DOI: 10.18318/td.2024.en.1.8

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**H**olocaust remembrance has become a “contemporary entry ticket” for the recent East European members to the European Union, with Ukraine being no exception.<sup>1</sup> Although Jewish Studies programs, research institutions, and Holocaust memorial centers have been created in Ukraine since 1991, the development of the Holocaust studies have proceeded relatively slowly due to the phenomenon of competing victimhood, which treats the Ukrainian victims by Bolsheviks and Jewish victims by Nazis as rivals.<sup>2</sup> The official discourse of the national

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1 Tony Judt, *Postwar: A History of Europe Since 1945* (New York: Penguin Group, 2006), 803.

2 This issue has been studied by Tarik Cyril Amar, “A Disturbed Silence: Discourse on the Holocaust in the Soviet West as an Anti-site of Memory,” in *The Holocaust in the East: Local Perpetrators and Soviet Responses*, ed. Michael David-Fox, Peter Holquist and Alexander M. Martin (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2014); Sarah Fainberg, “Memory at the Margins: The Shoah in Ukraine,” in *History, Memory and Politics in Central and Eastern Europe: Memory Games*, ed. Georges Mink and Laure Neumayer (Houndmills, Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013); Wilfried Jilge, “Competing Victimhoods – Post-Soviet Ukrainian Narratives on World War II,” in *Shared History – Divided Memory*:

memory in post-Soviet Ukraine before 2014 followed the one established in Poland and Baltic countries: it portrayed Ukraine as a victim of both totalitarian regimes, Nazi and communist. Only recently scholars have emphasized that when studying the history of the Holocaust and Communism in Eastern Europe, one needs to avoid putting them into the framework of a symmetry theory or of comparative martyrology. "Victimhood locks the identity in question into a discourse that focuses on past suffering, on a unique suffering, but offers a clarity of identity by delimiting it very emphatically from others in the same political or territorial space, by attempting to transcend both."<sup>3</sup> While the Holocaust has found its way in Ukraine's public memory after the publication of Anatoly Kuznetsov's *Babi Yar: A Document in the Form of a Novel* (1966),<sup>4</sup> it remained marginalized in a way that does not undermine the image of the suffering Ukrainian people.<sup>5</sup> Scholars have also pointed to the objective factors in Eastern Europe's, and in particular, in Ukraine's relative disinterest in the Holocaust. John-Paul Himka has noted the almost complete absence of Jews across Eastern Europe.<sup>6</sup> The "shield memory" of the Holocaust was mostly the product of the Soviet policy of silencing the fact of Jews mass murders. Furthermore, because most of the witnesses died, emigrated, or given up on telling what they knew, in the public memory of Ukraine, the Holocaust remains a distant event that happened to people who are vanished from the national memory.<sup>7</sup> It could be said that the memory of the Holocaust

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*Jews and Others in Soviet-Occupied Poland, 1939–1941*, ed. Elazar Barkan, Elizabeth A. Cole and Kai Struve (Leipzig: Leipziger Universitätsverlag, 2008); Anna Chebotarova, "Collective Memory of the Holocaust in Post-Soviet Ukraine," in *The Burden of the Past: History, Memory, and Identity in Contemporary Ukraine*, ed. Anna Wylęgała and Małgorzata Głowacka-Grajper (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2020).

- 3 George Schopflin, *The Dilemmas of Identity* (Tallinn: Tallinn University Press, 2010), 102.
- 4 Anatoly Kuznetsov, "Babi Yar. Roman-dokument," *Iunost* 8–9 (1996).
- 5 Aleksandra Ubertowska, "'Spectral Stories': Fictional Re-Inventions of the Holocaust in Polish Literature," *After Memory: World War II in Contemporary Eastern European Literatures*, ed. Matthias Schwartz, Nina Weller, and Heike Winkel (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2021), 372.
- 6 John-Paul Himka, "Obstacles to the Integration of the Holocaust into Post-Communist East European Historical Narratives," *Canadian Slavonic Papers* 50 (3/4) (September–December 2008): 359–72.
- 7 The Ukrainian sociologist Anna Chebotarova has conducted an in-depth qualitative survey of the memory of the Holocaust on a national level and in local communities (Zolochiv, Vyzhnitsya, and Balta where the mass-killings of Jews took place) and come to conclusion that this memory has been "very eclectic and fragmented." The scholar has defined this type of memory as a "shield memory," which points at "the voids in awareness about



in Ukraine still exists in what Primo Levi defined as the “grey zone” of extreme moral ambiguity.<sup>8</sup> Although Levi used this idea to describe the moral concession of Jews in concentration and extermination camps, the “grey zone” can be applied to any decisions that an occupied populace is forced to make in order to survive. For Western Ukrainians, the price exacted was collaboration with the SS, including the killing of their Jewish neighbors. Just as the Jewish revolt of 1943 was obscured from the Polish national memory by the Warsaw ghetto uprising of 1944, so the Buczacz massacre of the Jews in which elements of the local populace played a key role was obscured by the national-liberation struggle against both Nazis and Soviets.

Ukrainian prose fiction about the Holocaust has had a long and troubled history because of the Soviet policy of silencing the tragedy of Ukrainian Jews. One of the first fictional narratives – Olha Duchyminska’s novella *Eti* (1945)<sup>9</sup> – depicted the fate of a Jewish woman hiding out in a Ukrainian village after the 1941 pogrom in Lviv. The novel was condemned by Soviet critics and never reprinted in the USSR; its author was falsely accused and sentenced to 25 years in a labor camp. The next novel to appear, *Khreshchatyi yar: roman-khronika* (Khreshchatyk Ravine: Novel-Chronicle, 1941–1943)<sup>10</sup> by Dokia Humenna, was published in the United States in 1956 and remained unknown to the Soviet audience until the 1990s. The novel chronicled 788 days in the life of Marianna (an alter ego of the author) in occupied Kyiv, providing an idiosyncratic account of changing attitudes among locals towards the Nazis. The novel presented subjective opinions and rumors of the residents relayed by the protagonist-narrator. Being both anti-Soviet and anti-Nazi simultaneously, Humenna rejected the narrow conception of the nation and criticized the nationalist ideology of the OUN during the war.<sup>11</sup> She captured the tragic

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Jewish history as well as uncomfortable topics” which “are overlaid or ‘shielded’ with the projection of people’s own biographical experiences and more comfortable versions of the past that do not threaten the positive image of a we-group from which Jews are still largely excluded.” (“Collective Memory of the Holocaust in Post-Soviet Ukraine,” 184–185).

8 Towards the end of *The Drowned and The Saved*, Primo Levi introduces the concept of a “grey zone,” which may symbolize the moral compromise that many desperate prisoners were forced to make to buy themselves more time. The price exacted was collaboration with the SS, up to and including the murder of their fellow prisoners.

9 Olha Duchyminska, *Eti* (Lviv: Vilna Ukra na, 1945).

10 Dokia Humenna, *Khreshchatyi yar: roman-khronika* (New York: Slovo, 1956).

11 Although the OUN’s ideology did not advocate antisemitism and racism, many of the OUN members who infiltrated the German police were involved in clearing ghettos and helping the Germans to implement the Final Solution of the Jewish Question. For further reading see Martin Dean, *Collaboration in the Holocaust: Crimes of the Local Police in Be-*

fate of the Kyivan Jews as unique and, for the first time, mentioned the role of Ukrainians as witnesses, bystanders, and perpetrators of the crimes against Jews. Only with the publication of Anatoly Kuznetsov's *Babi Yar* in 1966 (although with significant editorial cuts), the Soviet audience learned about the history of the Holocaust in Kyiv. Despite a few positive initial reviews, the novel was viciously attacked by the critics who discerned in it a deliberate singling out of Jewish victims over other Soviet people during Second World War. This attitude was symptomatic during the 1960s, given the late Stalinist campaign against "cosmopolitanism" (that was overtly anti-Semitic) and the revival of the Russian nationalist discourse concerning the Great Patriotic War which glorified the suffering of Russians in the war and thus denied the Jewish character of Babyn Yar.

During the late Soviet period, the topic of the Holocaust remained under-represented due to the Communist party's directive to avoid national particularism. Only after 1991 with the opening of KGB archives and relaxing of the censorship Ukrainian authors began researching and writing about the Jewish tragedy. In post-Soviet Ukrainian literature, the Jewish theme gradually entered a literary discourse preoccupied with issues of otherness, diversity, national identity, and trauma. Ukrainian women writers have included events of the Holocaust in the form of the stories of rescuing Jews in their historical novels.<sup>12</sup> Overall, in the Ukrainian prose fiction published between 1991 and 2021 the topic of the Holocaust has appeared in about one-third of the historical fiction about the war.<sup>13</sup> As the number of the historical novels has doubled since the Revolution of Dignity in 2014, the ratio of the Holocaust literature has proportionally increased too. After 2014, literary methods and plots dealing with the Holocaust has become more inclusive, ambivalent, and multidirectional, demonstrating the transition of the Ukrainian society from the ethno-linguistic concept of nationhood to the idea of Ukraine as

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*Iorussia and Ukraine, 1941–1944* (New York: Palgrave, 2000); John-Paul Himka, *Ukrainian Nationalists and the Holocaust: OUN and UPA's Participation in the Destruction of Ukrainian Jewry, 1941–1944* (Stuttgart: ibidem-Verlag, 2021).

12 In contemporary Ukrainian literature, the theme of the Holocaust is especially popular among women writers, such as Larysa Denysenko's *Vidlunnia: vid zahybloho dida do pomerloho* (Kharkiv: Knyzhkovyi klub "Klub simeinoho dozvillia," 2012); Maria Matios, *Cherevychyky Bozho Mari* (Kyiv: Piramida, 2013); Tetyana Pakhomova, *Ia, ty i nash maliovan-nyi i nemalyovannyi Boh* (Kharkiv: Knyzhkovyi klub "Klub simeinoho dozvillia," 2016); Raisa Plotnikova, "V iaru zhasaiuchykh zirok" (Poltava: Tov ASMI, 2010); Oksana Zabuzhko, *Muzei pokynutykh sekretiv* (Kyiv: Komora, 2009).

13 Anna Chebotarova, "Mediating a Dissonant Past: Holocaust in Post-Soviet Fiction in Ukraine." A paper presented at the ASN Convention, NYC, 2015.

a political. This change can be partially attributed to the literary development of the Holocaust literature by non-Jewish Ukrainian writers, who discovered an unexpected affinity between the suffering of Ukrainians during the ongoing war with Russia and that of Jews during Second World War. For example, Marianna Kiyanovs'ka has called among the reasons for writing her cycle of poetry *The Voices of Babyn Yar* (2017)<sup>14</sup> her own engagement in volunteer activities in East Ukraine during 2014–2016 and her near-death experience on the front line.<sup>15</sup> Apparently, life under the signs of loss and destruction during Second World War resonates acutely with the current losses during Russia's invasion of Ukraine, with the displacement of refugees, with collaborationism of the local population with the Russian authorities in occupied territory; and with stigmatization of those who stay in occupied territory as "enemies." Obviously, the war not only dismembers the nation but also unites it around a common project directed toward creating the usable past for the future project of restoration of the society after the war. Similar survival tactics under the Polish, Nazi, and Soviet regimes had united the community in Ukraine during Second World War. The acknowledgment of traumas experienced by all members of the community involved in multi-sided military conflicts has shaped the memory landscapes in Ukraine, enabling the artists to revise the traditional division of the community into "victims," "perpetrators," and "participants" from the position of the implicated subject. Thus, in the contemporary Ukrainian literature about the Holocaust the diachronic (historical) dimension of the national memory has intersected with synchronic (contemporary) structure of identity-formation of Ukrainians as a political nation, divesting the previously polar opposition of "victim" vs. "perpetrator" of its categorical meaning and challenging the moral universalism prevalent in the Holocaust studies.

This paper examines the memory work in Sofia Andrukhovych's novel *Amadoka* (2020),<sup>16</sup> exhibited in a kaleidoscopic narrative world with both victims', passers-by, and perpetrators' points of view intertwining in an "implicated subject" position. My reading of Andrukhovych's novel is informed by Michael Rothberg's concepts of the "implicated subject" and "multidirectional memory" which capture the interference, overlap, and mutual constitution of

14 Marianna Kiyanovs'ka, *Babyn Iar. Holosamy* (Kyiv: Dukh i Litera, 2017).

15 The poet speaks about this experience in her interview "Holosy Babynoho Iaru ozhyly u poezi Mar'iany Kiyanovs'ko" on March 7, 2020, accessed May 2, 2024, <https://www.radiosvoboda.org/a/30473973.html>.

16 Sofia Andrukhovych, *Amadoka* (Kyiv: Vydavnytstvo Staroho Leva, 2020).

the seemingly distinct collective memories.<sup>17</sup> The model of multidirectional memory presented in *Amadoka* marks a drastic break from the nationally centered idea of the historical memory of the Second World War, by creating a more complex dynamics of remembrance and forgetting. The novel unfolds the tragedy of Jews during the massacre in Buczacz as communal, which can be represented only through a polyphonic act of remembrance happening on a shared, but uneven terrain. Sofia Andrukhovych's approach to the history of the Holocaust was shaped by several sources: Omer Bartov's monograph *Anatomy of Genocide: The Life and Death of Town Called Buczacz* (2018)<sup>18</sup>; Philippe Sands's historical memoir *East West Street: On the Origins of Genocide and Crimes Against Humanity* (2017)<sup>19</sup>; essays about the Holocaust in Poland written by the Polish journalist Hanna Krall<sup>20</sup>; W. G. Sebald's novel *Austerlitz* (2001),<sup>21</sup> and Imre Kertész's novel *Fatelessness* (1975)<sup>22</sup>. Of these diverse sources, Bartov's microhistory study of the Holocaust in Buczacz influenced Andrukhovych's<sup>23</sup> multiperspective narration in the novel the most. Bartov's earlier monograph *Erased: Vanishing Traces of Jewish Galicia in Present-Day Ukraine* (2007)<sup>24</sup> has been received very critically by most historians both in Ukraine and in the West. In his recent monograph *Anatomy of a Genocide*, Bartov has revised his approach from singling out the unsystematic cases of Ukrainians' collaborationism with Nazis to giving voice to various agents of the tragic event. Delving into the history of interwar tension between Jews, Poles, and Ukrainians; of Polish and

17 Michael Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* (Stanford, C.A.: Stanford University Press, 2009); Michael Rothberg, *The Implicated Subject: Beyond Victims and Perpetrators* (Stanford, C.A.: Stanford University Press, 2019).

18 Omer Bartov, *Anatomy of Genocide: The Life and Death of Town Called Buczacz* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2018).

19 Philippe Sands, *East West Street: On the Origins of Genocide and Crimes Against Humanity* (New York: Vintage Books, 2017).

20 Hanna Krall, *The Woman from Hamburg: and Other True Stories*, trans. Madeline G. Levine (New York: Other Press, LLC, 2012).

21 Winfried Georg Sebald, *Austerlitz*, trans. Anthea Bell (New York: Modern Library / Random House, 2001).

22 Imre Kertész, *Sorstalanság* (Budapest: Szépirodalmi Könyvkiadó, 1975)

23 Sofia Andrukhovych, "Koly liudyna povertae sobi spohady, vona povertae sobi sebe" [When a person recovers her memories, she restores her sense of self], accessed March 2, 2022, [https://lb.ua/culture/2020/04/01/454180\\_sofiya\\_andruhovich\\_koli\\_lyudina.html](https://lb.ua/culture/2020/04/01/454180_sofiya_andruhovich_koli_lyudina.html).

24 Omer Bartov, *Erased: Vanishing Traces of Jewish Galicia in Present-Day Ukraine* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007).

Ukrainian nationalism; of the successive Soviet deportations of Poles and Jews; and of the Nazis' "Final Solution," the scholar shows how in a tightly knit community the "intimacy of friendships" was quickly transformed into the "intimacy of violence."<sup>25</sup> In Buczacz, according to Bartov, the genocide of the Jews was not only organized by the central perpetrator forces, Nazis, but also happened spontaneously, on the spot, performed by the Jews' long-time Polish and Ukrainian neighbors. Bartov discerns some random patterns of rescuing Jews after the organized extermination, when "protectors" could become abusers or perpetrators – rescuers, depending on life-threatening circumstances. Thus, Bartov significantly altered the conclusions of his first book on the genocide in Buczacz by foregrounding the ambivalence of goodness. One of the most important contributions of Bartov's works to the study of the Holocaust is his examination of the mechanisms how the collective trauma of the war selectively repressed dark episodes of Jews' genocide. The arbitrary remembering and selective forgetting of the past by passers-by and witnesses, according to Bartov, binds them in a certain mnemonic community and ensures the continuity of social memory.

In *Amadoka*, the writer gives voice to all parties involved in the Buczacz tragedy – perpetrators, victims, local participants, and eyewitnesses. But as a novelist, Andrukhovych also uses a range of artistic devices and narrative strategies to capture the tragedy from the bottom-up way: Biblical metaphors and hidden literary subtexts, alternating focalization, dispersion of narrative authority among multiple narrative voices, unreliable narration, and photographic ekphrasis. In the literary representation of the communal trauma in *Amadoka*, two concepts from memory studies – dismemory and postmemory – work hand in hand. The former describes the ability of people involved on opposite sides of deadly violence to forget; the latter captures the urge of the communities to remember. In the process of communities' recovering from a traumatic experience the role of storytelling in facilitating both forgetting and remembering is crucial. As Andrukhovych has commented on the function of storytelling:

*Amadoka* is a novel not so much about historical events as about telling stories. What is important here is not historical facts, not their authenticity, but an attempt to clarify how we treat our own and other people's memories of events and experiences. Storytelling is one of the mechanisms of protecting a weak, fragile, and sensitive person torn apart by circumstances, by the power of other people, and by his/her own weaknesses. Creating a story is weaving one's own version of

25 Omer Bartov, *Anatomy of a Genocide: The Life and Death of a Town Called Buczacz* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2018), 95.

the world, fractured as much as the weaver himself/herself. A human being seeks his/her own integrity by creating a myth. A myth about oneself, about one's loves and sins, about one's guilt and virtue, about the world and its laws. And this verbal weaving has so many meanings, so many reasons for its appearance: it softens and protects, explains and fills in, evens sharp edges, hides the destructive truth, and communicates the truth in a way that may finally be accepted [by society – author's note], in a way that makes it less destructive... Storytelling unites people, connects the subjects of history, near and far, the narrator and the audience. Storytelling is an expression of love. *Amadoka* is a novel about how everyone needs and seeks love, and about how confusing the path of the search can be.<sup>26</sup>

The writer understands storytelling not so much as a fictional representation of the past, but as a powerful tool of intergenerational communication. The process of remembering becomes a process of communicating through the medium of storytelling, which establishes what Homi Bhabha called “the pact of interpretation” which “is never simply an act of communication between the I and the You,” but a way of telling for and through oneself.<sup>27</sup> Literary discourse has a special ability to communicate trauma that non-literary language does not. “Direct” representation of trauma in historically objective accounts cannot fully capture trauma's effect on human psyche; it deadens us to survivors' horrifying experiences.<sup>28</sup> The historians (Hartman, LaCapra, Hilberg) agree that although nonliterary accounts can record traumatic experience with detailed accuracy, they cannot directly communicate trauma. But literature can evoke loss even if that loss is inarticulable and muted.<sup>29</sup>

In a complex interwoven narrative that comprises first-person accounts of eyewitnesses, third-person intradiegetic narration, verbal photography, and docufiction, Andrukhovych tests the limits of the narrative representation of

26 Mark Livin, “Pam'iat' i zabuttia. Pro shcho nova velyka knyha Sofi Andrukhovych – poiasniuie avtorka,” accessed May 2, 2024, <https://www.the-village.com.ua/village/knowledge/book-of-the-week/295665-pro-scho-nova-velika-kniga-sofiyi-andruhovich-amadoka-poyasnyue-sama-avtorka>.

27 Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 2004), 53.

28 Cathy Caruth and Geoffrey Hartman, “An Interview with Geoffrey Hartman,” *Studies in Romanticism* 35 (4) (1996): 647.

29 Hartman's use of the Greek myth of Philomela perfectly illustrates the power of artistic imagery in the expression of trauma. In Greek mythology (notably as told by Ovid), Philomela, daughter of the legendary king of Athens Pandion, was raped by her brother-in-law Tereus. He cut out her tongue so that she could not tell others about the rape. Unable to speak, Philomela wove a tapestry depicting the violent act and asked an old woman to take it to her sister Procne who deciphered the story and rescued her.

trauma. One aspect of this involves showing the actual violence of the event and its rippling traumatic effect, another – revealing the epistemic violence that often structures the way the traumatic event is represented, or suppressed, by official narrative. The writer shifts the focus from the ethics and limits of representation to the constitutive role of imagination in representing the Holocaust to the communities that did not retain memory of it.

### Narrative and Structure

The title of the novel – *Amadoka* – refers to the biggest lake in Europe, that presumably existed on European maps until the seventeenth century. It was located in the lower estuary of the Dniester River, that is, in Podolia, where the events of Part Two of the novel take place.<sup>30</sup> The legend of the vanished lake is introduced in the beginning of the novel by the Jewish boy Pinchas Birnbaum to his Ukrainian friend Uliana Frasuliak, the protagonists of Part Two. Pinchas genuinely believes that the lake existed in reality and that it either ran dry or sank into the earth during the neotectonic shifts that shaped the terrain of Podolia. In the symbolic system of the whole novel, the evaporated lake signifies simultaneously the vanished Jewish community of Buczacz, the destroyed culture of Ukrainian Modernism (which constitutes the plotline of Part Three), and the Ukrainians' loss of statehood in the 1920s. The motif of vanished, unreliable memory or memory-phantom runs through the entire novel resulting in the mythologization of the war as an event lost somewhere in the mists of time. Memory slips and gaps, like the vanished lake Amadoka, erase the collective responsibility for the crimes committed during the war, so only through the individual act of remembering the past can be restored and evaluated by the contemporary subject. The search for the truth of the family past by the contemporary protagonist "Bohdan," suffering from dissociative amnesia, structures the intricate plot

30 Amadoka appears on the maps created by Claudius Ptolemy in the second century AD, but not as the largest European lake but as marshland located in the lower course of the river Dnieper, and not in the estuary of the Dniester as depicted in the novel. Later cartographers debated the very existence of the lake (Vasilii Tatishchev, *The History of Russia from the Very Ancient Times* (Sanktpeterburg, 1768), 176) and proposed different versions of its "evaporation" among which the one that the lake was confused with either the Prypyat or Desna Rivers dominates. Some modern cartographers (Brown, Pogrebova) argue that the lake was situated in the lower course of the Dnieper – in Znamenskoe or Kamenskoe *gorodishche*, which was one of the earliest settlements of Scythians in the sixth century B.C. and the original location of the Zaporizhzhian Host in the sixteenth-eighteenth centuries. The shift eastward in the geographical location of the semi-legendary lake in the novel has more significance than the fact of its disappearance.

of the novel. The novel comprises two temporal planes. The first plotline (Parts One and Three) takes place in post-Euromaidan Ukraine and centers on the loss and recovery of memory of the wounded soldier deemed "Bohdan" through the storytelling of his "wife" Romana. The second plotline (Part Two) captures "Bohdan's" family history living through the war and the Holocaust in Buczacz; and the third plotline (the middle part of Part Three), written in the genre of docufiction, is dedicated to the different fates of Ukrainian modernist writers – Mykola Zerov and Victor Petrov/Domonovych – married to the same woman Sofia. Connected by many recurring motifs and images, the three parts feature three protagonists dealing with the aftereffects of trauma on their memory and identity. The protagonist of the first plotline, "Bohdan," survived the combat during the war in Donbas, but lost his memory. The protagonist of the second plotline, Bohdan's grandmother Uliana, survived Second World War but murdered her beloved Pinchas – a fact which she wants to erase from her memory. The protagonist of the third plotline, Sofia Zerova, has survived the death of her son and execution of her husband.

All the events in the first and second plotlines are narrated by the fictitious character-narrator Romana. As an archivist librarian, she deals with fragments of the historical documents gathering them into a coherent past, but she herself does not have a past, because, as her name suggests, she is the discourse itself. One day a man with the suitcases full of family papers and photo albums shows up in the archive. He is an archaeologist, Bohdan Kryvodiak, who wants to donate these materials to the archive before going to the war in Eastern Ukraine. Out of these photographs and letters Romana fabricates the family history of the Frasuliaks-Kryvodiaks and presents it to the amnesiac "Bohdan," whom she accidentally finds in the hospital and misrepresents to the authorities as her husband. The real Bohdan appears in the novel twice – in the beginning and briefly in the end – only to verify that the wounded warrior is not the real Bohdan. Thus, all the stories about Bohdan's family and Buczacz's tragedy are invented by Romana and recounted in her own words. By composing and arranging the events of "Bohdan's" past she replaces his lost episodic memory with a coherent narrative memory, which aimed to collect his Ukrainian identity from scratch, but in the end, it generated anamnesis and reconstructed his pro-Soviet identity. By restoring a connection to the past narrative memory evidently changes the present. The failure to invent "Bohdan's" memory in the act of storytelling underlines not only the whimsical working of memory but also the fact that preservation of the past is always already a reworking of what has been stored there. Viewed within the broader concept of social memory, the reconstruction of the Holocaust events in the historical consciousness is always an unfinished process.



This process at work is realized in the novel through a shifting focalization from one character to another in Part Two of the novel.

Each section of Part Two is presented by about twenty identifiable focalizers: Jewish victims (Pinchas, his parents, and sister) and their Ukrainian neighbors-witnesses (the Frasuliaks), Ukrainian policemen, nurses, fighters of the UPA, and so on. The exposition to the Buczacz chapters of Part Two is told from the perspective and through the voice of Romana. She questions her narrative authority with phrases like “probably,” “it seems to me,” “I can tell you very little about your parents...,” yet asserts control over the historical truth by narrative means. First, she openly acknowledges the limits of her own knowledge of the past, which creates an impression of self-reflexivity and prompts the reader into treating her story as reliable. Introducing the family photos to “Bohdan,” Romana follows a reverse chronological order: from the funeral of his grandmother Uliana back to her childhood during the pre-war and war-time periods. Thus, Romana establishes narrative authority by freely moving from more recent and verifiable events to more distant and obliterated from the family memory. Then, with the shifts in focalization to other actors of the Buczacz tragedy, Romana’s narrative authority is constantly challenged, which is projected further to show the fallibility of both the participants’ and perpetrators’ accounts of the Holocaust.

Unlike a historical account, the medium of literature can offer both an observation and reflection on the observing process. *Amadoka* offers a self- and meta-reflexive engagement with memory, both individual and historical. Readers must constantly connect some insignificant detail or event mentioned in the beginning of the novel with their occurrence later to understand the “butterfly effect.” Although proven as wrong in quantum physics, the butterfly effect is used in sociology to show that even the slightest change in a starting point can lead to greatly different results or outcomes. This effect appears in the episodes in with the knives used by Pinchas’s father Avel: in the beginning of Part Two as the tools for slaughtering cows so that they go through minimal suffering, and in the end of Part Two as a weapon which Uliana uses to immolate Pinchas. The “butterfly effect” is also evident in the motif of the forbidden love (from the point of view of a traditional patriarchal society) between a Jewish boy and a Ukrainian girl that causes a disruption of the social fabric in the local community and eventually leads to the suffering of the Jews during the Holocaust. The unspoken rules of a centuries-long co-existence of Jews and Christians are taught to Uliana by Avel earlier in Part Two: “The Universe is ordered, and it is ordered, fortunately, not by people. If you preserve the order as it is, a man can live happily and quietly to his own and others’ happiness. There are things which have no harm at first sight, but which are impossible, one cannot let them happen. There are paths that can

never intersect. There are worlds that can only exist apart from each other.”<sup>31</sup> From Uliana’s perspective, then, her murder of Pinchas signifies the restoration of a broken world order and a rescue of the community from further deaths of Jews.

The aporia between different versions of the truth is used as a mode of ethical representation of the historical tragedy of the Holocaust and Uliana’s personal tragedy. The inconsistency of traumatic memory results from the rift between personal and historical truth. “Knowing” and “not-knowing” acquire different meanings in the novel depending on the temporal distance to the past. Uliana’s father Vasyl Frasuliak served in the auxiliary police in Buczacz during Second World War, assisting Nazis in their mass killing of Jews. Based on Uliana’s memory, her father could not kill Jews, he rescued them. His service in the police is presented by her as a forced act of compliance: he was only involved in digging the ravine and escorting Jews to the site. His neighbors, however, present a different perspective on his collaboration with the Nazis: some remember him rescuing Jews, but nobody witnessed his good deeds first-hand. It appears that the unknown, unnarratable personal truth could only have been revealed by the presence of a witness to the event, and since there is no survived witnesses to Frasuliak’s crimes or to his rescue of Jews, the justification of his past behavior resides only in readers’ acceptance of personal truth as a historical truth. In contrast to the witnesses of Vasyl Frasuliak’s alleged good deeds and crimes, the only witnesses to the crime committed by Uliana are ones who are distanced from the actual event: the contemporary narrator Romana, her amnesiac husband “Bohdan,” and readers. Uliana blames “war, hardship and the alien regime” for the atrocities, but never the concrete individuals. Following the logic that wartime depravity was fueled by politically motivated anger, the narrator writes from Uliana’s perspective:

She did not believe that they could exterminate each other. She did not believe that [Jews – Y. I.] were intentionally and viciously denounced. “No,” she said, “on the contrary, they hid [Jews – Y. I.] in their houses, fed and helped them.” She did not believe the fact that her Ukrainian teacher ran into the house of the Jewish neighbors with an axe. She said, “My Jewish friend said that she recognized her, that she saw her through the wood boards in the barn where she was hiding. But I did not believe her. She was a good teacher, madam Lesia. She loved to sing.” And she also did not believe that Mikhas’ Kasivchak enlisted himself in the SS Galizien division to take revenge on the German teacher who failed him three times. “He was not stupid, just had a very strong accent. Mrs. Fink did not like this.” [...] She did

31 Andrukhovych, *Amadoka*, 239.

not believe that Ukrainians together with Jews helped Bolsheviks to deport Poles. "Quite contrary," she said, "you see that many of those who were sent to Siberia – although they were separated from their children and starved to death – survived [the Holocaust – Y.I.]. And not only Poles and Ukrainians, but many Jews managed to survive [in Siberia – Y.I.]. If they had not been deported there, they would have been lying in the Fedora pit... She did not believe that *our guys*, who served in the police, most willingly carried out Nazis' orders against Jews. That after each raid peasants rushed to the city to loot Jews' homes. That they hid fugitives for money, and then turned them in to the police. They had to go to the police because they had to survive somehow. But they did not do any harm [to Jews – Y.I.]. Sometimes they even defended them when they could. Rescued them."<sup>32</sup>

In a series of statements of disbelief in her neighbors' crimes she seeks excuses for their behavior. The repetition of "She did not believe that..." exposes the popular disbelief in the community's responsibility for the Holocaust. It is based on a recurrent pattern in the actual responses of Ukrainian eyewitnesses during their interviews, who emphasized tolerating and rescuing Jews "no matter" what.<sup>33</sup> Uliana's memory account presents a clever balance between recognizing the fact of Ukrainians' collaboration with Nazis because of the fatal danger of not doing it and denying their deliberate intent in reporting on Jews and killing them. Uliana negated whatever did not fit in the pattern of traditional perception of relationships among Ukrainians, Poles, and Jews. The above passage demonstrates how societies imagine themselves and their "ways of acting," according to the norms and manners of the traditional behavior. Family-transmitted memory of living under supposedly more cultured people, Austrians before First World War and Germans during Second World War, has tainted Uliana's memory of the Holocaust, in which the uncomfortable topic of Jews' "disappearance" from the community is shielded with a more comfortable version of the past that does not threaten the positive image of the community.

Written in the genre of *Generationenromane*, *Amadoka* shows the long-lasting effect of guilt experienced by post-generation for the misdeeds of their ancestors and activates the process of understanding, delineating, or mitigating a sense of inherited responsibility. This guilt comprises both complicity in the mass extermination of the Jews during the Holocaust and collaboration with the Soviet NKVD against Ukrainian Insurgent Army after the war. The three sisters of the Frasuliak family – Uliana, Nusia, and Khrystia – successfully

32 Ibid., 261. All translations of *Amadoka* are mine.

33 See Chebotarova, "Collective Memory of the Holocaust in Post-Soviet Ukraine."

repress any feeling of guilt for their father's or their own collaborationism with either Nazis or NKVD. The interrogation of the past by the contemporary narrative voice exposes the uneasiness of the transfer of the past between generations, in which the "post-rememberer" bears active witness in preserving and transmitting the truth to others.

In the scene of his execution, Pinchas's father, Avel, is described as a martyr, while Vasyl Frasuliak, on the contrary, emerges in a more ambiguous position of a middleman. In a series of rhetorical questions, one can see a shift from Avel's last thoughts about the role Vasyl played in the Holocaust to a contemporary reader's judgement. The passage starts with the victim's perspective on approaching death: "Life and death are locked onto each other in an infinite circle. It is a pity that there is no shohet who could ask him for forgiveness and read a prayer before killing, although Vasyl Frasulyak was nearby all the time – a mediator and police guard, his Saturday assistant, and a worthless man." Gradually, Avel's focalization is blurred and replaced by the contemporary reader's ethical questioning of Vasyl's responsibility as a witness/perpetrator:

Did Avel notice him? Did he despise him? Did he think that Vasyl deserved the opportunity to witness how Avel would die? Or, on the contrary, was it the greatest injustice, the gravest savagery: to be humiliated, mutilated, and killed in front of Frasuliak? And was Vasyl just a witness or also a perpetrator? And is a witness something less than a perpetrator? And is to witness not the same as to perform? And does it matter that when you are being murdered, you can see a familiar face nearby? Does it alleviate the pain or make it worse? Do you hate him or find solace in him?<sup>34</sup>

Challenging the possibility of reading Vasyl Frasuliak in either/or categories, the writer raises the question of empathy toward the figure of a perpetrator and questions the tendency to universalize a victim's identity that makes it harder to identify with the perpetrator.

Although the memory of the first generation appears malleable, it is malleable only within certain limits circumscribed by the material objects that preserve the past and reveal additional truth about the Frasuliaks' involvement in the Holocaust. All the photographs that organize the narrative of Part Two were taken with the trophy camera "Goerz" which used to belong to a Jewish photographer and which Vasyl Frasuliak pillaged from the local photo shop. When Uliana tries to persuade Bohdan that his great-grandfather was a decent man, he casts a glance at the Goerz and asks:

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34 Andrukhovych, *Amadoka*, 289.

"Where did the great grandpa find this camera?" – "It was left after the photographer from 'Nimand' – "Was the photographer a Jew?" They did not answer all of his questions. They did not want to be responsible [*vidpovidaty* in Ukrainian means both to "be responsible" and "to answer" – J. Y.]. And you thought all the time how much they really forgot because they could not remember, how much they did not see because they were not able to see, and how many recollections they replaced with others in which they believed so strongly that for a while by interrupting each other and fighting, they enumerated details and nitty-gritty circumstances. You knew that for the most part they did not lie. They truly believed what they told you. They invented things that they believed in.<sup>35</sup>

With the publication of new historical data about the participation of local Ukrainians in the genocide of Jews, the third generation Bohdan began to look at Buczacz residents differently. He understood that these were completely different people who moved to the city after the war, but in their faces, he saw the previous owners of the houses and apartments. He "began to hear their anxious voices in his dreams, the echo of their footsteps in the night silence, the barking of the dogs, shots, screams, cries, squealing, the sounds of a shovel biting into the ground, the rustling of lumps of soil." He looked at the passers-by trying to figure out: "could this one hide them? And could this one turn them in? Could this one kill? Could these ones say 'it is bad that the Germans came, but it is good what they did to the Jews?'"<sup>36</sup> Bohdan is tormented over his great grandfather's collaborationism with the Nazis, pondering his responsibility in assisting the Nazis and offering a variety of explanations from which the reader could choose:

Your grandfather was there... You couldn't know why he joined the auxiliary police unit: maybe because he was promised a reward? A guarantee of his safety? Because of the threats to his family? Was he worried for his daughters? [Because – Y. I.] he believed that only in this way he could really change everything for himself, for his family, for all people? Because he wanted to experience power? Was he under someone's influence? [Because – Y. I.] he thought that this was the only way a conscious man could act? Did he hate Bolsheviks? Was he angry with his wife? Did he respect Germans? Insulted Jews? Respected a particular Jew? Insulted himself? Did he think that in this way he could help someone, rescue someone?<sup>37</sup>

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35 Ibid., 274.

36 Ibid., 275.

37 Ibid., 276.

Bohdan tries to justify his great grandfather's actions, looking for the answer in his personal circumstances, temporary insanity, and survival instinct, and experiences the same dilemma as his grandmother Uliana. His moral compass crashes: "the arrow began to twitch and spin angrily, as if under the influence of black magic. You no longer knew what baseness is, what loyalty is, what convictions are, and what is mercy."<sup>38</sup>

In Bohdan's reassessment of the family past, in his persistent attempt to edit the past in order to rehabilitate his ancestors, one can see the concept of postmemory at work. It inscribes the first-generation testimony into a third-generation reality, packaged in images and senses that stimulate the memory of an amnesiac subject. Mediated memory, or memory of memory, reveals not only differing conceptions of the past but also the indeterminacy of the meaning of the literary text itself. Once we realize that Romana is an unreliable memory holder, we stop worrying about the accuracy of her presentation of history and focus on the narrative itself and its power to reconcile and settle the past. When the unreliable autodiegetic narrator reveals factual and epistemological unreliability, we, as readers, ask ourselves how the unreliability of narration relates to the unreliability of memory itself.

The constant emphasis on memory's fallibility produces an indeterminacy of interpretation, making readers return to the text and revise its interpretation. In relationship to the contested past this reinterpretation hinges upon the ideological position of the reader. For understanding the connection between the unreliability of the narrative and the fallibility of memory it is important that the story of the Jews' extermination in Buczacz is told twice in Part Two: the first time through a perspective of Uliana Frasuliak, whose father Vasyl worked in the axillary police assisting the Nazis in murdering Jews; and the second time from the perspective of a survivor, the Jewish boy Pinchas. Because both versions of the Buczacz tragedy are framed by the third-generation narrator Romana, who shares the Ukrainian community's view of what had happened during the tragedy, having Bohdan questioning her interpretation allows readers to confront the ethically contested issue of collaborationism.

Thus, the tragedy of the Holocaust as seen and evaluated from varying perspectives collects several subjective recollections into multidirectional memory: each character adds their own view to a larger picture of the Holocaust, some with naivete and relativism, some seeking justification, others raising difficult moral questions. As if arguing with Theodor Adorno's questioning of a possibility of creating art after Auschwitz, Andrukhovych shows that imaginative representation of the Holocaust can overcome community's silencing and dismemory about the suffering of Jews. Imagination can lend

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38 Ibid., 277.

the historical past a sense of urgency that speaks to and about the present. The Ukrainians' treatment of the Holocaust in their country has a distinctive anti-redemptive coloration. In the process of overcoming the binary opposition between perpetrators and victims in the contested history of Second World War in Ukraine, Michael Rothberg's concept of the implicated subject may offer an alternative way of writing about the Holocaust in Ukraine. "The implicated subject serves as an umbrella term that gathers a range of subject positions that sit uncomfortably in our familiar conceptual space of victims, perpetrators, and bystanders."<sup>39</sup> Implication, which derives from Latin stem *implicāre*, means "to entangle," or "connect closely;" resonates with "complicity," but unlike complicity does not have a strong sense of legal wrongdoing. Moving from a discourse of victims and perpetrators to one of implicated subjects may help scholars of the Holocaust open a broad terrain for thinking about social and political responsibility. Within that terrain one finds multiple implicated subject positions and multiple figures of implication. Complicity presupposes implication, but implication does not always involve complicity. This is the main message of Andrukhovych's *Amadoka*.

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39 Michael Rothberg, *The Implicated Subject: Beyond Victims and Perpetrators*, 13.

## Abstract

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*The Multidirectional Turn in the Literature about Holocaust in Post-Euromaidan Ukraine (On the Material of Sofia Andrukhovych's Amadoka)*

The contested historical memory of the Second World War in Ukraine has exposed an uneasy transition from an ethnolinguistic type of national identity to the idea of Ukraine as a political nation, expedited with the Revolution of Dignity in 2014. Many Ukrainian writers of non-Jewish origin began to write about the fate of Ukrainian Jews during the Holocaust. If a previous generation of post-Soviet Ukrainian writers have embedded Jewish characters and subplots about the Holocaust into their historical novels about colonization by the Soviet Union and the national struggle for independence during the war, the new generation of writers reveals a shift from the idea of a homogeneous "national memory" to an idea of the "multidirectional" memory of the Second World War which had a profound traumatic impact on all actors involved in it. The growing interest among non-Jewish Ukrainian writers in the contested history of the Holocaust has been shaped by the unexpected affinity seen between the suffering of Ukrainians at present and of Jews in the past, which unifies them in collective victimhood. This paper examines the contested memory of the Holocaust in Sofia Andrukhovych's novel *Amadoka* (2020). The writer develops a complex narrative structure that captures the traumatic memory of Second World War from the perspective of different actors, showing that the extermination of Jews in Buczacz was a communal tragedy that can be represented only through a polyphonic act of remembrance taking place on a shared if uneven terrain. Employing two concepts from memory studies – dismemory and Postmemory – the analysis of the narrative construction of traumatic memory in *Amadoka* aims to show how literary narrative can capture trauma, on the one hand, and how trauma can shape identity, on the other.

## Keywords

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Holocaust, post-Euromaidan Ukraine, Sofia Andrukhovych, *Amadoka*, multidirectional memory



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Roman Katsman

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## Poetics of Twenty-First-Century Russian-Language Fiction about the Shoah

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TEKSTY DRUGIE 2024, NR 1, S. 143–158

DOI: 10.18318/td.2024.en.1.9 | ORCID: 0000-0003-0607-8047

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I

In this article, I will try to highlight the main ideological and poetic paradigm of today's Russian-language literature about the Shoah. In the limited material that this literature provides, one key epistemological and narrative strategy stands out: the ghetto is perceived as a place of cultural-creative, enlightening, pedagogical action, and this transforms the primordial horror of the Shoah into a source of rhetorical identification with a personality reborn to a new life. After an introduction to the problematics, the argumentation will be developed in four methodologically sequential stages. First, I will present a symbolic model that vividly demonstrates the concept of deep connection between the subject of the Shoah (and violence in general) with the tasks of growing up, education and enlightenment. Secondly, in the foundation of this model we will find life-building and culture cognition practices, such as therapy, translation, art, detective investigation, historiographic thought experiment, protection of dignity. Thirdly, it will be shown how these practices serve the aims of survival in the Shoah, as well as the narrativization of this experience. And finally, fourthly, it will be concluded that these practices remove the

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dichotomy of the individual and the collective, serving to create a living, free and dynamic community, in essence, characteristically of the Jewish type – a community of continuously developing, learning, and teaching individuals.

In Russian literature of the last two decades, there is surprisingly little non-memoir and non-documentary prose about the Shoah.<sup>1</sup> Separate motifs can be found in the work of many contemporary writers, there are many stories and poems on this topic, but there are very few works of large-form genres that are entirely devoted to it. This unexpected silence requires an explanation, but it is already quite significant. The reasons for the silence of the Israelis in the early post-war years are well known: the rejection of “going to the slaughter,” on the one hand, and the trauma of the survivors, on the other. In addition, the Israeli authorities did not want to quarrel with the West and the USSR. The situation began to change with the beginning of the Cold War and the change in relations between Israel and the USSR. The trial of Adolf Eichmann in 1961 in Israel is considered a symbolic break in the silence. Another two decades passed, and the third generation, the grandchildren of Shoah survivors, began to return to the memory of their grandfathers.

Most of the citizens of the USSR, for their part, had almost no continuity in the memory of the Shoah. Many Soviet Jews fought in the Soviet Army or were evacuated, while most of those who found themselves under occupation were killed. The few survivors often emigrated after the war, and they or their descendants rarely wrote in Russian. In the Soviet Union, the topic of the Shoah was a taboo: the exterminated Jews were bashfully called “peaceful Soviet citizens.” The early literary evidence of the Shoah (provided by such writers as Ilya Selvinsky, Ilya Ehrenburg, Vasilii Grossman) was mainly evidence of its consequences, those terrible traces that the German troops and their allies had left after their retreat. In the 1960s–1970s, monumental attempts to comprehend the Shoah appeared in the works of

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1 On the previous periods see, for example, the recent works by Maxim D. Shrayer, Marat Grinberg and Dennis Sobolev: Maxim D. Shrayer, “Ilya Ehrenburg’s January 1945 *Novy mir* cycle and Soviet Memory of the Shoah,” in *Eastern European Jewish Literature of the 20th and 21st Centuries: Identity and Poetics*, ed. Klavdia Smola (Munich–Berlin: Verlag Otto Sagner, 2013), 191–209; Maxim D. Shrayer, *I Saw It: Ilya Selvinsky and the Legacy of Bearing Witness to the Shoah* (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2013); Maxim D. Shrayer, “Pavel Antokolsky as a Witness to the Shoah in Ukraine and Poland,” *Polin: Studies in Polish Jewry* 27 (2015): 541–556; Marat Grinberg, “Between Mimesis and Allegory: Vasily Grossman, Boris Slutsky, the Strugatsky Brothers and the Meaning of the Holocaust in Russian,” in *Critical Insights: Holocaust Literature*, ed. Dorian Stuber (Pasadena: Salem Press, 2016), 174–179; Dennis Sobolev, “The Representations and Reassessment of the Holocaust in the Novels by the Strugatsky Brothers from the Middle Period” (in Russian), *Iudaica Russica* 1 (6) (2021): 60–96.

Anatolii Kuznetsov, Evgenii Yevtushenko, Anatolii Rybakov, Yulii Daniel, Eli Liuksemburg. Today, memoirs and journalistic works predominate; one can name such authors or compilers as Lev Simkin, Viktor Lazerson and Tamara Lazerson-Rostovskaya, Yakov Verkhovsky and Valentina Tyrmos, David Zilberman, Frida Mikhelson; the Holocaust Centre and Foundation in Moscow published several volumes of letters and evidence *Sokhrani moi pisma* [Save my letters] (2007–2021),<sup>2</sup> compiled and edited by Ilya Altman, Leonid Terushkin, Irina Brodskaya and others. It is possible to separately mention the books of Anatolii Kardash (pseudonym Ab Mishe),<sup>3</sup> who openly uses the method of combining documentary, intellectual and fictional fragments in one text.

Fiction about the Shoah, as already mentioned, is rare in today's Russian literature. Attempts to speak on this topic in the language of literary fiction were made by Grigorii Kanovich (*Ocharovanie satany* [The charm of Satan], 2007),<sup>4</sup> Ludmila Ulitskaya (*Daniel Shtain, perevodchik* [Daniel Stein, translator], 2006),<sup>5</sup> Boris Akunin (*Trezorium*, 2019),<sup>6</sup> Karine Arutyunova (a cycle of stories in the collection *Daughters of Eve*, 2015).<sup>7</sup> Against this background, novels that are dedicated to the Shoah stand out: *Fridl* (2012) by Elena Makarova,<sup>8</sup> *Poslednii vykhod Sheiloka* [Shylock's last act] (2006) by Daniel Kluger,<sup>9</sup> *Pepel* [Ashes] (2008),<sup>10</sup> *Reyna, Koroleva sudby* [Reyna, queen of destiny] (2020)<sup>11</sup> and *Kolechko zhizni* [The ring of life] (2023)<sup>12</sup>, to some extent also *Oni vseгда vozvrashchaiutsa* [They always return] (2006)<sup>13</sup> and *I vozvrashchu tebia* [And I shall return you]

2 Ilya Altman, Leonid Terushkin, *Sokhrani moi pisma. Sbornik pisem evreev perioda Velikoi Otechestvennoi voyny*, vol. 1–6 (Moscow: Tsentr i fond «Kholokost», 2007–2021).

3 See, for example Ab Mishe, *Posredi voyny. Posviashcheniia* (Jerusalem: Verba, 1998); Mishe, *Shoa. Iadovitaia triada* (Jerusalem: Nomina, 2013).

4 Grigorii Kanovich, "Ocharovanie satany," *Oktiabr* 7 (2007), accessed April 10, 2023, <https://magazines.gorky.media/october/2007/7/ocharovane-satany-2.html>.

5 Ludmila Ulitskaya, *Daniel Shtain, perevodchik* (Moscow: Eksmo, 2006).

6 Boris Akunin, *Trezorium* (Moscow: Zakharov, 2019).

7 Karine Arutyunova, *Docheri Evy* (No place: Rideo, 2015).

8 Elena Makarova, *Fridl* (Moscow: NLO, 2012).

9 Daniel Kluger, *Poslednii vykhod Sheiloka* (Moscow: Tekst, 2006).

10 Alex Tarn, *Pepel* (Tel-Aviv: Ivru, 2008).

11 Alex Tarn, *Reyna, Koroleva sudby* (Tel-Aviv: Isradon, 2020).

12 Alex Tarn, *Kolechko zhizni* (Tel-Aviv: Isradon, 2023).

13 Alex Tarn, *Oni vseгда vozvrashchaiutsa* (Moscow: Olimp, 2006).

(2006)<sup>14</sup>, by Alex Tarn. These attempts are so rare that critics are clutching at straws, referring to the literature of the Shoah even such works of Jewish literature in which the Shoah is only implied as a moment of historical background. Such, for example, is the case of the monumental poem by Boris Khersonsky *Semeinyi arkhiv* [Family archive] (2006).<sup>15</sup> In general, the situation is different in poetry than in prose, there are many individual poems about the Shoah, and each should be considered an independent full-fledged contribution to this topic, but in this paper, I will not touch on poetry at all.

If the low public interest in the Shoah can be explained by socio-political factors, then how can one explain the low interest of writers in such a significant historical event, so rich in themes, drama, tragedy, which is an inexhaustible source of philosophical, historical, social, and ethical reflections, serving as the cause of ongoing political scandals both within different countries and in international relations? The argument about the lack of historical distance is not valid, because in the literatures in other languages one can observe a different picture. It can be assumed that the problem lies in the discrepancy between the theme and those poetic strategies that contemporary writers consider the most relevant and fashionable. To write about the Shoah, for example, in the genre of historical fantasy, one needs special courage, as well as an appropriate tradition and school, which is not sufficiently present in Russian literature; and historical novels are not in fashion today for those writers who are looking for new forms.

And yet there are exceptions. The topic of the extermination of the Jews of Lithuania both during the war and after it in prisons, camps and shtetls is the pivot of the novel by Grigorii Kanovich<sup>16</sup> *The Charm of Satan*, as well as earlier and similar novels *Kolybelnaya snezhnoi babe* [Lullaby to the snow woman] (1979)<sup>17</sup> and *Kozlenok za dva grosha* [A goat for two penny] (1990).<sup>18</sup> Recalling the participation of Lithuanians in the destruction of their Jewish neighbors, the writer wonders why Satan, who always pretends to be the Messiah, is so tempting to men.<sup>19</sup> Kanovich's historical novels do not contain any culture-building message, any hint at the salvation of meaning, although many of his heroes are

14 Alex Tarn, *I vozvrashchu tebia* (Moscow: Olimp, 2006).

15 Boris Khersonsky, *Semeinyi arkhiv* (Moscow: NLO, 2006).

16 Grigorii Kanovich (1929–2023), repatriated to Israel in 1993 from Lithuania, a prose and play writer, poet, scriptwriter, translator.

17 Grigorii Kanovich, "Kolybelnaya snezhnoi babe," in *Svechi na vetru* (Moscow: Dom nazhdzhy, 2007).

18 Grigorii Kanovich, *Kozlenok za dva grosha* (Moscow: Izvestia, 1990).

19 Kanovich, "Ocharovanie satany."

Shoah survivors. Thus, the novel *Park zabytykh evreev* [Park of the forgotten Jews] (1997)<sup>20</sup> is an elegy about the disappearing world of Eastern European Jewry, who managed to survive the wars of the twentieth century and even the Shoah, but did not survive the uselessness and forgetfulness that befell it at the end of the 1980s. Russian-Israeli writer Mikhail Yudson's<sup>21</sup> novels *Lestnitsa na shkaf* [Ladder to the wardrobe] (2013)<sup>22</sup> and *Mozgovoy* [Brainie] (2020)<sup>23</sup> boldly use the Shoah as a prototype for dystopian fantasies and as a source of imagination and metaphor (one but bright example – the word “holostrophe” [kholostrofa] that combines Holocaust, catastrophe, and poetry strophe). In the prose of Linor Goralik,<sup>24</sup> both micro-narratives and large forms, like the novel *Vse, sposobnye dyshat dykhanie* [All who can breathe the breath] (2018),<sup>25</sup> tell a story about the epic shame that does not allow to live on. The narrator does not know how to live after the events that happened to her, after history in general, and in general – to live further. Time for her ends in a way that resembles an apocalypse. Some chapters of the novel by Russian-Israeli writers Elizaveta Mikhailichenko and Yurii Nesis *Talithakumi* (2018),<sup>26</sup> dedicated to the visit of the protagonists to the Auschwitz Museum, and in particular the figure of one of them, who initiated this visit, which ended for him with wet pants – this is perhaps a typical case of fear and attraction that simultaneously evokes the discourse of the Shoah.

Here we are confronted with the unity, on the one hand, of the craving for adventure and the unknown – and, on the other hand, the mythical horror of the underworld, the awe of the unknown, but obviously terrible, the archetypal cave with the dragon, the fear of experiencing in an alternative history what was experienced in reality by the Jews on the other side of the war front line. In any case, the discourse of the Shoah is the territory of genuine primordial pathos. The most widespread mode of the Shoah discourse corresponds to the “victimary” paradigm that dominates today;<sup>27</sup> however, Russian literature of

20 Idem, “Park zabytykh evreev,” *Oktiabr* 4–5 (1997).

21 Mikhail Yudson (1956–2019), repatriated to Israel in 1999; a prose writer, critic, and editor.

22 Mikhail Yudson, *Lestnitsa na shkaf* (Moscow: Zebra E, 2013).

23 Mikhail Yudson, *Mozgovoy* (Moscow: Zebra E, Galaktika, 2020).

24 Linor Goralik was born in 1975, repatriated to Israel in 1989; a prose writer, poet, painter, translator, editor.

25 Linor Goralik, *Vse, sposobnye dyshat dykhanie* (Moscow: AST, 2019).

26 Elizaveta Mikhailichenko and Yuri Nesis, *Talithakumi*, 2018, accessed April 10, 2023, <https://www.smashwords.com/books/view/890930>.

27 For development of this concept see Eric Gans, *A New Way of Thinking: Generative Anthropology in Religion, Philosophy, Art* (Aurora: The Davies Group, 2011).

recent decades does not suffer from the victim complex (except for Kanovich), but there is no heroism mania in it either. Perhaps this is the main reason for its strange silence on this topic: it is extremely difficult, if not impossible, to find a non-victimary and non-heroic tone in a conversation about the Shoah. Let us try to figure out how it is possible for those who still prefer not to remain silent, but at the same time are not ready to give up the formal and ideological search and innovation.

## II

I would like to start with one symbolic poetical gesture that is not directly related to Russian culture. In 2000, the movie "X-Men" was released, based on the comics about the superheroes of the Marvel universe, which began to appear back in the 1960s. The first episode, which opens the popular film franchise, explores the discovery of the superpowers of one of the main characters, Eric Lehnsherr, Magneto. According to the plot of the comic book, Eric was born in 1930 in Düsseldorf to a Jewish family. In the episode in question, we find young Eric with his parents in a convoy that the Nazis are escorting to the gates of the concentration camp. Being separated from his parents, Eric in desperation stretches out his hands to them while keeping struggling in the hands of the soldiers. When the parents disappear behind the bars of the concentration camp, his superpower awakens: he attracts metal, the bars of the gate bend and break, and it would have been destroyed if the Nazi had not stopped him with a blow from the gun butt. In later comics and films of the franchise, we learn that the Nazis tried to use Eric in their experiments, and in the 1960s he becomes a Nazi hunter and takes revenge on his offenders. In the future, Eric becomes one of the most powerful mutants and leads an underground organization that has embarked on the path of armed struggle against the persecution of mutants by people, and opposing the party that is looking for ways to peacefully resolve the problem and headed by Professor X, Charles Xavier. According to the script writer Chris Claremont, the figure of Magneto was based on Menachem Begin and the figure of Professor X was based on David Ben-Gurion.<sup>28</sup> He also adds that his attitude towards Magneto and Xavier is related to the Shoah.<sup>29</sup>

28 Alec Foege, "The X-Men Files," *New York* (July 17, 2000), accessed April 10, 2023, <https://nymag.com/nymetro/arts/features/3522/>.

29 Dorian Lynskey, "Exclusive: X-Men's Chris Claremont talks through five key storylines," *Empire* (April 6, 2016), accessed April 10, 2023, <https://www.empireonline.com/movies/features/x-men-wolverine-jean-grey-chris-claremont-five-key-storylines/>.

The described scene, which opens the franchise, in a bright pictorial gesture represents what is the main idea and driving force of today's Russian literature about the Shoah: left in the distant past, separated from us by two generations, the Shoah is the source of the present, new life, new reality and its new understanding, and therefore it is a symbol of education and growing up, a symbol of time and life itself (and again Kanovich remains almost the only exception, which, perhaps, only confirms the rule). This literature's truly protagonist is a child or a young man who, at the moment of the greatest tension, the challenge of survival, discovers a hidden power in himself, and then his nature changes, he mutates into an Other who has the strength and desire to resist the given reality. At the same time, any experience that falls to the lot of today's "mutant" can serve as a challenge – emigration, terrorism, war, cancel culture, identity politics, racism, antisemitism, xenophobia. This is not the point, but the fact that the victim turns into a hero and a warrior. The historical genre roots of this plot are easy to detect in any culture. In Jewish culture, they can be traced from the Zionist idea of the birth of a "new Jew" to Hasidic and – further into the past – Talmudic tales and legends about rabbis, righteous people, and simpletons, in which the power or holiness, hidden until then, suddenly appears, indicating a change in human nature. These tales, in turn, go back to the ancient and particularly biblical myths about babies who escaped death, the fate of the victim, survived the second birth and became heroes, such as Isaac, Joseph, Moses, Jesus. All this is well known. It is important for me to point out that the ancient narrative of epiphany and the formation of a superhero in the literature of the Shoah is undergoing transformation from a fairy tale discourse into a philosophical-historical discourse about life-creating culture cognition practices, and in this form, it is laid at the foundation of the creative consciousness of writers.

### III

For well-known historical reasons, Soviet and Russian literature does not know the Nazi camp. The main theme of the Shoah in it is therefore the ghetto or the occupied city or village, and the main chronotope is the movement towards the execution pit or the death camp, the premonition and expectation of it, which is why, hidden outside the stage space, it is felt as even more transcendent, unknowable, unchanging and unimaginable horror, as in ancient Greek tragedy. That is why, in contrast, everything that is beyond its borders, that is, the entire illuminated space of the narrative scene itself, is presented as disclosure (*aletheia*), as a field of cognition, becoming, doing, creating the replicated, self-organizing and self-reproducing forms of social behavior, that is, culture. This type of eventfulness, which is the essence of

the plot of the Shoah in the works under consideration, I call the culture cognition practices of the ghetto.

Let us formulate the question as follows: why does a writer need the representation and plot of the ghetto? Using the terminology of Paul Ricœur, one can assume that the ghetto works as a “living metaphor,”<sup>30</sup> that is, as a “refiguration”<sup>31</sup> of the picture of reality as a result of exercising the narrative-temporal practices. That is, it brings time-action to the territory where the death is to be reigning. Such practices are lectures, lessons, drawing, modeling, performance, speech-writing, translation, research, detective investigation, and the last one that determines all the others – protection of dignity.

Elena Makarova’s<sup>32</sup> books about the Terezin ghetto are the most striking example of this poetics. In the novels *Smekh na ruinakh* [Laughter on the ruins], published in periodicals in 1995, separate edition in 2008,<sup>33</sup> and *Fridl* [Friedl], published in periodicals in 2000, a separate edition in 2012,<sup>34</sup> Makarova opens a new page in the literature about the prisoners of Nazi ghettos and camps. From 1988, she has worked on staging exhibits of children’s drawings from the Theresienstadt concentration camp and has published albums and books about cultural life in the ghetto, in particular a series of books under the joint name *Krepost’ nad bezdnoi* [Fortress over the abyss] (2003–2008)<sup>35</sup> about art, music, theater, and education in the Theresienstadt concentration camp (together with Sergei Makarov, Viktor Kuperman, and Ekaterina Nekliudova) and the book *Frants Peter Kin. Son i real’nost* [Frantz Peter Kien: Dream and reality] (2009)<sup>36</sup> about the artist and writer who was confined in the Theresienstadt ghetto and killed in Auschwitz. Here, experiments with forms of the narrative construction of events and memory

30 Paul Ricœur, *The Rule of Metaphor: The Creation of Meaning in Language*, trans. Robert Czerny et al. (London: Routledge, 1978).

31 Paul Ricœur, *Time and Narrative*, vol. 1, trans. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984).

32 Elena Makarova was born in 1951 in Moscow, repatriated to Israel in 1990, a prose writer, sculptor, artist, pedagogue, art therapist, and historian.

33 Elena Makarova, *Smekh na ruinakh* (Moscow: Vremia, 2008).

34 Makarova, *Fridl*.

35 Elena Makarova and Sergei Makarov, *Krepost nad bezdnoi. Vol. 3: Terezinskie lektsyi, 1941–1944* (Moscow, Jerusalem: Gesharim, Mosty kultury, 2006).

36 Elena Makarova, *Frants Peter Kin. Son i real’nost’* (No place: Izdatel’stvo Terezinskogo Memoriala, 2009).



of the Shoah are combined with avant-garde experiments with stream of consciousness and playing with variations in narration, stylization, and parody, which bring the novels close to a postmodernist aesthetic.

Makarova's particular attention is drawn to the story of Friedl Dicker-Brandeis, an artist who was engaged in drawing with children in the Theresienstadt ghetto and was killed together with the other inhabitants of the ghetto in Auschwitz-Birkenau not long before the end of the war. She managed to save hundreds of her students' works. After the passage of years, exhibits and albums of the drawings of the children of the Theresienstadt ghetto, as well as Friedl's notes and letters, immortalized her name as one of the founders of art therapy and an example of an unbending strength of spirit and humanity in the face of monstrous violence and inevitable death. The story of Friedl Dicker-Brandeis lies at the foundation of the "documentary novel" *Friedl*, the aesthetic of which, adopted from the Bauhaus movement, consists in presenting art as teaching, a culture-building craft.

In her book about the Terezin Lectures, Makarova notes: "In the occupied countries, the education of Jewish children has become a survival strategy. The main goal was to maintain "normality" in an abnormal situation;" the author also quotes Leo Beck, a prisoner of Terezin: "These evenings created a community from a formless mass... It was a time of freedom."<sup>37</sup> The intention to search for a "time of freedom" drives Makarova in her desire to describe in as much detail as possible all the various cultural and educational practices of the Terezin ghetto: from scientific lectures to child therapy.

Since the 2000s and particularly in the 2010s, artistic, documentary-historical, autobiographical, and philosophical-pedagogical genre elements in Makarova's books have been interwoven to the point of being totally indistinguishable. In all her books of these years, thoughts about art and emigration are mixed in the consciousness of the characters with reflections about ghettos and concentration camps, both Nazi and Soviet. The collection *Vechnyi sdvig* [Eternal shift] (2015)<sup>38</sup>, in addition to stories, contains tales stylized as the diary of an émigré of the 1990s, an alcoholic phantasmagoria of a sculptor in the Soviet Union of the 1970s, a dialogue (more accurately a monologue) of a female writer who is a repatriate – the author's double – with the Israeli writer Ben-Zion Tomer about Soviet and post-Soviet reality.

*Putevoditel' poteriannykh* [A guidebook of the lost] (2020)<sup>39</sup> is a collection of stories about the author's meetings with the survivors of the Theresienstadt

37 Ibid., 52.

38 Elena Makarova, *Vechnyi sdvig* (Moscow: NLO, 2015).

39 Elena Makarova, *Putevoditel' poteriannykh* (Moscow: NLO, 2020).

ghetto. The artistic discourse about the Shoah and its memory grows not only and not so much out of the survivors' tales as out of the story of spiritual and material culture that was nearly destroyed but that survived and is woven anew into the new life of the author and her characters as it is recreated in the book. It is no exaggeration to say that this is a book about building an ordered life on the ruins of memory and culture, just as Maimonides's *Guide of the Perplexed*, which provides the title, serves to arrange order from the chaos of ideas and beliefs.

Makarova's poetic method is applied in full force in the novel *Shleif* [Trail], published in *Zvezda* 3–5 in 2021 and released as a separate edition in 2022.<sup>40</sup> Its main character, Anna, lives in Jerusalem during the period of COVID quarantine and does not remember who she is. But she is overwhelmed with the memories of other people about the events of the first quarter of the twentieth century in Russia, gleaned from suitcases containing old papers that she inherited. At the same time, she reads about the Shoah, the diaries of the victims. Fragments of memoirs and biographies, books and diaries, newspapers and scientific articles, poems, the voices of historical and fictional characters are compiled into a complex multilevel mosaic. While the heroine wanders around a half-empty city, meets real people, or communicates with her psychiatrist, many other people's lives occupy her mind, which, according to the author, is life, *chaim* in Hebrew – a plural word. She seems to be hiding fragments of texts on her body, like those prisoners she is talking about. Moreover, her body itself consists of these scraps, as well as her soul, tormented by the Jerusalem syndrome.

We find similar culture cognition practices also in works of other authors. Boris Akunin in *Trezorium* tells the story of the creation of an orphanage in the ghetto, adopting some advanced pedagogical theory. Daniel Kluger<sup>41</sup> in the novel *Shylock's Last Act* presents work in the ghetto of a theater group, and when a murder occurs in the theater, scrupulous observation of the talented detective work of the investigator is added to this. In Lyudmila Ulitskaya's novel *Daniel Stein, Translator* (2006) the narrative is built around the translation work of the protagonist, understood both literally and figuratively as an effort to establish understanding, mutual understanding, education and the art of interpreting reality for the sake of survival.

<sup>40</sup> Elena Makarova, *Shleif* (Moscow: NLO, 2022).

<sup>41</sup> Daniel Kluger was born in 1951, repatriated to Israel in 1994; prose writer, poet, essayist, translator and songwriter.

## IV

This brings us to the question of how therapy, art, investigation, and translation-interpretation serve survival. The fact is that cultural cognitive practices are essentially a re-experiencing of reality. Therapy allows one to relive trauma from the past, art mimetically duplicates and transforms lived experience, investigation reveals the unknown and incomprehensible, and thereby heals trauma and refigures knowledge about the past, translation rethinks and doubles reality, thereby doubling its ability to survive. This is clear from evolutionary, cultural-social, and psychological points of view. In the most general form, such practices provide an answer to the question of how, by changing knowledge about the past, one can change the present. This question often underlies historical, cultural, and political studies. The same question for some writers becomes the source of plot construction. In Shoah literature, this is almost always the case, since the events of today still seem to be very closely connected with the events of the Shoah, and those in turn still seem to be insufficiently studied and understood.

Elena Makarova, in the opening fragment of her novel about Friedl, writes about her deep sense of spiritual and professional kinship with the main character. The wisdom of artistic life arrangement, which she adopted from the Bauhaus and invested in the practice of teaching painting and art therapy in Terezin, transforms both the world in which Makarova lives and her understanding of what happened in the ghetto. Another Russian-Israeli writer, Dina Rubina, often uses the technique when the heroine, our contemporary, suddenly experiences a brief but intense flash of living through the events of the Shoah, for example, while walking through the streets of European cities. After that, of course, her understanding of the past sharpens and her perception of the present changes. One could attribute this technique to post-memory<sup>42</sup> or to the hermeneutic merging of horizons,<sup>43</sup> but this would not be accurate, since we are not talking about memory here, but about cognition or even active influence on the past, which is only accessible to artistic creative imagination, and thereby singles out literature into a special form of historical plot construction.

The most striking example of this are two novels by the Russian-Israeli writer Alex Tarn:<sup>44</sup> *Ashes* and *Reyna, Queen of Destiny*. *Ashes* belongs

42 See Marianne Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory. Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012).

43 See Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013).

44 Alex Tarn (Aleksei Tarnovitskii) was born in 1955; repatriated to Israel in 1989, prose and play writer, essayist, translator.

to “Berliade” – a series of novels about the Israeli special agent Berle, who performs the most difficult and intricate missions. This time, he is tasked with tracking down sellers and buyers of weapons destined for Arab terrorists in Israel. A gold bar falls into his hands, with which the buyers intended to pay, and this turns out to be one of those bars that were cast by the Nazis from the gold teeth and jewelry of the Jews they killed. Nir, the protagonist of *Reyna, Queen of Destiny*, meets a girl named Reyna, whose grandmother of the same name survived the Shoah and lived to old age in Israel. Before her death, she recorded on a videotape her testimony about what she experienced during the war years: robberies, murders, rapes, and mass executions of Jews. Reyna is convinced of the “quantum entanglement” of her fate with the fate of her grandmother. Having once changed her life (leaving the university, breaking up with a boyfriend and moving to Jerusalem), Reyna has already managed to change her grandmother’s life in the past – and the record of her testimony, albeit slightly, has changed. During the next experiment, already carried out together with Nir, the story told by Reyna changed significantly, and the reader will recognize this modified, even more terrible story of suffering. There is no more doubt: the past can be changed. The heroes are trying to cancel the Shoah altogether. However, in both the original and the modified stories, all of Reyna Sr.’s children die, and Reyna’s mother is born after the war. Therefore, by canceling the Shoah, Reyna cancels her own birth.

As can be seen from a brief retelling of these two plots, the main narrative and ideological strategy of both novels is to establish a tense relationship between the past and the present. *Ashes* is built as a detective or judicial investigation, accompanied by evidence. Here, as in *Reyna*, the storylines separated in space-time converge, duplicating the events of the Shoah in the present. In one case, the connection between the past and the future is presented as a riddle, in the second – as a causal relationship; in both cases, this connection is perceived by the heroes as a task or an exercise that needs to be solved or completed, which characterizes Tarn’s philosophy of history quite definitely: history is not a given, accomplished or deterministically predetermined, but a task, an open and always unfinished state.<sup>45</sup> In his recent novel *Kolechko zhizni*, about the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, Tarn develops this idea of the task or work in which the Jewish people are a part or instrument: it is the divine

45 For the origins of this philosophy of history see the line leading from Hermann Cohen to his student Matvey Kagan and further to the latter’s friend Mikhail Bakhtin: Matvey Kagan, “O khode istorii,” in *O khode istorii*, ed. Vitalii Makhlin (Moscow: Jazyki slavianskoj kultury, 2004), 238–287; Mikhail Bakhtin, *Toward a Philosophy of the Act*, trans. Vadim Liapunov (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1993).

work of preserving the dignity even in the ghetto, and it is the symbolic ring, the ring of life, that preserves the Jewish community, be it a classroom or a ghetto, in all historical catastrophes.

## V

It can be seen from the above examples that Russian literature is concerned with the same question that is characteristic of many works of literature of the Shoah in other languages: what does it mean to remember and understand the Shoah, how is such memory even possible or what is it desirable to be, how to narrate it? Memory and understanding arise here through the construction of a living community, which becomes the source of the transformation of reality and memory. Literary memory does not bury, does not recall, does not reproduce, but creates, therefore it generates a living text or text-constructor. This is the meaning of the metaphor of the ghetto, which in a mythopoetic way is undergoing metamorphosis and is transformed into a school class filled with children, young and adult, which here symbolizes the cultural community in general, capable of resisting the forces of dehumanization. Such are Friedl's drawing classes, circles and lectures in Makarova's *Fortress over the Abyss* (and therefore, by the way, it is so important that in the translation into English of this book "fortress" was replaced by "university," which, in essence, identifies the meaning of these two words); such are Kluger's theater, and Akunin's orphanage classrooms, such are the Jewish fighting classes in the Warsaw ghetto in Tarn's *Kolechko zhizni*.

In conclusion, I will give two thematically similar examples that demonstrate today's understanding of the Shoah through the prism of the pedagogy for life. The story in *V poliakh Amaleka* [In the fields of Amalek] (2000)<sup>46</sup> by Eli Luksemburg,<sup>47</sup> included in the collection of the same name (2000), is the travel notes of an Israeli teacher accompanying schoolchildren on the March of Life in Poland. The hero has two personalities. One is a free, strong, and proud Israeli, building a new life in a new Jewish country. The other is a humble and cowardly diasporic Jew. To his horror, he discovers how easily even indomitable Israeli teenagers turn into an uncomplaining herd, carefully hiding their origin. Through what should have been the apotheosis of life – the march of Jewish children with Israeli flags through the streets of Auschwitz – in the tormented mind of the narrator, a vision of a march of victims, wandering

46 Eli Luksemburg, "V poliakh Amaleka," in *V poliakh Amaleka* (Moscow, Jerusalem: Geshtarim, Mosty kultury, 2000), 7–80.

47 Eli Luksemburg, 1940–2019, repatriated to Israel in 1972; prose writer.

into the gas chambers, emerges. The sound of the shofar, giving rise to the procession, leads the hero to the idea of a redemptive sacrifice:

As on the Day of Judgment, rising and rattling, rising and falling, at first it seems out of place in the fields of Amalek. [...] But you understand: it is here that it is needed, in Auschwitz, to remind G-d that we were killed solely because we are Jews who remained faithful to the union with the Creator. Hear, O Lord, the sound of the shofar, your sheep, given here to the slaughter!<sup>48</sup>

Israeli flags and fragments of memories of repatriation are recoded into signs of substitution, into a ritual, which is what the March of Life or blowing the shofar is. The expiatory sacrifice is called upon to affirm the hero's being and restore order, to save his personality from decay, the danger of which is especially noticeable near the mountains of ashes and execution ditches.

An expressive image appears in the novel *Talitakumi* by Russian-Israeli writers Elizaveta Mikhailichenko<sup>49</sup> and Yuri Nesis.<sup>50</sup> Here, a new constructed living community emerges in the form of a group of vociferous and cheerful Israeli schoolchildren, spilling onto the lawns of the Auschwitz Museum, wrapped in Israeli flags:

Standing above the gas chambers, near the ruins of the crematorium, I sense the feeling of ashes. No, it doesn't knock on my heart. It penetrates without knocking. Standing on the full-blooded, well-fed grass, I cannot help feeling the dead threads growing through the soles of the feet, stretching from the fertilized soil. [...] On the huge and even field of Birkenau, on the cheerful grass, which no one eats out to the last blade of grass anymore, through the grayness that precedes the rain, ours are walking. They wave white-blue flags, some wrap themselves in the flag, some just walk with a fixed gaze, and two of them put the ends of the flag in their pockets and walk with this banner.

[The guide – author's note] – You see a group of Israeli schoolchildren. As part of the school program, the State of Israel sponsors trips of high school students to our museum. [...]

Teenagers reach us and sit down at the ruins. Someone falls on the grass and stretches, someone yells:

– Moti, maniac, where is my bag?

– Defective! – yells the girl near him. – Why are you yelling in a place like this?!

48 Luksemburg, "V poliakh Amaleka," 76.

49 Elizaveta Mikhailichenko was born in 1962; prose writer, poet, play writer, painter.

50 Yuri Nesis was born in 1953; prose writer, play writer; they repatriated to Israel in 1990.

- They are noisy, those of yours, – Olya remarks.
- Alive, – for some reason I say and create a pause.

Teenagers sit with their legs dangling into the ruins of the gas chambers and the crematorium. Lelya pulls an Israeli flag out of her jacket pocket and hands it to Golya:

– Shlomik, here you go. You can also go with it... with the guys... Do you want to?

Golya shakes his head.

– Why don't you want to? Did you want...

Golya swallows, blushes, and says:

– I can't.

– But why? Lelya is perplexed. She is not ready to abandon the invented frame. – Well, why not?

Golya looks at me in fright, presses his head into his shoulders and whispers:

– I pissed myself. [...]

After I told the pissed Golya that he had nothing to be ashamed of, that this was the most typical to humans, even the most human reaction, I immediately realized that this was not for consolation, not out of compassion, but I really would prefer to live in a world where, on the main channels after the evening news, Golya would have trumpeted: "You see, all of you who didn't piss in Auschwitz!"<sup>51</sup>

Golya is an angel. It was his desire to go to Auschwitz. One of the results of Arkady's (the main character and narrator) meeting with him and with other angels was the realization of this desire, which took the form of a miracle of the resurrection of children, the transformation of "ashes" into "living ones." These numerous "talithas" became "ours" and rose from oblivion. Arkady simultaneously creates a myth and throws a reproach in the face of the executioners and simply indifferent or forgetful. In addition, he appropriates, proclaims as part of himself these children with flags and what they symbolize – the miraculously resurrected "talitha," the "daughter of Zion," Israel. They are "alive," and in this one word the philosophy of the history of the Shoah is symbolically embodied as the construction of a new living community of free people.

To sum up this short and by no means exhaustive study, we can say that for many Russophone, especially Russian-Israeli writers, the creation of this community is the core of their poetics and philosophy, and it is constructed as a collaboration of culture-cognizing individuals. This approach can be

51 Mikhailichenko and Nesis, *Talitakumi*.

called individualistic didacticism. It is embodied most prominently in the work of Elena Makarova. Culture, social organization, and community life – everything is in the hands of the individual. Thus, the ghetto becomes a sociological and pedagogical model, in which the antinomy of the individual and the collective, which has ceased to work, is removed. The Nazi and Fascist utopian politics of group identity is overcome by the realistic practice of individualistic becoming. Summing up, it is this overcoming that can be considered the basis of poetic, sociological, and historical understanding of the Shoah in today's Russian literature. I think it is in this sense that one should understand one, otherwise incomprehensible, thought expressed on the pages of Makarova's *Fortress or University*: "Terezin has opened a new page in literature."<sup>52</sup>

## Abstract

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*Poetics of Twenty-First-Century Russian-Language Fiction about the Shoah*

The article deals with the fictional prose about the Shoah written in Russian in the last two decades. Observations show that the amount of such literature has been significantly reduced, and most of its authors now belong to Russian-Israeli literature. An analysis of its poetic and ideological attitudes leads to the conclusion that the main goal of this literature today is the individualistic pedagogy of the celebration of life, and among its strategies the main one is a culture cognition practice. Among the contemporary writers mentioned in the article are Elena Makarova, Alex Tarn, Daniel Kluger, Eli Luksemburg, Elizaveta Mikhailichenko and Yurii Nesis, Grigori Kanovich, Liudmila Ulitskaya and Boris Akunin.

## Keywords

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Literature about Shoah, Holocaust, Russian literature, Russian-Israeli literature, twenty-first-century literature

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<sup>52</sup> Makarova and Makarov, *Krepost nad bezdnoi*, 80.



# Between Past and Future. Transfiguration and Twenty-First- -Century Holocaust Literature

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Bettine Siertsema

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## Fictional Representations of Hitler

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TEKSTY DRUGIE 2024, NR 1, S. 159–182

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DOI: 10.18318/td.2024.en.1.10

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**T**he figure of Adolf Hitler is no taboo as a trope in literary fiction. Scholars Alvin Rosenfeld,<sup>1</sup> Gavriel Rosenfeld,<sup>2</sup> Michael Butter,<sup>3</sup> and Joanne Pettitt<sup>4</sup> offer a significant body of scholarship on representations of Hitler as a character in fiction, with American and British novels and short stories as their prime field of investigation. Of the 29 fictional works on Hitler that Gavriel Rosenfeld lists, including films, theatre and TV plays, and comics, only four are not in English. Pettitt discusses 13 works in English and only one in German. Michael Butter focuses exclusively on American fiction. With his study of French Hitler fiction, Manuel Bragança offers some

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1 Alvin H. Rosenfeld, *Imagining Hitler* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985).

2 Gavriel D. Rosenfeld, *The World Hitler Never Made: Alternate History and the Memory of Nazis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

3 Michael Butter, *The Epitome of Evil: Hitler in American Fiction 1939–2000* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

4 Joanne Pettitt, *Perpetrators in Holocaust Narratives: Encountering the Nazi Beast* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).

counterweight to this American dominance by investigating French literature on Hitler.<sup>5</sup> This article aims to broaden the discussion to a transnational perspective. It discusses five non-American novels from the twenty-first century, namely Hans Keilson's *The Death of the Adversary* from Germany (and/or the Netherlands, because from his mid-twenties, the author lived in the Netherlands),<sup>6</sup> Harry Mulisch's *Siegfried* from the Netherlands, A.N. Wilson's *Winnie and Wolf* from the United Kingdom, Timur Vermes's *Look Who's Back* from Germany, and Lavie Tidhar's *A Man Lies Dreaming* from Israel (and/or the United Kingdom, where he has lived since 2013). Apart from the timeframe, the twenty-first century, and the exclusion of American and French literature, as they have already been covered by previous research (see below), this selection of five is mainly based on their potentially global range, and thus on their being published in or translated into English. No doubt in Eastern-European literatures, as well as in Spanish, Greek, and Italian, other examples can be found, but their readership is limited, and their accessibility is problematic for researchers who do not master those languages.

### Overview of Previous Research

In *The World that Hitler Never Made*, Gavriel Rosenfeld interprets the four stages in the publication of alternate Hitler histories as a process of increasing normalization of the Nazi past. These stages are: the 1950s, with fantasies about bringing Hitler to justice, the 1960–1970s after the Adolf Eichmann trial, the late 1970s and the 1980s after the “Hitler Wave,” which focused attention on Hitler’s private life, and the 1990s onwards, with a comic approach to Hitler in a reunited Germany. This trend continues well into the twenty-first century, as Rosenfeld shows in his more recent book *Hi Hitler*.<sup>7</sup> Rosenfeld contends that the increasing normalization, humanization and de-demonization in Hitler fiction reflect the willingness “to view the Führer in non-judgmental terms.”<sup>8</sup> Authors also universalized Hitler by drawing parallels with contemporary evils, which Rosenfeld seems to disapprove of as a diminishing of attention for Nazism in its historical specificity.

5 Manuel Bragança, *Hitler's French Literary Afterlives 1945–2017* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019).

6 Actually, the novel was first published in 1959, but it gained a much larger readership and general acclaim in 2010, as will be related in the relevant section below.

7 Gavriel D. Rosenfeld, *Hi Hitler! How the Nazi Past is Being Normalized in Contemporary Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

8 Rosenfeld, *The World Hitler Never Made*, 236.

One of Michael Butter's findings in *The Epitome of Evil: Hitler in American Fiction 1939–2000* is that the realist mode of representation aims to show the moral superiority of America, whereas the later postmodern approach is less based on the good–evil dichotomy. In her chapter on Hitler in *Perpetrators in Holocaust Narratives*, Joanne Pettitt discerns two opposing trends: one towards mythologizing and demonizing Hitler, placing him outside history and even outside humanity, and one towards humanizing him. She largely agrees with Rosenfeld that texts in this latter trend run the risk of trivializing him. On the one hand she acknowledges that seeing the Holocaust perpetrator, in this case Hitler, as the embodiment of evil, as the mythologizers do, stands in the way of a better understanding of their motivations. On the other hand, in the process of humanization, she identifies the creation of a “space for justifications and normalization.”<sup>9</sup>

Neither Rosenfeld nor Pettitt expresses the view that humanizing Hitler can offer a more disturbing representation than a demonic Hitler because it puts our own way of being into question. Michael Butter aptly asserted: “To call the historical Hitler evil forecloses explanation.”<sup>10</sup> It is easy to relegate Hitler and the people who followed him to the outskirts of history and humanity by demonizing him/them. Showing a shared humanity with him invokes deeper probing, unsettling questions about the nature of evil and of being human. This strategy may be ethically more valuable than shrugging Hitler off as an otherworldly monster, as the more traditional, demonizing portrayals do.

Bragança concludes that the Vichy situation led to a difference in approach: “It is not towards alternative histories/stories that French novelists turned their attention after 1968 but towards Vichy. Consequently, Hitler only appears intermittently in these novels, before and after 1968. In other words, Hitler never became France’s ‘significant other’ as he did in American culture. In fact, Hitler has hardly ever been the ‘other’ of other characters in French fiction; on the contrary, he has increasingly become a ‘significant self’ in French novels since the 1970s.”<sup>11</sup>

Erin McGlothlin designed a taxonomy of readers’ empathic identifications with Holocaust perpetrators in fiction.<sup>12</sup> The autodiegetic narration of Nazi perpetrators, in which the perpetrator is the I-narrator, emphasizes the humanity of these protagonists. McGlothlin acknowledges the possibility, or

9 Pettitt, *Perpetrators in Holocaust Narratives*, 118.

10 Butter, *Epitome*, 10.

11 Bragança, *French Afterlives*, 118.

12 Erin McGlothlin, “Empathic Identification, and the Mind of the Holocaust Perpetrator in Fiction: A Proposed Taxonomy of Response,” *Narrative* 24 (3), (October 2016): 251–276.

risk, that readers identify with the perpetrator-narrator, because he is constructed as an object of empathy. She arrives at a kind of hierarchy of five possible modes of identification: existential, perspectival, reliability-dependent, affective and ideological. She argues that representations of the perpetrators' consciousness ask of us to align with their perspectives, even as we are aware of their reprehensible actions. Yet they do not necessarily compel the reader to absolve perpetrators from their crimes.

However, only one of the novelists discussed here, Timur Vermes, presents Hitler as the autodiegetic narrator of the story. In a large part of Lavie Tidhar's novel he is the focalizer, thus causing the reader to feel s/he has at least some access to the character's mind. But the narrative situation is complex and does not allow us to accept the views of the Hitler character at face value (more on that later). Mulisch and Keilson do not allow Hitler any direct speech; Wilson does, but to a rather limited extend. In short, four of the five novels under discussion here offer too little focalization by the Hitler character to fit into McGlothlin's taxonomy. Only for *Look Who's Back* it does offer a method to investigate the (implied) reader's response.

The following sections are in chronological order as per the publication date.

### **Hans Keilson, *The Death of the Adversary*<sup>13</sup>**

The first Hitler fiction appeared in the United States during the war. For obvious reasons this was not possible in Germany or the occupied countries. Yet Hans Keilson (1909–2011) wrote part of *The Death of the Adversary* as early as 1941. Born in Germany, Keilson studied medicine, but as a Jew he was forbidden to practice as a doctor. In 1936 he fled to the Netherlands. He went into hiding in 1941, but also participated in the resistance. In 1978 his research on the traumas of Jewish orphans earned him a PhD. He then worked as a psychiatrist in the Netherlands well into the twenty-first century. While in hiding he started writing *The Death of the Adversary*. He buried the first 50 pages in a tin in the garden, dug them up after the war, and finished the novel.<sup>14</sup> It was first published in 1959 and translated into English in 1962.<sup>15</sup>

13 Hans Keilson, *The Death of the Adversary*, trans. Ivo Jarosy (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2010).

14 Keilson related this in an interview with Jannetje Koelewijn in *NRC Handelsblad*, 24 December 2010. Some reviews wrongly state that he wrote the entire novel while in hiding.

15 Hans Keilson, *Der Tod des Widersachers* (Braunschweig: Westerman Verlag 1959). Translated by Oswald Wolff and published by Orion Press in New York, 1962.

At the time, "Time" listed *The Death of the Adversary* in the year's top ten books. Other authors on that list included Roth, Nabokov and Faulkner, but Keilson soon fell into oblivion. That changed in 2010, when his novel on hiding experiences, *Comedy in a Minor Key*, first published in 1947, was translated into English and *The Death of the Adversary* was newly translated by Ivo Jarosy. Francine Prose wrote a glowing review of both these novels in the Sunday Book Review of the "New York Times," August 8, 2010, qualifying them as masterpieces, and pronouncing Keilson a genius. So, as for its reception *The Death of the Adversary* could certainly be considered a twenty-first century novel.

The novel does not probe the nature of evil, as many perpetrator stories do, but the nature of hatred. It is set in the 1920–1930s in Germany, but neither Hitler, nor Nazism is mentioned by name; nor are the Jews mentioned as a targeted group. Hitler, the adversary from the title, is referred to as B.; the Jews are just "we" and "us." The frame story offers an explanation: a Dutch lawyer received the manuscript for safekeeping during the war, and the person who gave it, apparently the I-narrator of the main story, avoided being explicit in order not to endanger this lawyer. The effect, however (and the real reason probably), is that the text contains a general truth that exceeds the historical events. The I-narrator, a schoolboy at the beginning of the story, loses his best friend when that boy falls under the spell of B. and his followers. That makes him wonder about B.'s appeal to other people and secondly what the cause of B.'s hatred for "us" is. Those joint questions result in a strong fascination that dominates his life and thoughts. The narration shows the painful first phase of the rise of Nazism, and the boy's efforts to comprehend the events.

He catches himself thinking in a similar way as "they" in a conversation with the friend who became a follower of B. This boy relates how he became spell-bound by B. and would give his life for him.

The life of a hare-lip, I thought. At the same moment I felt a pain. It was somewhere in my body, though I could not say just where. I felt ashamed of my malice. Suddenly he was somehow different. "And why would you give your life for him?" I asked in the same sneering tone that at that same time I detested so much.<sup>16</sup>

Ostracized by his non-Jewish schoolmates, he seeks out the company of fellow Jews. One of them accuses him of defending B., because he always tries to think like him in an effort to understand his motives. Deep down he is convinced that B. will come to his senses and acknowledge that he and the

16 Keilson, *Death of the Adversary*, 58–59.

narrator are one of a kind. His friends doubt him and he in turn is critical about their pride in being Jewish:

"So you would rather thank God for being what you are,"<sup>17</sup> and attack the other just because he is the other," I said. "You forget that the other one does the same with you, since you are the other for him [...]"<sup>18</sup>

The narrator's friend, who becomes a follower of B., tells him that an enemy teaches you more about yourself than friends can, for the enemy's involvement with you reveals that you are in the end related to one another. That idea settles firmly in his mind.

B., the adversary, does not figure only in the thoughts and musings of the narrator. There are two live confrontations, albeit rather one-sided. In the first, the narrator stays in a town, where B. will give a speech to bolster his campaign. The narrator sits in an adjacent lounge, hearing the speech over the loudspeakers. One aspect of B.'s rhetoric is remarkably relevant: the speaker introduces an imaginary debate partner and counters that person's questions and objections more than adequately, thus killing his opponent off, metaphorically speaking. This passage is even more striking in view of the word "adversary," which echoes the title of the novel:

Again he gave the appearance of carrying on an argument with the aforementioned nobody. He raised him to the rank of adversary and began a duel with him before the eyes of everyone in the hall. [...] And then he invented everything the adversary – his own creation – was saying. [...] The other one [the imaginary opponent – author's note] had no one any more to speak for him. He, who had never existed, had been killed by the voice, and since he was silent, everyone assumed that he was dead. Helplessly I sat in the lounge. I was the nobody in the hall, I was listening to my own extermination.<sup>19</sup>

More and more the narrator seems to be deluded into thinking that B. is obsessed by him too, and that he will be able to cure B. and avert their joint disaster. In the second confrontation, years later, B. is at the height of his power. The

17 This expression may refer to a traditional Jewish morning prayer, where God is blessed, for not having made me a woman (nor a gentile, nor a slave). Or perhaps to Jesus' parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector, with which he addressed "some who were confident of their own righteousness"; the Pharisee thanks God that he is not like other people (Luke 18: 9–14).

18 *Ibid.*, 74.

19 *Ibid.*, 97–98.

narrator is amidst an elated crowd, who cheer B. Yet, contrary to the crowd, the narrator observes the heavily armed soldiers who are there to protect B. This shatters his childish fantasies about being B.'s friend. He now sees B. for the adversary that he is, and he begins to fantasize about shooting B. there, but at the supreme moment, he does not act, he just realizes: "No, I killed him in myself."<sup>20</sup>

B. has no direct speech in this novel, and everything that the reader learns about him is through the I-narrator, whose trustworthiness is dubious. Thus, the novel essentially offers a portrait of a persecuted young man and his thoughts and delusions more than a portrait of Hitler. The provocative idea that the two are connected through a degree of similarity and interdependence does not increase Hitler's humanity, on the contrary. Because of his mesmerizing effect on his followers, and because he remains a mostly abstract and vague figure, only indirectly perceived, his mythological dimension stands out. In this case mythologizing is not equal to demonizing, though.

### Harry Mulisch, *Siegfried*<sup>21</sup>

Harry Mulisch (1927–2010) is one of the best-known Dutch authors. Some of his novels, like *The Assault* and *The Discovery of Heaven* are translated in several languages and made into films. His account of the Eichmann trial, published before Hannah Arendt's report and with a similar point, is available in English: *Criminal Case 40/61*. Mulisch repeatedly stated that in a way he was the Second World War, born from a Jewish-Austrian mother and an Austrian military father, who divorced his wife in 1936 and collaborated during the war as an employee of the Lippmann-Rosenthal Bank, that was instrumental in the robbery of the money and possessions from the Dutch Jews. That position enabled him, however, to save his Jewish ex-wife from deportation. The war and more generally the blurred distinction between good and evil are prominent themes in Mulisch's work, of which *Siegfried*, was the last to be published during his life.

The story goes as follows. Famous Dutch writer Rudi Herter, a barely concealed self-portrait of Mulisch, visits Vienna to receive a literary prize. In a TV interview he declares that he wants to write about a completely incomprehensible figure, an enigma, like Hitler, and that he thinks that imagination is

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 197.

<sup>21</sup> Harry Mulisch, *Siegfried. Een zwarte idylle* (Amsterdam: De Bezige Bij, 2001). Translated by Paul Vincent as *Siegfried* (New York: Viking Penguin, 2003). The quotes in this article are my own translation.

the best instrument for understanding: "Perhaps fiction is the net that can capture him." After a lecture in which he mentions his new book about Hitler, he meets the older couple Falk, who state that they have interesting information about Hitler.<sup>22</sup> Later they tell him that they were servants in Hitler's "court" in the Berghof. In 1938 Eva Braun became pregnant with Hitler, but this had to remain a secret, because he wanted to maintain the illusion that he was available to every German woman. The child, Siegfried, had to pass for a child of the Falks, who became very attached to the boy. In 1944, when Hitler was already in Berlin, they received an order to kill the child and make it look like an accident. If Falk would not do it, he and his wife would be sent to a concentration camp. To save his wife's life, Falk carried out the assignment. A week later they were transferred to The Hague. They never knew why Hitler ordered the murder.

Herter is shocked: Hitler was even more evil and more ruthless than he had imagined. Back in his hotel, with his assistant and mistress Maria, he loses himself in wild philosophical musings featuring Nietzsche, Wagner, and Heidegger. He feverishly dictates his thoughts about a new theory into a Dictaphone: Hitler was not so much absolute evil as absolute nothingness. He was like a black hole that sucked in all humanity around him until nothing was left. Thus, he views Hitler not so much in a psychological as in a metaphysical way. Herter does not heed Maria's critical remarks – remarks that may be interpreted as the implied reader's response.

Then follow, without any introduction, the alleged diary fragments of Eva Braun, possibly sprung from Herter's own mind – in the sleep that suddenly overwhelms him in the middle of his philosophical considerations. This diary shows the reason for Siegfried's death sentence: Himmler wanted to succeed Hitler over time and obviously Siegfried would stand in his way. He made the Gestapo fabricate papers to suggest that Eva had a Jewish grandmother. It would be inconceivable that the Führer had a child with Jewish blood, and thus Hitler ruled he had to die, because sooner or later it would become public that Siegfried was his child and not the Falks'. In the end, Eva is able to prove that her grandmother was 100% Aryan, and she is restored to her position, but that is weeks after Siegfried is killed. The marriage on the last day of their life was Hitler's gesture towards Eva to make up for the murder of her child. The death of the dogs, including Blondi's pups, in all their innocence, provides a mirror image of the murder of Siegfried. Eva, however, seems to understand the latter better than the first.

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22 It probably is no coincidence that the name of the housekeeper who mainly raised Harry Mulisch, was Frieda Falk.



Maria returns to the hotel room and finds the writer lying dead on his bed. She listens to the recording of his notes, and it turns out that just before he died, Herter saw a kind of vision or appearance, of Hitler no doubt, exclaiming "He... he... he is here... 'Then nothing more."<sup>23</sup>

For Herter, as for Mulisch himself, Hitler was the negative of the *mysterium tremendum ac fascinans*, the mystery that makes one tremble but fascinates at the same time, a characteristic that is generally attributed to God. Though the fictional diary of Eva Braun seems to offer a human image of Hitler, the novel as a whole stresses his not being human. The writer Herter wanted to see if fiction could be a mirror in which Hitler's image would become visible, but the end suggests that even fiction is unable to capture, let alone conquer, the absolute negative, the black hole of nothingness that Hitler is.

In this short novel Hitler has no voice. He is not even directly observed, he is present only in the thoughts of the writer Herter, in the story Falk tells him and in the imaginary diary of Eva Braun. That indirect approach connects Mulisch's novel with both Hans Keilson's and the next book to be discussed, A. N. Wilson's *Winnie and Wolf*. With the latter it shares the trope of Hitler's imagined child.

### A. N. Wilson, *Winnie and Wolf*<sup>24</sup>

British author A.N. Wilson, born in 1950, is known for his biographies of writers like Sir Walter Scott, Betjeman, Tolstoy, John Milton and C. S. Lewis and the biblical figures St. Paul and Jesus. After *Winnie and Wolf* (2007), which was on the long list for the Man Booker Prize, he published *Hitler: A Short Biography* in 2011, and many other historical books and novels.

The novel covers Hitler's rise to power from 1923 till the end of the Second World War. The preface by a Lutheran pastor offers the frame story of an elderly lady in a seniors' home in Seattle who gave the novel's text to her pastor. Occasional footnotes by the pastor explain the factual background and once even express doubt about the veracity of some of the content. Gradually it becomes clear that the alleged author of the text is this lady's foster father, who used to be the personal assistant of Siegfried Wagner, the composer's son. He remains anonymous, and is only referred to with the initial N. He was part of the Wagner household and very much taken by Siegfried's English-born wife Winifred or Winnie. She is a warm and robust personality, who ably and vigorously manages the Bayreuth Festival in the 1930s, after Siegfried Wagner's

<sup>23</sup> Mulisch, *Siegfried* (Dutch edition), 213.

<sup>24</sup> A. N. Wilson, *Winnie and Wolf* (London: Random House, 2007).

death. The story focuses on the relationship between Winnie Wagner and Hitler, a friend of the family, whom she and her children affectionately call (Uncle) Wolf. After the suicide of Geli Raubal, Hitler's niece, with whom he allegedly had a kinky sexual relationship,<sup>25</sup> Winnie and Hitler have an affair, from which a daughter is born. She is named Senta, after the heroine of Wagner's opera *Der Fliegende Holländer*, and is placed in an orphanage near Bayreuth. When N. marries Helga, a musician from the Bayreuth orchestra, Winnie coaxes them into adopting the child. As the Allies progress into Germany, Bayreuth is heavily bombed, and the little family escapes to Leipzig, in what was to become East-Germany. In the 1960s Senta, a professional cellist, flees to the United States following a performance of *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* and her foster father never sees her again. In writing this very elaborate letter, he tells her about her real lineage.

In this novel Hitler is presented in three different appearances. At his first meeting with N., he is a timid young man whose awkward behavior is a remnant of his destitute past. The amiable family man Wolf, who loves to tell stories to the four Wagner children, is the man Winnie sees foremost, disregarding the other sides of his personality, and N, instead of blackening the image of his competitor in love, takes over her view to a great extent:

[...] I belonged to that very small band of people who had seen Wolf – rather than H – had seen a genial opera lover; the apple-cheeked yeoman-soldier in a dark blue serge suit of my first meetings with him, a man who with Winnie and the children was all geniality and who, in spite of a discernible vein of overenthusiasm, and an occasional coarseness of expression, was, or appeared to be, an essentially benign figure.<sup>26</sup>

Finally, there is Hitler the powerful politician and demagogue, ruthless and cruel, mostly referred to as H. The interpretation of Hitler as a split personality is made most explicit in the report of the Night of the Long Knives: “Spare Röhm,” said H suddenly in the middle of the morning. Rather, it was Wolf, awkwardly aware of what H was up to.”<sup>27</sup> For Winnie, and so for N., the other Hitler, Wolf, remains dominant:

25 See for an overview of various theories about Geli Raubal's death Ron Rosenbaum, Hitler's Doomed Angel, *Vanity Fair* April 1992, accessed April 24, 2023, <https://www.vanityfair.com/news/1992/04/hitlers-doomed-angel>.

26 Wilson, *Winnie and Wolf*, 266.

27 Ibid., 275.

Wolf was the same person as H, but he kept H very well hidden from us. One of the reasons, I suspect, that Winnie was able to continue Wolf, and admiring him even when the extent of H's atrocities had become obvious to everyone else in Germany, was that Wolf so much needed a place in the world, where he *could* be gentle, normal, playful. It was a side of his nature that in other phases of existence he had only ever shown to dogs.<sup>28</sup>

In other scenes Hitler the awkward young man and Hitler the demagogue merge. For instance, the speech Hitler gives from an upper window to a cheering crowd in an early phase of his rise to power. It is a hilarious scene because those inside the room witness how Hitler's uncontrollable flatulence punctuates each patriotic exclamation. The fragment about the poverty and frustration of Hitler's Vienna years, is another example of the merging of the awkward young man and the demagogue, more serious in tone and implication. The kindness he received from Jewish gallery owners who bought and sold some of his architectural drawings is presented as the root of his anti-Semitism: it would be against H's character, "to love those who had been such close witnesses of his life of abject humiliation."<sup>29</sup>

The psychological portrait of Hitler in this novel is – deliberately – incomplete and inadequate; after all, the narrator himself acknowledges: "Although I saw more of him, close up and face to face, than many human beings did, the psychology of Wolf [...] was no more easily understood by me than by anyone else."<sup>30</sup> But Wilson does offer insight into the psychology of his followers. Granted, N has partly internalized Winnie's overly positive view, but he writes in retrospect, aware of the horrors committed in the Holocaust. In the description of his state of mind at the time, the craving for a strong man stands out, someone who can restore order in the country. During the economic misery after the First World War and later during the Great Depression famine and lawlessness seemed to take over the country, with wandering groups of ex-militaries and the constant fear of a Communist revolution. Indignation about the terms of the Versailles Treaty, especially with regard to the Rhineland, fear of a collapse of society, and nostalgic and patriotic, almost occult feelings about the fatherland, Hitler successfully took advantage of it all. Clearly, as an analysis of the social-economic situation of Germany in the Interbellum this picture is not new. But it provides an evocative background to an account of Hitler's rise to power. It is pictured as his development into a mythological national hero, the

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28 Ibid., 255–256.

29 Ibid., 76.

30 Ibid., 157.

messianic figure the Wagners saw in him, more than the progress of a power-hungry politician with unsavory friends and a tendency to violence. The war remains largely out of focus, as Hitler did not stay at the Wagners' residence, Wahnfried, in those years. Winnie is spared getting acquainted with the man who sent millions to their deaths, and with "the raving man in the bunker," out of control and no longer in touch with reality.<sup>31</sup>

Anti-Semitism festered in the Wagner family, starting with Richard Wagner's 1850 article "Das Judentum in der Musik," and reinforced by Houston Stewart Chamberlain, who was married to Wagner's youngest daughter Eva. Winnie, however, looked down upon the vulgar anti-Semitism of the Nazis and successfully intervened with Hitler himself when Jewish members of the Bayreuth orchestra were interned in prisons or camps. Though the narrator states that anti-Semitism never was rife in Germany, he shows how easily he went along with it, for instance when he admired Winnie for using her Swiss bank account to finance the festival (thus evading German currency that lost its value fast because of the huge inflation), but loathed his Jewish dentist with a foreign bank account, which he views as "*underhand*, sneaky, conspiratorial, typical of *them*."<sup>32</sup> Yet, he could have known better, as he himself admits, because his parents and brother were deeply critical about the regime. One day he spotted them in a human chain defending the local synagogue against a brown shirts' attack. He realizes he should have joined them, but he had turned away. In the end his brother, active in the resistance, was hanged and his father perished in a concentration camp. The narrator N presents himself as the typical bystander, who does not take a stand, because he has nothing to gain from that.

The novel's composition mirrors Hitler's infatuation with Wagner and his work, and his penchant for Germanic mythology: the seven sections of the book are titled after Wagner operas, each having a theme in common with its title opera. It is a double bind, because in each section the performance of the opera in question, with its organizational and artistic complications, is part of the story. But for our topic the more important aspect of this Wagner line of the novel is the way Hitler is mesmerized by the Wagnerian world, and in turn mesmerizes his entourage and almost all of Germany with his megalomaniac plans.

This Wagner line deviates from the autodiegetic narration. Describing Richard Wagner and his mid nineteenth century adventures, the I-narrator

31 It is doubtful if that would have changed her opinion of him, as a 1975 TV interview with Hans Jürgen Syberman has shown.

32 Ibid., 128.

seems to shift to an extradiegetic, omniscient point of view, with knowledge of Wagner's mind: "God, that concert season in London (1855, BS) was hell!"<sup>33</sup> A similar stylistic rupture occurs on pages 244-254, when details from Hitler's past are related that N can hardly have known. The latter instance does give some insight in Hitler's character and development but cannot be explained away by N's over-identification with Hitler. Over-identification with Wagner could be a possibility in the Wagner episode, but it is far-fetched and not completely credible. These inconsistencies do detract somewhat from the novel's representation of Hitler's followers: not Nazis, or at least not die-hard ones, but turning a blind eye to the dark side of Hitler and the Nazi party.<sup>34</sup>

### Timur Vermes, *Look Who's Back*<sup>35</sup>

Timur Vermes' *Er ist wieder da* from 2012 is the most widely discussed novel of the five considered in this chapter. Apart from Jonathan Littell's *The Kindly Ones* from 2006, no fiction on Holocaust perpetrators has received so much critical and scholarly attention as Vermes' novel. Since this is the only one of the five here discussed that meets the condition of an autodiegetic narrator that was McGlothlin's point of departure, I will try to identify the aspects of readers' possible identificatory response that she designated.

Hitler, the autodiegetic narrator, finds himself in contemporary Berlin, miraculously risen from the dead. His confrontation with present day Germany is at first hilarious. He misinterprets a granola bar as evidence of a still persistent food shortage, and the presence of many Turkish people in the streets tells him that the Turkish army has successfully defended Berlin against the Soviets. Many passages can be read as satirical commentary on contemporary German (and European) society, such as his first introduction to a television set. He immediately sees its possibilities for propaganda but is appalled that there are only insipid cooking programs to watch or banal talk shows about family problems. Aided by the humorous phrasing, these views may foster a partial perspectival identification, making readers look from an outsider's perspective to what they are used to as normal. Likewise, Hitler observes that Germany has apparently forged its own currency for the rest of Europe, that

33 Ibid., 260.

34 Apart from the child that Winifred allegedly had with Hitler, most of the facts in the novel are corroborated by Brigitte Hamann's biography of Winifred: *Winifred Wagner: A Life at the Heart of Hitler's Bayreuth*. Translated by Alan Bance (Orlando, Florida: Harcourt, 2005).

35 Timur Vermes, *Look Who's Back*, trans. Jamie Bulloch (London: Quercus, 2014). Originally in German, *Er ist wieder da* (Köln: Eichborn Verlag, 2012).

the journal *Bild* must be geared for the elderly because of the chocolate letters of the headlines, and that the Olympics in Beijing successfully imitated Berlin's by presenting the hosting country as eminently innocent.

Less amusing are some of his tirades against "das internationale Finanzjudentum" or "the by syphilis degenerated brains of the hate press," and his phantasies about the next war, in which he – contrary to the one in the 1940s – would first sacrifice the unworthy people to the war effort, and save the elite. Here, no ideological identification is aimed at and none is accomplished.

In the novel, the general public sees Hitler as funny and harmless, taking him for an accomplished method actor or comedian. They go along in his "play" and offer him appearances in television shows, with all the misunderstandings that go with it. Hitler mistakes their smiles for approval. He wants to conduct street interviews as a means to whip up general discontent and is amazed that people appear mostly satisfied with their lives and Germany's politics. Gradually he begins to see that no one understands who he really is. He muses: "The advantage of being over 120 years of age, is mostly a tactical one: the political opponent does not count on it and is taken completely by surprise."<sup>36</sup> He himself does not understand, any more than the reader, how it is possible that he came back to life again.

This issue is a bump in understanding the novel as a political or societal satire. Can we reproach the German public in the novel for laughing at this Hitler and for playing along with him, stretching an arm, shouting *Sieg Heil* and addressing him as *Mein Führer*? Is it a sign of naivety, or even ideological identification in these fictitious Germans – or in readers who smile at the revived Hitler's adventures? Does the novel offer severe criticism or an endorsement of contemporary Germany? After all, no sane person could ever think this is the "real" Hitler. In that sense the novel could well be a satire of the moralistic culture of *Betroffenheit*, that Gavriel Rosenfeld pointed out for West-Germany from the 1970s.<sup>37</sup> Yet this Hitler's ideas do find fertile soil, and there is wide public acclaim for him as a political commentator who speaks his mind. Thus, the story offers satirical criticism of the naivety of the popular response to this alleged stand-up comedian, who so keenly exposes the flaws in German society. It also shows the power of the modern media and deft rhetoric and their danger when used for the wrong causes. The Holocaust is not more than a dark shadow in the background, but tellingly it is the young woman assigned to him as his secretary, who stands up against him after her visit to her Jewish

<sup>36</sup> Vermes, *Look*, 282.

<sup>37</sup> Rosenfeld, *Hi Hitler!*, 16.

grandmother. But she is practically alone in acknowledging the danger this “comedian’s” media success poses.

If we consider the diegetic narrator Hitler using McGlothlin’s taxonomy, we may find some perspectival identification with his criticism of certain aspects of the consumerist modern culture. Reliability-dependent identification plays no role, since the humor of the novel is exactly based on the reader knowing more and better than the I-narrator. There could be a small measure of affective identification in as far as readers can feel sympathy with mavericks and outsiders in general, people who do not fit in modern society or do not have a tight grasp of reality. Ideological identification is not to be expected – or hoped for – with a narrator who is openly anti-Semitic, racist, and ruthless where other people’s interests or even their lives are at stake.<sup>38</sup> The positive response from the fictitious public regards only some, evidently popular, parts of his views, disconcerting as that response in itself is. That leaves the most basic type of identification, the existentialist one, and there is no real question of that either: his miraculous and unexplained resurrection prevents readers’ identification with the narrator as a fellow human.

Vermes both demonizes and humanizes Hitler. His supernatural existence, his total lack of repentance or insight in the causes of Germany’s defeat, and his determination to start a new world war contribute to the demonic dimension. His presentation as an old man at a loss in present day culture and society may be viewed as humanizing. The misperceptions and clashes with reality constitute an important part of the humor in this novel. Its humor makes the novel a prime example of the trend of normalization of the Nazi past that Gavriel Rosenfeld pointed out.<sup>39</sup> However, what was humorous in the Germany of 2012, may be less so in the present day, after the refugee crisis and the sharp rise of the populist party “Alternatives for Germany” with its nationalist, conservative and xenophobic agenda, violent extreme right movements, and the Reichsbürgers’ plans to overthrow the government, as revealed in 2022. We can only hope that in the near future we can still look upon this novel as a – perhaps not completely successful – attempt at a humorous expression of the trend of normalization of the Nazi era, and not as prophecy of real political developments.

38 In this respect the scene where Hitler shoots a bothersome dog is rather out of character with the historical Hitler.

39 British critics have indicated that making fun of Hitler may be transgressive in Germany, but that it has been done in the UK for decades. In the United States making fun of Hitler happened especially before and during the war, Charlie Chaplin’s film *The Great Dictator* is the best-known example of that trend.

**Lavie Tidhar, *A Man Lies Dreaming*<sup>40</sup>**

Lavie Tidhar is an Israeli born author (1976), who now lives in the United Kingdom and writes in English, mostly sci-fi and phantasy. His grandparents were Holocaust survivors, his mother born in a DP camp. This, in a sense transgressive, novel was nominated for several prizes, and mostly – but not unanimously – favorably reviewed (“The Guardian”: “a twisted masterpiece”<sup>41</sup>).

It is an alternate history but unlike most others of the genre: here it is not the victory of Nazism in the world (or the US, like in Philip Roth’s *The Plot Against America*, or in Great-Britain, like in Len Deighton’s *SS-GB*), but the defeat of the national-socialist party in the 1933 elections. The communists won and installed an equally harsh terror regime, without targeting the Jews. In England, however, Fascist politician Oswald Mosley is about to become prime-minister and anti-Semitism has become mainstream. Hitler, now going by the name Wolf, has managed to escape from Germany and leads an anonymous life in poverty as an unsuccessful private detective in London. The city is awash with refugees from Germany and Austria, both Nazis and bankers and industrialists, among them – with a wink to history – Hess, Göring, Ilse Koch, Eichmann, Leni Riefenstahl. The last 15 pages of the novel are reserved for notes that explain the historical background of these and other characters and events. Hitler’s adventures are like a low-brow pulp detective story, with an excessive amount of violence and – mostly Sadomasochistic – sex. Wolf is frequently beaten up, by a Jewish police inspector, by a Jewish banker, Rubinstein, whose beautiful daughter had employed him to find her lost sister, by the thugs of his former Nazi associates, whose network of human trafficking he investigates. The banker even lets his ruffians forcefully circumcise him.

The story is told half in the third person, half in Wolf’s first-person diary fragments, both in the past tense. These fragments uncover something of his past, the love for his mother, abuse by his father, and his – unhealthy – love for his young niece Geli Raubal. The latter is a link to Wilson’s novel, as is the name Wolf with which Hitler calls himself. The difference between the narrated text and the diary fragments is slight and, in my opinion, not very functional.

Wolf is sketched as a doggedly raving anti-Semite, who does not curb his tongue, losing all caution and smartness, for instance when he shouts his

40 Lavie Tidhar, *A Man Lies Dreaming* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2014).

41 Adam Roberts, “A Man Lies Dreaming by Lavie Tidhar Review – A Noir Novel about the Holocaust” *The Guardian*, October 15, 2014, accessed April 28, 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/oct/15/a-man-lies-dreaming-lavie-tidhar-review-novel>.



prejudiced insults at Rubinstein when he is completely at the banker's mercy. His arrogance and self-aggrandizement are utterly unlikely. Other unsympathetic features are his obsession with prostitutes, his idea that love is only a sign of weakness and his taste for women as just adoring and obedient, the same way as he likes his dog Blonda.

This crude story is interspersed with fragments starting with, 'In another time and place Shomer lies dreaming' (or: rises blinkingly, and likewise phrases). They are, in the present tense, about a prisoner in Auschwitz called Shomer. Experts may recognize this name: Yiddish author Sholem Aleichem once wrote a diatribe against a pulp fiction writer, Shomer, in the late nineteenth century. These fragments offer a credible and moving picture of life in the camp, but they comprise no more than about ten percent of the text. Though it is not said in so many words, the suggestion clearly is that the Wolf story is a kind of revenge phantasy by Shomer, his imagination a way to escape the ordeal of Auschwitz. The novel's title points in the direction of this interpretation. The remarkably violent role of some of the Jewish characters may be a counter move against the prejudice of Jews as weak and defenseless. I felt some discomfort with the many unpleasant Jewish characters, though the non-Jewish ones are equally unlikeable.

The Wolf and Shomer plotlines fleetingly touch each other at the end, when Wolf dreams he is in a concentration camp, much like Shomer's experience, and when Shomer dreams of arriving on the shore of the promised land, seeing a ship with refugees approaching, the same ship that carries Wolf, as a Jewish refugee, to Palestine.

### The Case Studies Compared to Each Other and to Literary Theory

How do these five novels correspond to the paradigms established by Rosenfeld, Pettitt, Butter, Bragança, and McGlothlin? The device of narratological distancing that Joanne Pettitt pointed out (though the instances that she refers to provide distance in a more literal, visual sense),<sup>42</sup> is operating in four of the five novels, namely those that employ some kind of frame story: *The Death of the Adversary*, *Siegfried*, *Winnie and Wolf*, and *A man lies dreaming*. Keilson and Wilson present their novel as the text of a manuscript by an anonymous author, found by an uninvolved third party. Mulisch incorporates the part in which Hitler is active as the story the protagonist hears from former servants, and in the alleged diary of Eva Braun, without clarification if this is imagined or dreamt by the protagonist, or in some unexplained way 'really' has come in his possession. Tidhar leaves it to the perceptive reader to understand the

42 Pettitt, *Perpetrators*, 101.

Hitler (or Wolf) part as the revenge fantasy of a concentration camp prisoner. So, four of the five novels use a literary device of distancing. The fifth novel's setting, *Look Who's Back*, could be said to be so implausible that that in itself provides distance.

Gavriel Rosenfeld identified humor as a means of normalization of the Nazi past, in films and cartoons, and in the more recent genre of memes. Vermes is the only one of the five novelists discussed here who deploys humor. However, his humor is the result of exactly the opposite of a normalizing trend in view of the physically impossible point of departure: Hitler inexplicably risen from the dead. Vermes induces smiles through Hitler's not understanding the modern world, and the fictitious public's unawareness of who he really is. One could consider Tidhar's novel as humorous too. That humor is the effect of the disparity of the fictitious, completely grounded Hitler and the historical figure. There is a small measure of humor in Wilson's account of Hitler too, but it is mostly restricted to the flatulence theme, and not very prominent in most of the novel. The humor lies in the contrast of such a sordid feature and the un-normal impact of the historical figure. In all three cases it is mainly the contrast between history and fiction (though I do not know if his flatulence is fictitious) that has a humorous effect. On the other hand, in all three cases it could be contested that laughing about Hitler in itself – whatever the exact reason – is a way of coping with the phenomenon, and thus a kind of normalization. Bragança pointed out that humor and trivialization gain their effect precisely because we all know that in the end Hitler was evil.<sup>43</sup>

It is remarkable that the not very common trope of Hitler's offspring is present in two of the five novels. Both are composed as a story within a story, just like American author Gary Goss's novel *Hitler's Daughter* (1973).<sup>44</sup> Coincidentally, Wilson's and Mulisch's novels are from the same year, 2007, which is some thirty years later than American ones about Hitler's alleged children.<sup>45</sup> In *Siegfried* the story of the murdered son is proof of Hitler's

43 Bragança, *French Afterlives*, 10. For this he also refers to Richard Evans, *The Third Reich in History and Memory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).

44 See for a discussion of this not widely known novel, Gavriel Rosenfeld, *The World Hitler Never Made*, 224–227 and Michael Butter, *The Epitome of Evil*, 75–82. Goss' novel is not to be mistaken for Australian author Jackie French's children's book of the same title from 1999.

45 Michael Butter discusses four other American novels that explore this theme: Martin Dibner, *A God for Tomorrow* (1961), Gus Weill, *The Führer Seed* (1979), Timothy Benford, *Hitler's Daughter... Wants to Occupy the White House* (1983) and Ira Levin's thriller about boys who are biologically Hitler's clones, *The Boys from Brazil* (1976) (*Epitome*, 32–33 and chapter 4, "Children, Clones and Conspiracies").

ruthless character and can thus be considered a way of demonizing him. In *Winnie and Wolf* that is not the case, but his indifferent attitude towards the child does nothing to make him into a more human character either, despite his alleged love for children in general and the Wagner children in particular.

Hitler's countenance is not strongly thematized in these novels. The eyes and the voice receive most attention as instrumental for the impact he has on people, more on crowds than on individuals. Both Keilson and Wilson contend that the rest of his features are not very special and hardly warrant his public success. Tidhar is the only one who pays attention to the element in his appearance that is, apart from the lock of hair on his brow, the most characteristic: the moustache, now shaved off. These two, the moustache and the lock on his brow, have become so iconic that they figure as identifiers on the cover of every edition of *Look Who's Back*. They work more as a mocking symbol than as a demonizing feature, whereas the way the eyes and voice with their mesmerizing effect figure in the other novels does contribute to his demonic or mythological status. With Tidhar, precisely the absence of this mesmerizing effect is a recurring motif. It conveys that the circumstances defined and enabled Hitler's charisma. For Vermes, of course, the whole story hinges on Hitler's countenance that is exactly the same as in April 1945, including the uniform that smells of the gasoline with which the body was supposed to be burnt. Would the typical features be absent, the fictitious public would only show support for his right wing, nationalistic views, but now it is also – at least in part – laughter at the country's dark past, uneasy as that laughter may also be. Yet clearly, Vermes shows Hitler with his charisma unabated, exactly the opposite of what Tidhar suggests.

Manuel Bragança pointed out that using historical characters in fiction requires a difficult balance between too much and too little details.<sup>46</sup> Keilson and Mulisch stay on the latter side. According to Bragança this runs the risk of stereotyping, which, indeed, seems true for these novels. They both tilt towards mythologizing Hitler, and both do so intentionally. In this, Mulisch chooses the more traditional approach of Hitler as demonic; Keilson uses the mythologizing more unexpectedly, as part of the psychology of the I-narrator. In Wilson's novel historical facts, all focused on the pre-war years, serve the creditability of the story and the portrayal of Winnie Wagner and her circle. The historical facts contribute to understanding Hitler's popularity as the savior of a Germany in disarray. Therefore, this historical setting works more for the humanization of Hitler's followers and the German people than for humanization of Hitler himself.

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46 Bragança, *French Afterlives*, 9.

Hitler's relationship with his much younger niece Geli Raubal figure both in Wilson's and in Tidhar's novel. She lived in Hitler's apartment in Munich and he was more than fond of her. In 1931 she was found dead there, at 23, killed by Hitler's gun. In his authoritative and exhaustively researched Hitler biography Ian Kershaw is very negative on Hitler's attitude and behavior towards her. He regards his extreme jealousy and possessiveness as pathological; even physical violence is hinted at. Yet it remains uncertain if their relationship was explicitly sexual, and neither has it ever been clarified if her death was suicide or instigated by Himmler or other leading figures in the Nazi party.<sup>47</sup> A love affair could have contributed to humanizing Hitler's portrait (as it does in Wilson's portrayal of Hitler's relationship with Winifred Wagner), not in this case, however: both the incestuous aspect and the domineering, negative character of the part Hitler played, work against that, with just an unsympathetic, not a downright demonizing effect. The pseudonym Wolf, that is so prominent in Wilson's and Tidhar's novels, is based on another historical fact, as Ian Kershaw relates about his stay in Bavaria in the early 1930's.<sup>48</sup>

In Vermes's novel the historical details mostly serve a humorous purpose as they underline the difference between "now," present-day Germany and "then," in the way Hitler views the world. Lavie Tidhar, uses historical details unusually much (for a novel) and he elaborately accounts for them in the pages of notes with which he concludes. The details function partly to underline the counter factuality of the Wolf part of the story, such as the fiction that all these high-ranking, influential Nazis end up as immigrants in London. Other details, such as Oswald Mosley and the Mitford sisters, and many views that Wolf expresses, lend the story a sense of familiarity and recognizability (for historically well-informed readers, that is). The historical characters and views are woven into the counter-factual story with an effect that may be the opposite of the de-realizing one that Bragança mentions as the risk of using too many historical details. Roland Barthes indicated with this term that the fictional pact with its "suspension of disbelief" is breached by the awareness of the difference between reality and the fictional world.<sup>49</sup> But in the end, the suspension of disbelief is not what Tidhar aims at, assuming that the Wolf part is indeed Shomer's revenge phantasy.

47 Ian Kershaw, *Hitler, 1889–1936. Hoogmoed* (Utrecht: Spectrum, 1999) (trans. of *Hitler, 1889–1936. Hubris*. London: Allen Lane, 1998), 458.

48 Kershaw, *Hitler. Hoogmoed*, 370; 372.

49 Bragança, *French Afterlives*, 10.

As for demonizing and humanizing Hitler, Harry Mulisch is the only one to unequivocally choose the demonizing approach. Keilson does so to a lesser degree because of the distancing device of the Jewish boy as focalizer. Wilson hardly does so, mainly because the Hitler who wrought havoc in Germany, not to mention the Holocaust, stays out of focus; that part of the past looms in the unspoken background; the war years and the Holocaust are only present in the narrator's hindsight, not in the related events. Vermes is a mix, but the demonizing, reinforced perhaps by the supernatural nature of Hitler's presence in contemporary Germany, is diminished by humor. Tidhar – or rather the Shomer character – draws an utterly unlikable picture of Hitler, but he does not demonize him.

These five novels aim more at fostering reader's empathy for those people who were attracted to Hitler than for the man himself. Though all discussed novels, except *Siegfried*, grant him some amount of spoken word, Vermes is the only one who makes Hitler the autodiegetic narrator. Other instances of Hitler as focalizer are rare, and when it occurs, as, indirectly, in *A Man Lies Dreaming*, it is to some extent with a humorous effect. All use a circuitous way to approach their subject, if we consider the lack of realism in Vermes as such too.

Existential identification on the reader's part is mostly possible, with the exception of Harry Mulisch's and Vermes's novels; in the first it is not possible because Hitler stands for absolute, metaphysical evil, and in the latter because of the lack of realism that makes Hitler a supernatural entity instead of a human being. Some perspectival identification is possible in Wilson's and Vermes' novels, and perhaps a tiny bit of affective identification in Vermes' and Tidhar's books because of the predicaments Hitler is in.

Michael Butter identified no less than 115 American works of Hitler fiction published between 1939 and 2002. There is no comprehensive research of European literature to date, but it would presumably render a significantly lesser amount. Butter clearly does not agree with Gavriel Rosenfeld that the representation of Hitler as absolute evil is an expression of a moralistic perspective, and that texts that challenge that established view of Hitler testify to a waning of that perspective. He outlines a rather recent "blame-Hitler" tendency in German culture that obscures the collective responsibility, but it is debatable if Vermes' novel, which was published some years after Butter's book, fits that trend, because it could be said that the way the "revived" Hitler is received by the German public is the real topic here. Yet, the mythological or ontological tendency seems to be much weaker in Europe than in the United States. Butter contends that this interpretation of Hitler does not explain anything, that it even forecloses explanation. This may be the reason that European literature leans more towards a portrayal of Hitler that looks for psychological and especially social (and social-economic) explanations.

Though my small selection of five European works of fiction does not claim to be entirely representative, they confirm the intuition that recent European (including Israeli) fiction follows a different trend than American literature. Harry Mulisch's novel is the marked exception, but his approach is in line with some of his other work that show a preference for personal, sweeping mythology. His large novel *The Discovery of Heaven*<sup>50</sup> from 1992 is a point in case. Yet his 1982 novel *The Assault*,<sup>51</sup> made into an Academy Award and Golden Globe winning film, explores the blurry boundaries of good and evil, and in that sense is more a part of the European tradition that denies an absolute dichotomy.

It is a yet open question if this difference between American and non-American Hitler fiction is due to the more recent date of the non-American novels discussed here, or to the geographical distance. The geographical proximity and the lived experience of the evil that Hitler caused may make European writers more sensitive to the contingency and the human factor in history. The urge to understand the circumstances that made Hitler's rise to power possible, and to understand the motives of the perpetrators and the bystanders may therefore be stronger than in the United States. The awareness of the extent of collaboration that followed Hitler's seize of power in Germany and the occupation in other countries,<sup>52</sup> makes this need for nuance even keener. In this respect, Britain's position is complicated. Geographically – and politically now too – it is half in and half outside Europe, but, more importantly, Britain has not been occupied by the Nazis and did not face the moral dilemmas that come with a hostile takeover. As one of the Allied countries, the side of the liberators is part of Britain's collective memory. Maybe Lavie Tidhar, Israeli-born but living in London and writing in English, is an obvious candidate to write in a nuanced way about this topic, though in the case of *A Man Lies Dreaming* he chose to do so in an unusual and titillating way. His sketch of British society in the grip of Oswald Mosley and his crowd, may not be seriously meant as 'what if' history, it still offers social critique of susceptibility in society – not only British society – for fascism and populism. This view is also present in Wilson's novel, but in a less satirical way, and without any extension to Great Britain (despite Winnie Wagner's British descent).

50 Harry Mulisch, *De ontdekking van de hemel* (Amsterdam: De Bezige Bij, 1992), translated by Paul Vincent as *The Discovery of Heaven* (New York: Viking, 1996).

51 Harry Mulisch, *De aanslag* (Amsterdam: De Bezige Bij, 1982), translated by Claire Nicolas White as *The Assault* (London: Collins Harvill, 1985).

52 Dan Stone zooms in on this extent of collaboration without which the Holocaust would not have been possible, in his recent book, *The Holocaust: An Unfinished History* (London: Pelican, 2023).

Finally, in the comparison of the five novels, it is most remarkable that Hitler is present as a focalizer in a German and an Israeli novel, crudely said: in novels of the perpetrator and the victim countries, but in the Israeli one it should be assumed that the real focalizer is the victim Shomer. A parallel situation can be seen in the other German novel, *The Death of the Adversary*, where it is the anonymous Jewish young man whose perception of Hitler is central in the narrative, so in both Keilson's and Tidhar's novel it is the victim's perspective from which we look at the perpetrator, with in both cases a totally unreliable result. Tidhar presents a playful fantasy (though to the informed reader the Shomer part is anything but playful) and Keilson a delusion. Yet both seem to hint at an interconnectiveness between the victim and the ultimate perpetrator. The Dutch and the English novels take a bystander perspective, but the English one more leaning to the perpetrator's view and the Dutch one leaning not to the victim's side, but more to a post-fact judgmental position. It is tempting to see these stances as representative of the attitudes and literatures of the countries in which these novels are rooted, but that would stretch the conclusions for such a small body of texts much too far.

## Abstract

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*Fictional Representations of Hitler*

American writers have taken Hitler as a fictional character more often than European writers did and their work has received more scholarly attention. Scholars like Gavriel Rosenfeld and Michael Butter roughly conclude to two opposing trends in American Hitler fiction, a humanizing and demonizing one. This article discusses recent non-American novels, focusing on five of them, two in German (Hans Keilson and Timur Vermes), one in Dutch (Harry Mulisch), one from Great-Britain (A. N. Wilson) and one from Israel (Lavie Tidhar). These five novels show striking similarities in their preference for a frame story and for elements of counterfactual history. More importantly, only one, the Dutch novella, fits the demonizing trend that is so prominent in American Hitler fiction. Contrary to what historian Gavriel Rosenfeld claims, however, the over-all humanizing approach does not have a trivializing effect. By picturing Hitler as a human being and not as a demon, either in a metaphysical or in a metaphorical sense, the distance a reader may feel to this literary character, will be bridged to some degree. His humanness could have a more alarming effect than the comfortable idea of his absolute otherness, by implicitly asking questions about the reader's empathy and the essence of being human.

## Keywords

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Hitler fiction, counterfactual history, mythologization, Hans Keilson, Harry Mulisch, A. N. Wilson, Timur Vermes, and Lavie Tidhar



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Sarah Minslow

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**Legacies of the Shoah in Jonathan Safran Foer's *Everything Is Illuminated* and Arnon Grunberg's *De Joodse Messias* [*The Jewish Messiah*]**

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TEKSTY DRUGIE 2024, NR 1, S. 183–202

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DOI: 10.18318/td.2024.en.1.11 | ORCID: 0000-0001-9219-3548

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**T**his article compares *Everything Is Illuminated* (2002) by American author Jonathan Safran Foer to *De Joodse Messias* [*The Jewish Messiah*] (2004) by Dutch author Arnon Grunberg. Both novels contribute to ongoing discussions about Holocaust representation in the face of a generation temporally and spatially removed from the historical events. Both are more experiential than many other Holocaust novels. They are representative of the genre complexity typical of some second and many third generation Holocaust narratives, though Grunberg's work is avant-garde for a child of Holocaust survivors in its use of grotesque humor. It disrupts expectations of what a novel by and about the descendants of Holocaust survivors should be.<sup>1</sup> In addition to playing with genre and temporality, the authors employ humor to bring taboo subjects into their respective narratives as an attempt to “speak

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<sup>1</sup> According to Bettine Siertsema, Grunberg may have been influenced by Dutch author Ischa Meijer in that he “violated the norm that you spare war victims” (Presentation, *Comparative Approaches to Twenty-First-Century Holocaust Literature*. September 2020).

the unspeakable.”<sup>2</sup> Such complexity serves to blur boundaries, not only between literary genres, but also between temporalities and binaries, such as those of victim and perpetrator, superficial and sacrosanct, and love and hate. Further, the novels highlight the generational trauma that is inherited and exists in myriad ways in families of survivors and perpetrators. Ultimately, by blurring temporalities and focusing on what families inherit, these novels emphasize human agency in atrocity and the impossibilities of reconciliation by highlighting the capacity humans have for hurting one another and the limits of forgiveness. Despite their titles, which suggests enlightenment or salvation, both novels acknowledge that “evil [is – author’s note] indeed a problem” but that there is “no possibility of a deeper truth” when writing Holocaust fiction.<sup>3</sup>

### Synopses of the Novels

*Everything Is Illuminated* was a “New York Times” bestseller and landed the author in the pages of popular magazines like “Rolling Stone” and “Vanity Fair.” Its reach extended far beyond typical literary circles in the United States. This novel features a protagonist named Jonathan Safran Foer (whom I will refer to as Jonathan) who travels to Ukraine in search of a woman named Augustine who saved his Jewish grandfather, Safran, from the Nazis. The novel is loosely based on the real Jonathan Safran Foer’s (whom I will refer to as Foer) travels to Ukraine to, in his words “find out about my family, find out about myself, and somehow express what I found out.”<sup>4</sup> Foer humorously portrays quirky Jewish character and conveys the understanding of how badly affected children of Holocaust survivors are. Foer produced a deeply moving exploration of third generation identity in which the present is pulsing with imagined memories of those people who and places that no longer exist because they were destroyed by the Nazis. He creates a story so rich with Jewish history and characters that readers are overwhelmed by their absence in the present. The chapters in *Everything Is Illuminated* alternate between Jonathan writing fictional stories about life in Trachimbrod, a shtetl in Ukraine in the 1790s, and Jonathan and Alex, his Ukrainian guide, exchanging letters in which they

2 Judit Elek, *To Speak the Unspeakable: The Message of Elie Wiesel* (Turner Classic Movies, 1996).

3 Arnon Grunberg, *The Jewish Messiah*, trans. Sam Garrett (New York: The Penguin Press, 2008), 3.

4 “Jonathan Safran Foer interview on *Everything is Illuminated* (2002).” *Manufacturing Intellect*, accessed July 22, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g2ShZG2vdT8>.

recount their recent journey through Ukraine, which turns out to be more a story about Alex and his family history than about Jonathan's. The story is as invested in Alex's relationship with his own father and grandfather as it is Jonathan's journey. Jonathan's and Alex's grandfathers' stories of the war converge near the end of the novel, drawing a connection between the families despite their spatial divide. Jonathan and Alex learn difficult truths about their ancestors and force readers to contemplate the ethical limits of forgiveness.

As the letters recount, Jonathan is driven around Ukraine by Alex, Alex's grandfather, and Alex's grandfather's "seeing eye bitch, Sammy Davis Junior Junior"<sup>5</sup> in search of the place where his grandfather lived and where his ancestors were killed by Nazis. The journey takes many days, and the three men awkwardly attempt conversation and navigate meals, which mostly consists of potatoes for the vegetarian Jonathan. When they reach their destination, only one woman with a small house full of boxes of mementos of the past remains. They believe her to be Augustine, the woman who saved Jonathan's grandfather during the war, but she is named Lista. Lista recognizes Alex's grandfather, and when he asks her forgiveness, she will not grant it. Alex and Jonathan learn that Alex's grandfather pointed out his best friend as a Jew to the Nazis during the Holocaust, and his best friend was murdered. Upon returning home, Jonathan receives a letter from Alex's grandfather admitting that he wants the best for his grandsons and that he is unable to forgive himself. Unable to do so, Alex's grandfather commits suicide.

The Jewish Messiah begins with a Swiss teenage grandson of a former SS guard who was killed during Second World War desiring to become the savior of the Jews. Given his messianic complex, he befriends an orthodox Jewish family, begins having a sexual relationship with one of the handsome sons, Awromele, and has a botched circumcision. As a result, Xavier loses a testicle, which he keeps in a jar high on a shelf and refers to as King David. Xavier Radek's parents thought his interest in Judaism would "vanish as though it had never been. Just like Xavier's grandfather."<sup>6</sup> Yet, Xavier and Awromele maintain their friendship over several tumultuous years. Xavier's parents are divorced, and his father is dead by suicide. Xavier's mother ignores Xavier's suffering, but her boyfriend, Marc, falls in love with Xavier. Xavier paints, mostly images of his jarred testicle and his mother, and eventually, he and Awromele leave their families so that Xavier can go to school in Amsterdam. As adults, Awromele has a series of sexual affairs, and Xavier decides to become involved in politics. Ultimately, the couple move to Israel, where Xavier

5 Jonathan Safran Foer, *Everything Is Illuminated* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2003), 34.

6 Grunberg, *The Jewish Messiah*, 8.

risers to notoriety and is considered by many to be the savior of the Jews until he and Awromele are killed by angry mobs for selling nuclear weapons in what has been described as a tragicomic finale.

Both Xavier Radek, the protagonist in *The Jewish Messiah*, and Alex in *Everything Is Illuminated* have fraught and abusive relationships with the parent who was the child of someone involved in the murder of Jews. *The Jewish Messiah* is about the grandson of an SS guard becoming friends and then lovers with an Orthodox Jew named Awromele. Xavier explains that he has so much pleasure in his life that he wants to now “learn about suffering,”<sup>7</sup> which he has learned to associate with Jews. His conversion to Judaism (which has nothing to do with his desire for religion or forgiveness) is bookended by his desire to be like his grandfather and to make his grandfather proud. At the beginning of the novel, we gain insight into the way Xavier imagines his deceased grandfather, as a man “who understood death’s handiwork without bothering his own family about it, a man for whom words like ‘honor’ and ‘loyalty’ still meant something, a man of morals who clung faithfully to a vision even under brutal conditions.”<sup>8</sup> And while the teen Xavier misconstrues his grandfather’s actions as an SS guard whereby he “had killed the enemies of happiness the way other people ate oysters”<sup>9</sup> as principled and honorable, it is clear that Xavier’s mother does not feel the same way about her father; she hides “documents, photos, and a book she had hoped would never be found”<sup>10</sup> and never talks about him, though we learn that she respects him.<sup>11</sup> This familial silence leads Xavier to imagine and create fictions about his grandfather. Like Foer’s imaginative reconstruction of a Jewish shtetl in the 1790s entangles the past with the present, Grunberg’s futuristic imaginings of a time when a former SS guard’s grandson is elected Prime Minister of Israel and sells nuclear weapons to enemies of the West radically entangles the past, present, and future and asks readers to think about human cruelty and inheritances of trauma. Both novels interrogate whether peaceful coexistence is possible since they feature a Jewish male and a non-Jewish male who has generational links to Nazi perpetration becoming friends while grappling with forgiveness and reconciliation between Holocaust survivors and perpetrators. A major contradiction

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7 Ibid., 10.

8 Ibid., 1.

9 Ibid., 4.

10 Ibid., 3.

11 Of her SS-guard father she thinks that he “may have lived by ideas that were considered objectionable these days, but at least he hadn’t lived like a weakling.”

that emerges in both novels is the tension between pain and humor, with both texts suggesting that pain and humor are requisites to communicate about traumatic pasts that are irreparable and unforgiveable.

### Temporality in Second and Third Generation Holocaust Novels

In their respective works, Foer and Grunberg use experiential modes of storytelling symptomatic of other works of the second and third generation of Holocaust survivors and perpetrators. They play with temporalities of the distant past, recent past, present, and future, and they use humor to empathetically engage readers in shocking ways. Both novels interrogate the relationship between the historical events and the second and third generation, particularly in their portrayals of how the protagonists inherit traumatic pasts from their parents and grandparents. In her 2013 book, *Second Generation Memory and Contemporary Children's Literature: Ghost Images*, Anastasia Ulanowicz argues that:

second generation memory can be considered a radically disruptive form. It unsettles the distinctions between “present” and “past,” “self” and “other,” and “mind” and “body.” Paradoxically it also calls into question the very category on which it is founded: the family. Both second-generation memory and collective memory “enframe, modify, and recast” individual recollection in relation to ties of kinship, affective bonds, and narratives of inheritance.<sup>12</sup>

The complexity of family and the silences in family histories and their impact on identity development are prominent in these two novels. These second and third generation Holocaust novels suggest that children and grandchildren of Holocaust survivors continue to struggle with inherited identities as perpetrators and victims and that second and third generation novelists use postmodern, meta-fictional techniques to “work through” intergenerational trauma as an attempt to forge their identities. This working through is what Marianne Hirsch considers the work of postmemory. For Hirsch, postmemory is “a connection to the past that is not actually mediated by recall but by imaginative investment, projection, and creation.”<sup>13</sup> Thus, postmemory describes a creative act in which the children try to piece together a family narrative punctuated with silences. *The Jewish Messiah* explores the possibilities of relationships between the descendants of grandchildren of Holocaust survivors

<sup>12</sup> Anastasia Ulanowicz, *Second Generation Memory and Contemporary Children's Literature: Ghost Images* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 18.

<sup>13</sup> Marianne Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust* (New York: Columbia UP, 2012), 5.

and perpetrators, the silence around what one's parents or grandparents did during the Holocaust, and inherited trauma. Xavier abandons his mother and forges his most meaningful relationship with Awromele in an attempt to forge an identity and kinship beyond the perpetrator-victim binary. Foer acknowledges the inescapable past of the second and third generations in his novel explicitly when he writes: "But children had it worst of all, for although it would seem that they had fewer memories to haunt them, they still had the itch of memory as strong as the elders of the shtetl. Their strings were not even their own, but tied around them by parents and grandparents strings not fastened to anything, but hanging loosely from the darkness."<sup>14</sup> These loose ends are the inspiration for Foer's protagonist to go to Ukraine and attempt to find the woman who saved his grandfather during the Holocaust. In her article "Diaspora, Postmemory and the Transcultural Turn in Contemporary Jewish Writing," Jessica Ortner explains that a journey to Eastern Europe features often in American Jewish writing, but that the result in these "postmemorial works that describe the lost places of one's ancestors, those lost places do not simply provide a referential sense of belonging; they remain places of genocide that have ceased to exist in the way known by the parents' [or grandparents'] generation."<sup>15</sup> Jonathan stands in the place where his ancestors lived and were killed, but there is nothing there of the shtetl he has imagined. The journey does not provide healing or understanding for Jonathan, but it illuminates the role Alex's grandfather played in the murder of his best friend. Alex and Jonathan cannot see the past atrocities that occurred in that place, but Lista and Alex's grandfather remember them and retell them. The binary of victim and perpetrator becomes blurred, and the focus becomes sharing painful memories with one's descendants. The scene concludes with the acknowledgement that for most, forgiveness is untenable.

Maria Karafilis argues that novels can position readers to "approach the past ethically" but that this often "hinge[s] on an alternative temporality that requires a radical entanglement with the past in which the 'now' of an other becomes the 'now' of the reader and hopefully engenders the imagining of other possible futures."<sup>16</sup> In the scene with Lista and Alex's grandfather, the moments of choiceless choices made during the Nazi invasion are relived and shared with Alex and Jonathan. Grunberg and Foer encourage readers to see

<sup>14</sup> Foer, *Everything Is Illuminated*, 260.

<sup>15</sup> Jessica Ortner, "Diaspora, Postmemory and the Transcultural Turn in Contemporary Jewish Writing," *Crossings: Journal of Migration & Culture* 7 (1) (2016).

<sup>16</sup> Maria Karafilis, "Temporal Derangement and Historical Entanglement in Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Alice Doane's Appeal*," *The New England Quarterly* XCIII (3) (2020): 463.

the 'now' of others as their own through the use of complex characters who explore their personal identities in light of their families' experiences during the Holocaust. By blurring the boundaries between genres and literary modes, the authors position readers to respond ethically to narratives about "historical events characterized by referential uncertainty."<sup>17</sup> Alex is uncertain if the story he hears from Lista is true of his grandfather as he has never heard it before. In the last chapter of *The Jewish Messiah*, when Xavier has become the Prime Minister of Israel, Xavier imagines that "His grandfather would have been proud of him."<sup>18</sup> He cannot know this given the death of his grandfather during the war. Both books rely on the specters of grandfathers and how their presence or absence affect their grandsons in their search for identity, in what they are able to comprehend about love and reconciliation, and what they are able to ultimately discover about themselves and conclude about humanity. The genre complexity resists anticipation and understanding, thus creating temporal entanglements of the past, present, and future and engaging with ongoing discourse about how to appropriately represent Holocaust narratives when one is not a survivor or perpetrator but a descendant of those who survived or perpetrated violence. Grunberg's novel extends the temporal entanglement and provides a sadly comical warning of what the future may hold given historical grievances, present technologies, and human cruelty. Attempts to repair the past or receive forgiveness are ultimately unresolved, thus only pain and ironic humor remain.

The Holocaust created a fissure of pre- and post-Holocaust time, and self, that has impacted Jewish identity and culture. The focus on Jewish life prior to the Shoah, like that imagined by Foer, is uncommon in popular literature in the United States. Writing in 2003, Jeremy D. Popkin argues that "The Holocaust survivor memoirs that have become the most widely read usually make little effort at putting their authors' pre-Holocaust lives in any kind of historical perspective ... Any narrative energy expended to depict themselves as persons who had a history and an identity prior to the Holocaust experience would necessarily detract from this impact."<sup>19</sup> Yet, now, there is more emphasis on doing so. In fact, the recently reopened Holocaust Galleries at the Imperial War Museum in London emphasize the rich diversity of Jewish

17 Francisco Collado-Rodriguez, "Ethics in the Second Degree: Trauma and Dual Narratives in Jonathan Safran Foer's *Everything Is Illuminated*," *Journal of Modern Literature* 32 (1) (2008): 57.

18 Grunberg, *The Jewish Messiah*, 449.

19 Jeremy D. Popkin, "Holocaust Memories, Historians' Memoirs: First Person Narrative and the Memory of the Holocaust," *History and Memory* 15 (1) (2003): 58.

life prior to the Holocaust in the first room to highlight the authentic humanity of each person before their individual identities are subsumed by a collective victim identity. Foer's novel allows readers an insight into what such lives may have been like and deeply humanizes the characters, both Jewish and Gentile who peacefully coexisted and intermarried in Trachimbrod. This imaginative part of the novel is filled with interesting characters, especially Jonathan's grandfather, Safran, and a love story. It functions to highlight the rich cultures, worlds, and people that were destroyed by the Holocaust and encourage more empathetic engagement from readers or at least encourage them to "approach the past ethically" with a clear recognition of the distinct human beings and homelands lost. It has a nostalgic aesthetic, as Ortner says, that longs for a past that has ceased to exist.

The novels' emphasis on main characters whose identities are informed by the perpetration of violence towards Jews during the Holocaust by their grandfathers reveals how two descendants of Holocaust survivors (the authors) imagine the identities of perpetrators' grandchildren are influenced by the historical violence in the family's past and then interrogates what possibilities there are for meaningful relationships (both platonic and romantic) to exist between them in contemporary society. In his article, "Ethics in the Second Degree: Trauma and Dual Narratives in Jonathan Safran Foer's *Everything Is Illuminated*," Francisco Collado-Rodriguez argues that Foer's novel "positions characters and readers as non-referential witnesses" of Holocaust events and that by using "strategies that disrupt a linear presentation of events" authors may "work on readers' emotions and stimulate an ethical reading of a literary work."<sup>20</sup> Both novels blur temporal boundaries showcasing the ongoing legacies of the Holocaust for the descendants of perpetrators and victims through the close relationships of two young male characters. Trauma theorists Anne Whitehead<sup>21</sup> and Cathy Caruth<sup>22</sup> argue that fragmented time frames in narrative expressions are a key characteristic of trauma narratives. The entanglement of family histories from the Holocaust with the contemporary setting of the main characters highlights the legacies of trauma that have been inherited including pain and the inability to forgive the unforgiveable. Xavier seeks familial redemption for his grandfather's actions through his desire to be the savior of the Jews, and Alex's grandfather seeks forgiveness from Lista so that he can forgive himself. Neither, however, succeeds and both novels suggest that the inherited trauma – individual and

20 Collado-Rodriguez, "Ethics in the Second Degree," 56.

21 Anne Whitehead, *Trauma Fiction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2004).

22 *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, ed. Cathy Caruth (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins UP, 1995).



collective – is irresolvable. Rather than forgiveness, compassion may be the ethical response.

### Family Histories and Identity

In both novels, readers are positioned to engage ethically with considerations of the descendants of perpetrators. Collado-Rodriguez explains that “literature and film have often recounted massacres carried out by the Nazis in categorical terms, with a clear line dividing good from evil, murderer from victim,” but in Foer’s novel readers grapple with “the truth of somebody who is not only a survivor, but also an alleged collaborator with the Nazis,” Alex’s grandfather.<sup>23</sup> In Grunberg’s novel, readers are positioned to feel sympathy for a woman who is traumatized by her father’s involvement with the SS and witnessing her mother being raped by Russian soldiers while she also remains vehemently anti-Semitic and uncaring toward her son. The novels build on traditions of representation of the Holocaust in ways that had not been so popularly done prior, including the use of the grotesque and humor to jar readers. In doing so, however, the novels succeed in pushing readers to consider the relationship between histories of atrocities, family, identity, possibilities of reconciliation, and futurity. They emphasize the silences filled by encounters with a seemingly absurd past that was horrifically real. The pain must be felt, even if it is inherited.

The books portray intergenerational trauma and its effect on family structures, which in turn influences the boys’ identity formation. Alex is not responsible for his grandfather’s action during the Holocaust, nor is Xavier in *The Jewish Messiah*, but their genealogical connection affects them nonetheless, and it greatly impacts the relationships they have with the Jewish males they meet in the novels. The focalization through Alex and Xavier, rather than the Jewish characters, provide creative imaginings where the Jewish authors attempt to make the “now” of perpetrator’s offspring their own (or the readers’). Xavier suggests that the temporal distance from the war that third generation people experience should mean they do not have to grapple with it anymore. As we read in the novel, “Europe had been at peace for so long by the time he [Xavier – S. M.] was born. The war was far, far away, at least that war was ... experts had already declared that the Second World War was now over and done with, that chapter was finished.”<sup>24</sup> The irony is that though “that war” may be finished, the effects of it linger as that war

23 Collado-Rodriguez, “Ethics in the Second Degree,” 62–63.

24 Grunberg, *The Jewish Messiah*, 2.

drastically impacted the world and people's ideas about humanity and evil. It will never be "over and done with." Collado-Rodriguez argues that Foer's novels similarly "emphasize[s] the now-vast temporal and cultural distance between late twentieth and twenty-first century America and the Holocaust," though it also acknowledges that what was lost during Second World War and the Holocaust impacts the present.<sup>25</sup> The authors explore how the war continues to infiltrate family structures and relations between descendants of perpetrators and victims in the present and imagined future.

Xavier is inspired by his kinship. Grunberg writes that "his grandfather could have been his twin brother."<sup>26</sup> Xavier's decision to join a Jewish youth association and convert to Judaism is a shock: can we reconcile a German boy converting to Judaism knowing his grandfather was a Nazi perpetrator? Xavier's choices are influenced by his dysfunctional family life. Xavier's mother did not have a loving, close relationship with her father who was killed in the war, her mother was raped and traumatized, and now she and Xavier have a strained and strange relationship. Her love for Xavier is mediocre at best. Grunberg writes, "The mother loved her only child – she was a mother, after all – but she hated him as well. After he was born, the architect had barely felt any desire for her... and she blamed the child for that."<sup>27</sup> Xavier's mother and father divorce, his father commits suicide, and she begins dating a man who physically abuses her, named Marc. When Marc breaks her nose, she thinks: "The architect had ignored her... But ignoring was better than breaking."<sup>28</sup> She goes on to say to the doctor when he asks if "she had been the victim of a crime," "victims are always culprits, too, and culprits are always victims. No one gets what he doesn't deserve."<sup>29</sup> Specific to this scene, she negates the responsibility Marc should take for breaking her nose, while he plays "dumb. No regrets, no pleas for forgiveness, no show at his own wrongdoing."<sup>30</sup> The mutual unwillingness of either to hold themselves or each other accountable frustrates readers and contributes to Xavier's lack of accountability throughout his life. It can be read in the larger context of the Holocaust as them having attitudes that former perpetrators or their offspring may have, that no one is innocent and that perpetrators only hurt people who deserve it. Further

25 Collado-Rodriguez, "Ethics in the Second Degree," 62.

26 Grunberg, *The Jewish Messiah*, 3.

27 Ibid., 122.

28 Ibid., 118.

29 Ibid., 119.

30 Ibid., 118.

their interactions suggest that what is done cannot be undone, so they should move on. There is no space for forgiveness in ignoring the wrongdoing; there is only recurring pain. Marc and Xavier's mother embody an attempt to ignore responsibility for other's suffering, even as they continually contribute to it, which is eventually what Xavier also embodies.

This is a clear example of the novel's revelation of human suffering and cruelty and how Xavier's mother's family history has influenced her personality, but it is hard to feel sympathy for her. In the present, she remains anti-Semitic and racist. When she first meets Awromele, she does not know that he and Xavier are lovers, and Awromele does not know that she is not Jewish. She explains that Israelites despise "us" and when an Israelite looks at her she feels "this horrible pain, an inhuman pain."<sup>31</sup> Awromele thinks she is speaking against Zionism, but readers see that as a Nazi perpetrator's daughter she inverts the gaze of the Nazi on Jews to make herself the victim. Awromele assures Xavier's mother that Awromele accepts and loves Xavier the way he is, and then she "choked on her own spittle, which she often did when love was mentioned."<sup>32</sup> She nor Xavier know how to love others. The worldview that Xavier's mother embodies is that "There's a lot of despising going on. It's something people like to do"<sup>33</sup> and for her, the despising is inescapable. Her family has inscribed that into her. Awromele tries to connect with her because, as he says, "This woman is the mother of my sweetheart."<sup>34</sup> Sadly, the worldviews she inherited from her father about Jews and the self-loathing, secrecy, and trauma she endured are passed on to Xavier, but not realized until later in the novel.

To further insult Awromele, the mother says:

The biggest mistake that fascism made was to turn against the Israelite... The Middle East is a powder keg. Before long it will come to Europe. What am I saying? The powder keg is already in Europe. We've tried not to see it, but it's here. It's in our trams, the powder keg sleeps in our homes, it goes shopping in our supermarkets. You, for example, you're part of that powder keg, which will explode in our unsuspecting faces... you are my misfortune.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 318.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 319.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 319.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 320.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 322.

The last statement is a reference to Nazi propaganda in which Jews were often portrayed as the “misfortune” of Germany. Though jarring, she is communicating what she believes to be true no matter how awkward and painful it is. She continues and says, “If the civilized world had let You-Know-Who [Hitler – S. M.] finish what he’d started back then, wouldn’t we be better off today? ... Would the world have been better off if you hadn’t existed?”<sup>36</sup> She suggests to Awromele that his parents should have been killed in the Holocaust, but at this point he thinks she is “a Jewish mother.”<sup>37</sup> This appalls readers, as Grunberg intends to evoke an emotional response. The book imagines that the second generation of perpetrators have lingering attitudes that what their parents did was in support of some greater good. The text positions readers to recognize that just because “that war” ended, the humans whose beliefs and attitudes inspired it remain and have been passed down to their children with continued legacies of “despising.” Ironically, the Jewish Awromele “had been raised with principled objections to the Jewish state in its present form,” which is one reason why he tells Xavier he does not want to move to Israel.<sup>38</sup> Later in the novel, Xavier becomes a Zionist, and Xavier is the person who chooses nuclear war as the President of Israel, so technically, Xavier is his mother’s misfortune, and maybe the world would be a better place if she had been killed in the war.

In *Everything Is Illuminated*, Alex’s father, the son of a Holocaust survivor, is abusive and physically assaults Alex and his little brother Igor regularly. Like Xavier’s mother, he lacks the sentimental attachment to his children that parents who have not inherited such traumas often have. These novels beg the question of whether traumatized parents can raise non-traumatized children, with both suggesting that, at least in the legacies of the Holocaust, intergenerational trauma has real, lasting effects on the grandchildren. Alex and Igor’s parent has not forgiven their grandparent, and their dad takes out his trauma on his children. He does not know how to communicate his pain other than through physical violence and yelling. Alex feels immense pressure to protect his little brother Igor from their father. When Alex hears his brother crying, he writes to Jonathan that he wanted to go tell his brother, “Little Igor, the bruises go away, and so does how you hate, and so does the feeling that everything you receive in life is something you have earned.”<sup>39</sup> This quote also reveals that Alex hates his father — the perpetrator of violence — but suggests that

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36 Ibid., 323.

37 Ibid., 323.

38 Ibid., 378.

39 Foer, *Everything Is Illuminated*, 68.

the hate changes when you remove yourself from the violence and when you realize your suffering (or the suffering of the Jewish people) was not earned.

Alex introduces his family's business, Heritage Touring, explaining that they provide "a translator, guide, and driver for the Jews, who try to unearth places where their families once existed."<sup>40</sup> As Ukrainians, their family resides in lands afflicted by Nazis and Russians during World War Two, and though they may not have actively participated in the violence against Jews, they now make their living on its legacies which is one way the past remains influential in the present and the future, as Alex's father wants Alex to take over the business. Alex has other plans and saves his money "in the cookie box for moving to America with Little Igor."<sup>41</sup> Like Xavier leaves his mother, Alex wants to spatially remove himself and Igor from the trauma-induced abuse they experience. Near the end of the novel, Alex finally stands up to his father. As his grandfather recounts to Jonathan in the final letter of the novel: "He told his father that he could care for Mother and Little Igor ... that he could understand if his father had to leave and never return, and that it would not even make him less of a father."<sup>42</sup> Alex and his father "moved at each other with violence" and finally Alex says to him, "You are not my father" and his father leaves. Alex's grandfather tells Alex that he "had never been so proud" of him and that he does not have to take over Heritage Touring but instead should "Make your own life ... Try to live so that you can always tell the truth."<sup>43</sup> Readers learn that Alex's grandfather has lived his adult life having to repress the truth about his actions during the Holocaust. As a result, his personal trauma and survivor's guilt he endures was inherited by his son and grandsons.

The story of what occurred is revealed when Jonathan, Alex, and Alex's grandfather encounter the woman they think is Augustine but who turns out to be Lista. Wendy O'Brien explains that the person who experiences a traumatic event "becomes lodged or stuck in the time of trauma" and "the events become suspended in time."<sup>44</sup> This becomes explicit when Jonathan, Alex, and Alex's grandfather get to Trachimbrod. When Lista tells the story of Trachimbrod's destruction, Alex tells Jonathan in a letter later that "You

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 215.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 274.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 274-275.

<sup>44</sup> Wendy O'Brien, "Telling Time: Literature, Temporality and Trauma," *Temporality in Life as Seen Through Literature*, ed. Anna-Teresa Tymieniecka (Hanover: The World Phenomenology Institute, 2007), 212-213.

cannot know how it felt to have to hear these things and then repeat them, because when I repeated them, I felt like I was making them new again.”<sup>45</sup> To write or speak history becomes, for him, a regenerative force whereby they are all transported to that moment in time, revisiting the past in the present. Alex’s grandfather challenges the truth of what she is saying, even flat out calling Lista a liar. To the reader, it seems rude, but gradually, readers learn that Lista knew what Alex’s grandfather had done, and he desperately hoped his family would never find out. Grandfather urges her to “Tell him [Alex – S. M.] what happened” in Trachimbrod.<sup>46</sup> She explains what happened when the General lined them up and “went down the line and told each man to spit on the Torah or they would kill his family.”<sup>47</sup> Grandfather challenges her saying it’s not true, but she says it is and she goes through how her family was killed in front of her, and no one helped. Grandfather says, “you would not help somebody if it signified that you would be murdered and your family would be murdered.”<sup>48</sup> It becomes clear that he was one of the Ukrainians who did not help and eventually even ratted out his best friend to save himself and his family. It was a choiceless choice. After Lista recounts the story of what happened when the Nazis came to their shtetl, Alex translates his grandfather’s confession: “Herschel was a Jew. And he was my best friend... And I murdered him.”<sup>49</sup> When Alex’s grandfather finally asks Lista if she could forgive them, she closes her eyes and shakes her head, suggesting there is no chance for reconciliation. Due to his past actions and their entanglement with this present journey and discovery, Alex’s grandfather is forced to confront what he had so long repressed and has to do so in front of witnesses, one being his grandson. This ultimately leads to his decision to commit suicide because he cannot forgive himself or reconcile his past. The pain of Alex knowing what he did is too much to bear. The narrative positions readers to respond empathetically by recognizing that some hate and guilt does not go away and that there are limits to forgiveness.

Given that one writes about traumatic events after the event occurs, Ross Chambers argues that “aftermath writing has a hauntedness... a double character of untimeliness... a baffling experience of time as, conjointly, the separation

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45 Foer, *Everything Is Illuminated*, 185.

46 Ibid., 184.

47 Ibid., 185.

48 Ibid., 187.

49 Ibid., 228.

of the past and present and their continuing correspondence.”<sup>50</sup> This link between past and present comes to the fore in this section. Lista tells them that Trachimbrod does not exist anymore. It was wiped out, and she has hundreds of boxes all over her tiny house with some labeled, “Dust” and “Darkness.” Keeping these tangible materials from Trachimbrod evidences the people who lived there, but their absence emphasizes the destruction that occurred at the hands of the Nazis. She says that she stays in her house as her punishment “for surviving.”<sup>51</sup> Alex’s grandfather suggests that many who collaborated with the Nazis are not bad people. He tells Jonathan: “I am not a bad person ... I am a good person who has lived in a bad time.”<sup>52</sup> However, *Everything Is Illuminated* rejects political and religious excuses for what happened in the past, and instead places blame squarely on human beings. Near the end of the novel, Alex’s grandfather is reminded by Lista that the Messiah was supposed to come at the “end of the world,” ... “but it was not the end of the world,” says Grandfather. Lista tells Grandfather it was the end of the world and “He just did not come.” When grandfather asks why, Lista says, “the lesson we learned from everything that happened – There is no God.” She says further “I could not believe in a God that would challenge faith like this” and Grandfather asks, “What if it was man and not God that did all of this?” and Lista replies, “I do not believe in man, either.”<sup>53</sup> Lista provides a counter to Grandfather’s belief that peace through forgiveness and reconciliation is still possible, but overall, Foer’s book is more hopeful about the future than Grunberg’s.

### Humor and Truth

In addition to grappling with inherited trauma and its effects on the identities of grandchildren, for Grunberg and Foer, humor is a way to explore some of the most absurd parts of history and humanity. In her essay “Once Removed,” second generation author Lisa Reiman-Dobi explains that as a child, she “assumed that the truth must be awfully grotesque for it to be constantly avoided or shrouded in fantasy.”<sup>54</sup> Grunberg and Foer invent their stories as explora-

50 Ross Chambers, *Untimely Interventions: AIDS Writing, Testimonial, and the Rhetoric of Haunting* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2009), 191.

51 *Ibid.*, 189.

52 *Ibid.*, 227.

53 *Ibid.*, 189.

54 Lisa Reiman-Dobi, “Once Removed.” *Second Generation Voices: Reflections by Children of Holocaust Survivors and Perpetrators*, ed. Alan L. Berger and Naomi Berger (Syracuse: Syracuse UP, 2001), 19.

tions to “fill in the gaps” of what their families did not say about experiences during the Holocaust, which leads to darkly humorous places. They use abject descriptions of sex and violence as a way to, as Dutch scholar Michiel Bot argues, take the sacred and move it away from being taboo. It is silence about cruelty and pain that leads to misunderstanding and an erasure or invalidation of the pain victims endured. These novels, rather than remaining silent about historical atrocities and pain, use humor as a vehicle for truth. Harry Hershfield, a popular radio personality in the 1940s who earned the nickname “the Jewish Will Rogers” said that “Humor is the great common denominator.”<sup>55</sup> Perhaps then where linguistic, cultural, or temporal barriers exist, they may be overcome, at least in part, by humor. But, using humor to write or speak about the Holocaust can be contentious. In the silence that followed the Holocaust, it must have been unfathomable to combine testimony with humor, and yet, now there are multiple authors who use humor as a way of examining different aspects of the Holocaust particularly as a way of accepting the insolvability of the problem of forgiveness.

Comedian Steve Allen said that “Tragedy plus time equals comedy.”<sup>56</sup> Both novels explore if the ability to laugh at tragedy functions as an attempt at healing or working through trauma. In both, the laughter elicited works to validate the absurdity of the cruelty humans inflicted upon one another. In *Everything Is Illuminated* Alex writes to Jonathan, “humorous is the only truthful way to tell a sad story.”<sup>57</sup> Humor implies resignation to the reality of what occurred. It cannot be changed. We want truth to lead to reconciliation, but some truths are too sad and cruel to warrant forgiveness. One reviewer exclaims, “Taking on the most well-guarded pieties and taboos of our age, *The Jewish Messiah* is both a great love story and a grotesque farce that forces a profound reckoning with the limits of human guilt, cruelty, and suffering.” One conclusion is that guilt has limits but cruelty does not, and everyone suffers because of that. With such a bleak conclusion, one may be surprised at the humor with which readers are led there.

Both books satirize seemingly sacred rituals or traditions. Talal Asad argues that to satirize is “a mode of moral engagement... a satire is supposed to deal with prevailing vices” which is one way novels about the past may connect with the present and make us more self-reflexive. Contemporary

55 Lawrence Bush, “August 25: The Jewish Will Rogers,” accessed July 27, 2023, <https://jewishcurrents.org/august-20-jewish-will-rogers>.

56 “Comedy is Tragedy Plus Time,” accessed July 27, 2023, <https://quoteinvestigator.com/2013/06/25/comedy-plus/>.

57 Foer, *Everything Is Illuminated*, 53.



second and third generation authors do not have the same pressure to testify – or to only factually represent the experiences of the Holocaust – that has now been well documented, so they use writing as a way to attempt to piece together family histories that they see as informing their individual, family, and cultural identities and do so in experimental ways that also, as Asad argues *The Satanic Verses* by Salman Rushdie did, “intervene in an already charged political field.”<sup>58</sup> Bot claims that Grunberg’s novels “steer away from the mandate to actively avoid offense in the name of tolerance and respect for cultural difference” and in doing so, Grunberg encourages contemporary readers to reflect on why they are offended and what those offenses tell us about ourselves and our relationship to the past or even our abilities to communicate across differences now. But Grunberg’s novel has a clear refrain that “Communication is pain” and though Awromele suggests that “We all come from the same fountainhead” as humans, Xavier’s mother says that people who are culturally different are “fundamentally different” suggesting that there is little hope for humans overcoming cultural differences to have meaningful dialogue.<sup>59</sup> The other refrain that supports this conclusion is that the only language that matters is violence. Awromele hears and then repeats the sentiment multiple times: “language as we know it is becoming obsolete. The language of the knuckle, the shoe... that is the language we must speak; otherwise, we will never free ourselves of ourselves.”<sup>60</sup> When silence or unspeakability is the *modus operandi*, humans find other ways to communicate their pain. Xavier’s mother’s failure to tell him the truth about his grandfather and Nazi atrocities lead him to an ignorant messianic fantasy that endangers humanity. Xavier seems to believe that if he and Awromele can love one another, then surely perpetrators and victims can reconcile, but Xavier ignores all the pain that goes unspoken in all of his relationships, especially with his mother and Awromele. Grunberg’s novel suggests that we will free ourselves of ourselves through mutual annihilation.

In addition to Xavier being the most obviously like Hitler, his conversion to Judaism and then Zionism emphasizes how easily humans can get carried away in their own narcissism and desire for power. The grotesque elements of the book include a botched, infected circumcision and testicle that is kept on a shelf in formaldehyde and referred to as “King David.” Xavier creates a series of paintings with his mother holding King David titled *Mother and*

58 Quoted in Michiel Bot, “‘Translating’ *Mein Kampf*: Arnon Grunberg’s Profanations,” *Law & Literature* 31 (1) (2019): 97.

59 Grunberg, *The Jewish Messiah*, 316.

60 Ibid., 365.

*Testicle*. When Xavier becomes a politician in Israel, he tries to convince people that King David is the Redeemer and tells a leader of Hamas in a meeting that "Surveys show that fifty-five percent of the population believe that King David is the Redeemer."<sup>61</sup> Throughout this entire section, Grunberg's novel scathes international politics with its lies, manipulations, corruption, and greed. He also tears apart religious faith, mocking those people who write letters to King David, pray to King David, and even hang pictures of King David on their walls.<sup>62</sup> King David is not a Redeemer. King David is a testicle, but Xavier as "a master in the creation, manipulation, and control of seemingly boundless chaos" has convinced people, as Hitler did, that he is their savior and their futurity.<sup>63</sup>

### Conclusions

Near the end of *The Jewish Messiah*, Xavier finds himself alone with the tattered corpse of Awromele, who is killed by people afraid for their lives after Xavier sells nuclear weapons to former colonies of the West who then aim them with an ultimatum at the US, UK, Amsterdam, Spain, Portugal, Germany, the Balkans, France, and Switzerland. The last prayer Xavier says over Awromele's corpse is not a Jewish prayer, but a passage from their Yiddish translation of *Mein Kampf*, and he says, "A person can easily change languages... but in his new language he will continue to express his old thoughts, his character will not be changed... We have to learn to speak the language of the future."<sup>64</sup> Though Xavier converted to Judaism and changed his language, his inherited despising remained. As a young man, he thought, "The hardest thing is to forgive yourself... forgiveness: And that was what Xavier wanted to grant to the Jews most generously: forgiveness. For all the wrongs they had committed throughout the centuries. For the guilt they had imposed on others."<sup>65</sup> Xavier has inherited his mother's ironic worldview whereby it is the Jews, not the Nazis, who need forgiveness. Bot argues that Grunberg's book's humorous tone "provokes readers to contemplate real instances of, among other things, LGBTQ bashing, bullying, and rape in the present,"<sup>66</sup> which all become part of

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61 Ibid., 443.

62 Ibid., 448.

63 Ibid., 448.

64 Ibid., 468.

65 Ibid., 228.

66 Bot, "'Translating' *Mein Kampf*," 109.

the exploration of human cruelty. It is not victims of such cruelties who need forgiving, and it is not their responsibility to forgive, especially in a world that perpetuates crimes of identity.

The imagined reality of the children of Holocaust survivors in the face of their parents' silences and evasions are brought to the fore in Grunberg's novel as he positions readers to ask and imagine what humans are truly capable of in terms of inflicting pain and suffering. The conclusion in this novel suggests that the future is nonexistent because humanity is spiraling into chaos. Writing in this journal in 2020, Monika Rudaś-Grodzka states that

God is not present. The only feasible messiah is collective, in the form of an oppressed and unhappy humanity. There is no point in waiting for a messiah nor trying to guess the date of his/her arrival. Salvation is all about saving the self. This idea can also be found in the thought of Karl Marx, who posited that human beings shape their own histories.<sup>67</sup>

Xavier becomes a god-like figure, like Hitler himself, whose biggest desire was to do something astonishing, so he starts a nuclear war, suggesting, as Lista concluded, that we should not have faith in man, either.

The close proximity of the grandchildren of perpetrators and victims encourages readers to consider whether reconciliation between those whose ancestors were persecuted or killed by the Nazis and those whose ancestors were Nazis or were complicit with them is possible. The irony of the title *Everything is Illuminated* is that by the end of the novel, as Foer explains in an interview, "nothing is illuminated, except that everybody sees things in different ways."<sup>68</sup> Lista is unable to forgive Alex's grandfather or the other bystanders who watched as a Nazi shot and killed the baby in her womb. By the end of the novel, Alex has told his abusive father that he should leave and never return, which he does. Alex rejects the legacy of his father's violence and attempts to disrupt it. In his final, unfinished letter to Jonathan before he commits suicide Alex's grandfather writes, "All is for Sasha (his nickname for Alex) and Iggy... I would give everything for them to live without violence. Peace. That is all that I would ever want for them."<sup>69</sup> This is a much more hopeful ending than Grunberg provides.

Grunberg's novel has a much darker vision of the future – one in which humans cannot peacefully coexist. His work suggests that if humanity does

67 Monika Rudaś-Grodzka, "In the Archives of Women's Writing," *Teksty Drugie* 1 (2020): 14.

68 "Jonathan Safran Foer Interview on *Everything Is Illuminated* (2002)."

69 Foer, *Everything Is Illuminated*, 275.

not reconcile and heal by learning to truthfully communicate about atrocities, however painful it may be, then we are all doomed – to nuclear war and mutual destruction. Both have open endings, suggesting that even those books about the past have implications for our future. By imagining the past and its relation to the present, *Everything Is Illuminated* highlights their entanglement, as does Grunberg, whose novel goes even further to portray a nihilistic future of destruction to the point where Xavier Radek concludes, “Our only comfort is destruction.”<sup>70</sup> Near the end of the book, Xavier ends with quite the call out of contemporary readers highlighting the necessity of communicating across differences: “Communication is pain... if it doesn’t hurt, there’s no communication taking place... You have to tell the truth. And truth is nothing but pain.”<sup>71</sup> These novels are painful. Within their pages emerge hard realities about human cruelty, indifference to the suffering of others, and the limits of forgiveness. Though deeply moving and humorous, these second and third generation novels are permeated with pessimism if humans do not learn to communicate across differences and stop ignoring the suffering of others.

## Abstract

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*Legacies of the Shoah in Jonathan Safran Foer’s Everything Is Illuminated and Arnon Grunberg’s De Joodse Messias [The Jewish Messiah]*

This article compares *Everything Is Illuminated* (2002) by American author Jonathan Safran Foer to *De Joodse Messias [The Jewish Messiah]* (2004) by Dutch author Arnon Grunberg. Both novels contribute to ongoing discussions about Holocaust representation in the face of a generation temporally and spatially removed from the historical events. Ultimately, by blurring temporalities, focusing on what families inherit, and using humor these novels emphasize human agency in atrocity and the impossibilities of reconciliation by highlighting the capacity humans have for hurting one another and the limits of forgiveness.

## Keywords

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Holocaust, temporality, second generation, trauma, third generation

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<sup>70</sup> Grunberg, *The Jewish Messiah*, 470.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 425.

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Michal Ben-Horin

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## The Life of a Story: Aharon Appelfeld's Double as a Mode of Holocaust Representation

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TEKSTY DRUGIE 2024, NR 1, S. 203–220

DOI: 10.18318/td.2024.en.1.12 | ORCID: 0000-0002-0606-5767

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I tried several times to write “the story of my life” in the woods after I ran away from the camp. But all my efforts were in vain. I wanted to be faithful to reality and to what really happened. But the chronicle that emerged proved to be a weak scaffolding. The result was rather meager, an unconvincing imaginary tale.<sup>1</sup>

A postscript following the death of the Israeli writer Aharon Appelfeld in January 2018 begins with the late writer's words: “I’m a hero in one of Philip Roth’s novels.” Written by Philip Gourevitch who recalled his conversation with Appelfeld nearly twenty years earlier over lunch at a Jerusalem café where Appelfeld liked to work, the postscript continues: “Just as Roth has his fictional double in the book, Appelfeld too is present there both as a nonfictional voice and as a character who is, in significant respects, Roth’s invention.”<sup>2</sup> As I would like to show in this

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1 Philip Roth, “Walking the Way of the Survivor; A Talk with Aharon Appelfeld,” *The New York Times*, February 28, 1988, accessed April 2, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/1988/02/28/books/walking-the-way-of-the-survivor-a-talk-with-aharon-appelfeld.html>.

2 Philip Gourevitch, “Aharon Appelfeld and the Truth of Fiction in Remembering the Holocaust,” January 5, 2018, accessed

article, Appelfeld's fictional double does not belong solely to Roth's novels,<sup>3</sup> but appears also in his own work. By focusing on two of Appelfeld's late novels that followed his 1999 memoir, I will show how the writer shaped his literary doubles within an uncompromising search for an appropriate voice to tell the story of his life in the wake of the Holocaust.

Born in 1932 in Jadova in Bukovina, Appelfeld, a prolific Israeli writer, experienced the Holocaust as a young boy. He lost his mother at the beginning of the war and was expelled with his father to Transnistria. After being separated in the concentration camp, Appelfeld managed to escape, found refuge in the Ukrainian forests and later joined the soldiers of the Soviet army. In 1946 he immigrated to Palestine via Italy as part of the Aliyat Hano'ar youth movement, and completed his schooling at agricultural schools in Ein Kerem and Nahalal. He served for two years in the Israeli army, and in 1952 enrolled as a student of philosophy at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, during which time he began his literary activity as a poet and critic. During the years 1952–1959 Appelfeld published poems in various newspapers and literary periodicals. His first story collection, *Smoke*,<sup>4</sup> was published in 1962, followed by essay collections, novels and a memoir.

Since its emergence in the 1950s, scholarship on Appelfeld's work has pointed to its dialectical relationship with two topics: first religion (religiosity), which I will not discuss here,<sup>5</sup> and second, the events of the Second World War and the Holocaust.<sup>6</sup> For example, Alan Mintz, who explored the

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April 15, 2023, <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/postscript/aharon-appelfeld-and-the-truth-of-fiction-in-remembering-the-holocaust>.

- 3 For instance, confronted by his double-figure in *Operation Shylock*, Roth's narrator reflects on the relationship with Appelfeld: "Because, I thought, of Aharon's and my distinctly radical twoness [...] We are anything *but* the duplicates that everyone is supposed to believe you and me to be; because Aharon and I each embody the *reverse* of the other's experience." Philip Roth, *Operation Shylock: A Confession* (London: Vintage Books, 1994), 200–201 (emphasis in original).
- 4 Aharon Appelfeld, *Ashan: Sippurim* [Smoke: Story collection] (Jerusalem: Achshav, 1962).
- 5 I dealt with it elsewhere: Michal Ben-Horin, "The Sound of the Unsayable: Jewish Secular Culture in Schoenberg and Appelfeld," *Religions* 10 (5) (2019), accessed May 20, 2024, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel10050334>.
- 6 For a mapping of the scholarship on Appelfeld's work, see Yigal Schwartz, *Omanut Hasippur shel Aharon Appelfeld* [The narrative art of Aharon Appelfeld] (Tel Aviv: Kineret, Zmora-Bitan, Dvir, 2014). According to Shahar Pinsky, whereas European and American scholars refer to Appelfeld's work as modernist postwar literature, Israeli scholars define it as Holocaust literature. See "The Train that Rides Inside: The Jewish Predicament in Aharon Appelfeld's *The Iron Tracks*" (Hebrew), in *Aharon Appelfeld and His World: Special Volume of Mikan*, ed.

responses of modern Hebrew literature to the Holocaust, claimed that in Appelfeld's literature "everything having to do with what the French call the concentrationary universe [...] is left out. Before, after, parallel to – yes; anything but the thing itself. Especially after, as if to say that a catastrophe can be known only through its survivors and its survivals."<sup>7</sup> In her monograph on Appelfeld, Emily Miller Budick described his "tendency to circle around – hint at, suggest, signal toward – the major sites of suffering and violence rather than represent them directly."<sup>8</sup> Appelfeld himself, however, rejected the label Holocaust writer, as he seems to have explained in his memoir:

I was a child during the war. This child grew up and all that happened to him and within him continued into his adulthood: the loss of his home, the loss of his language, suspicion, fear, the inhibitions of speech, the feelings of alienation in a foreign country. It was from these that I wove my fiction. Only the right words can construct a literary text, not subject matter.<sup>9</sup>

Over the years, Appelfeld would repeat this rejection in various interviews, conversations and lectures with writers, scholars and students. Exploring the relationship between subject matter and the interwoven words and between content and form, reveals additional sets of opposition such as authentic vs. false representation, organic vs. artificial, reality vs. imagination and finally history vs. fiction. I claim that this exploration lies at the core of Appelfeld's literary work and reaches its peak in the poetic formation of the double. These double figures appear in Appelfeld's novels *Pitom Ahava* [*Suddenly, Love*] (2004)<sup>10</sup> and *Ha'ish she'lo pasak lishon* [*The Man Who Never Stopped Sleeping*] (2010)<sup>11</sup> following his memoir *Sipur Hayim* [*Story of a Life*] (1999). In both novels, which can be read as autofiction,

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Yigal Schwartz and Risa Domb (Cambridge University and Ben-Gurion University Press, 2005), 77–88.

7 Alan Mintz, *Hurban: Responses to Catastrophe in Hebrew Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), 206–207.

8 Emily Miller Budick, *Aharon Appelfeld's Fiction: Acknowledging the Holocaust* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2005), 148.

9 Aharon Appelfeld, *The Story of a Life*, trans. Aloma Halter (New York: Schocken Books, 2004), 124–125.

10 Aharon Appelfeld, *Suddenly, Love: A Novel*, trans. Jeffrey M. Green (New York: Schocken Books, 2014).

11 Aharon Appelfeld, *The Man Who Never Stopped Sleeping: A Novel*, trans. Jeffrey M. Green (New York: Schocken Books, 2017).

the protagonists' name (Ernst and Erwin respectively) is identical with or alludes to the writer's birth name.<sup>12</sup> However, different from previous work like the novel *The Iron Trucks* (1991), whose protagonist is also called Erwin, in these later novels Appelfeld portrays moments from his life experience, while describing the process of coming to writing. In this respect he tells readers the story of his life by illustrating the life of his story.

In both cases, the protagonists become writers through an ongoing confrontation with the past. They reveal deep loss and an uncompromising struggle to survive even after the war has ended. Moreover, their narratives combine historical details and dream work, reality and fantasy, while transgressing the lines between past and present, Europe and Israel, life and death. This transgression is possible particularly through the figure of the double – an “other” that is never entirely absorbed within the “self” – which, as I suggest, is Appelfeld's way of writing about the disaster.

### **The Double: Oscillating Between Reality and Imagination**

Appelfeld emphasized the significant role of the arts and the aesthetic realm in the reflection, mediation and transmission of knowledge about the Holocaust. In an interview at the Yad Vashem Institute, he discussed the conflict that is revealed in pedagogical methods of teaching about the Holocaust that are limited to disciplines such as history and sociology.<sup>13</sup> What becomes an ethical task for Appelfeld is demonstrated in his literary work that reflects an ongoing search for appropriate modes of expressing the traumatic experience. As a result, his novels challenge the clear distinction between reality and imagination, knowledge and suggestive experience. An example of this search is found in the characters of Erwin and Ernst, Appelfeld's literary doubles, who combine biographical and fictional elements.

12 The concept of autofiction was first associated with the work of Doubrovsky, a Holocaust survivor born in 1928 in France; See Serge Doubrovsky, “Psychoanalysis/Truth/Autobiography,” trans. Logan Whalen and John Ireland, *Genre* 26 (1) (1993): 27–42. Whereas for some scholars this genre embodies the development of the autobiography based on the combination between reality and fiction (moving from life that constructs a story to a story that constructs life, others emphasize its distinct features. Compare with Jerome Bruner, “The Autobiographical Process,” *Current Sociology* 43 (2) (1995): 161–177; Claudia Grone-mann, “Autofiction,” in *Handbook of Autobiography/Autofiction* 1, ed. Martina Wagner-Egelhaaf (Berlin and Boston: De Gruyter, 2019), 241–246.

13 Michal Sternin and Merav Jano, “An Interview with Aharon Appelfeld: The Art is a Shield Against the Banality” (Hebrew), Spring 2010, accessed May 18, 2022, <https://www.yad-vashem.org/he/articles/interviews/aharon-appelfeld.html>.



In his essay "Das Unheimliche," Sigmund Freud defined the idea of the double (Doppelgänger) by referring to the prose of the German Romantic writer E. T. A. Hoffmann:

These themes are all concerned with the phenomenon of the 'double,' which appears in every shape and in every degree of development. Thus we have characters who are to be considered identical because they look alike. This relation is accentuated by mental processes leaping from one of these characters to another [...] so that the one possesses knowledge, feelings and experience in common with the other. Or it is marked by the fact that the subject identifies himself with someone else, so that he is in doubt as to which his self is, or substitutes the extraneous self for his own. In other words, there is a doubling, dividing and interchanging of the self.<sup>14</sup>

Furthermore, Freud refers to his student, Otto Rank, who coined this concept in his 1914 essay "Der Doppelgänger," claiming: "the 'double' was originally an insurance against destruction of the ego, an 'energetic denial of the power of death [...];' and probably the 'immortal' soul was the first 'double' of the body." Later however, Freud assumes that the friendly, protective character becomes horrific. Connecting the double with the psychic mechanism of the "uncanny," Freud concludes that what belonged to the early mental stage and has long since been left behind "has become a thing of terror, just as, after the collapse of their religion, the gods turned into demons."<sup>15</sup>

Both psychoanalysts developed this idea of the double while drawing inspiration from the nineteenth century literary repertoire of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, E. T. A. Hoffmann, William Hauff, Edgar Allen Poe, Oscar Wilde, Guy de Maupassant, Alfred de Musset, and Fyodor Dostoevsky. On this basis, the literary critic Tzvetan Todorov claimed that in the twentieth century psychoanalysis took the place of literature in dealing with the figure of the double.<sup>16</sup> Yet, the double also appears in twentieth and even twenty-first century literature. For Example, Eran Dorfman explores the role of the double in French writers such as Maupassant, as well as Magrit Duras, Michelle Wolbeck and Michel Tournier. Following Rank's analysis of the double based on Freud's work on narcissism, Dorfman points to the relationships between exterior and interior components:

14 Sigmund Freud, *The "Uncanny,"* [Das Unheimliche] (1919), Standard Edition, vol. XVII, trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1955), 217–256; 234

15 Freud, *Uncanny*, 235–236. See also Otto Rank, "Der Doppelgänger," *Imago* 3 (1914): 97.

16 Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*, trans. Richard Howard (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1975).

Rank conceives narcissism not as an idle state but as an active attempt to find a compromise between the need for love and the fear of the outside. Loving oneself is a way to hold the stick at both ends [...]. But Rank observes that this compromise must fail since something in us "seems to resist exclusive self-love." Each one of us has thus two contradictory tendencies: an inclination toward narcissism and a defense against it, and the turbulent drama of the double comes to express this contradiction.<sup>17</sup>

Karen Grumberg, who explored the figure of the double in twentieth century Jewish American literature, emphasized the ideological alongside the psychological aspects associated with its nineteenth century literary forebears. Based on Robert Alter's analysis of Philip Roth's *Operation Shylock*, she claims: "The emergence, exposure, or creation of the double points not necessarily or not only to repressed desires but also to other modes of understanding, identification, or disidentification with the (nonrepressed) self."<sup>18</sup> She develops this idea by calling into question the hierarchy of identities in a hegemonic culture, but also the very concept of (stable) identity:

Coming to terms with one's double entails understanding one's place outside the familiar categories of identity – in effect, resisting the demands of socialization within highly ideological social constructs in order to maintain a semblance of subjective integrity. If there is something subversive about this engagement with identity, it is that it involves bypassing conventional categories of identity altogether.<sup>19</sup>

The aesthetic, philosophical and psychoanalytical discourse on the double is enormously wide, and goes beyond the scope of this article.<sup>20</sup> However, in exploring the literary embodiment of this figure in Appelfeld's late novels, I hope to show its powerful role in the writer's attempts at poetic representation of the Holocaust: First, by questioning the lines between inside and outside as conveyed through the relationship between self and other (for

17 Eran Dorfman, *Double Trouble: The Doppelgänger from Romanticism to Postmodernism* (New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2020), 25.

18 Karen Grumberg, "'The Whole Content of My Being Shrieks in Contradiction Against Itself': Uncanny Selves in Sayed Kashua and Philip Roth," *Shofar: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Jewish Studies* 36 (3) (2018): 1, 7.

19 Ibid., 7.

20 On different approaches to the double in literature see Dimitris Vardoulakis, *The Doppelgänger: Literature's Philosophy* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010).

instance, the fear from the other alongside the need of it; self-hatred and guilt alongside narcissist desires) and between reality and imagination. And second, by challenging the familiar categories of (national) identity and subverting stable processes of cultural socialization.

Furthermore, scholars of trauma have emphasized the importance of a witnessing that mediates between the experience and the reflection. For instance, Samuel Gerson defines this witnessing as an other that “constitutes a ‘live third’ – the presence that exists between the experience and its meaning, between the real and the symbolic, and through whom life gestates and into whom futures are born.”<sup>21</sup> Similarly, Dana Amir describes a constant movement between the first person and the third person of experience or between the “experiencing I” and the “reflective I,” which enables the shift between the “position of the victim” and the “position of the witness.” This metaphoric mode of traumatic testimony involves an act of representation and the creation of new meaning, producing an integrated narrative within which the traumatic events are not merely repeated but also transformed.<sup>22</sup>

Exploring the embodiment of trauma in Appelfeld's literature, Yochai Oppenheimer argued that Appelfeld creates a calculated texture of symptoms rather than conscious psychological representations.<sup>23</sup> In contrast to binary models, he suggests that symptoms reveal a liminal dimension between repression and coherent memory conveyed through poetic depictions of stuttering, distraction, frantic movements, disease and physical pains. Oppenheimer distinguishes two stages in Appelfeld's art of symptoms: in the earlier stage, the symptom illuminates a disconnecting from the traumatic past, while in the later stage the symptom alludes to reconnecting with the past through intergenerational identification, thereby pointing to private and national recovery.<sup>24</sup>

Rina Dudai also emphasized the crucial role of the trauma model for Appelfeld's work in general and for *The Man Who Never Stopped Sleeping*, in particular. Focusing on this novel, she showed how “the adherence to a transcendental

21 Samuel Gerson, “When the Third Is Dead: Memory, Mourning and Witnessing in the Aftermath of the Holocaust,” *International Journal of Psycho-Analysis* 90 (2009): 1341–1357; 1341–1342.

22 Dana Amir, “When Language Meets Traumatic Lacuna: The Metaphoric, the Metonymic, and the Psychotic Modes of Testimony,” *Psychoanalytic Inquiry* 36 (8) (2016): 620–632; 622.

23 Yochai Oppenheimer, “The Art of Symptoms in the Work of Appelfeld” (Hebrew), in *The Art of Symptoms: Reading Aharon Appelfeld's Fiction*. Yochai Oppenheimer and Ktzia Alon (Tel Aviv: Gama, 2012), 19.

24 Ibid., 44–46.

mental position, based on a mystical-religious experience following extreme trauma, is a stage on the way to the reconstitution of the self, as well as the poetic self."<sup>25</sup>

The duality of attachment to and detachment from the past recurs in Shahar Pinsker who claimed that Appelfeld creates ongoing life stories based on two contradictory yet intertwined models of journey. The linear model embodies attempts to escape the exilic experience associated with victimhood by taking a heroic revenge on the perpetrators, whereas the cyclical model illustrates an attempt to reconstruct Jewish life prior to the catastrophe by rescuing old manuscripts and books.<sup>26</sup> He shows how Erwin Siegelbaum, the protagonist of *The Iron Trucks*, while oscillating between these two models, fails to find healing neither as revenger nor collector, neither in Bolshevism, Assimilation, and Eastern-European culture nor in Jerusalem. Nevertheless, this oscillation demonstrates a multiple, non-monolithic view of Jewish traditions.<sup>27</sup>

Following these lines regarding Appelfeld's way of dealing with the disaster, I would like to shed light on the fundamental role of the literary double in his work. Unlike his previous novels, I claim that the protagonists of the autofictional novels *Suddenly, Love* and *The Man Who Never Stopped Sleeping* are able to move between the traumatic experience and its reflection and between pathological repression and protecting memory. This shift is made possible by means of an ongoing transition from the self to the other, and from the poet to the event (the traumatic loss) that he continues to encounter through repeated dreams, memories, and imagined conversations. In creating this figure of the double who embodies and captures both autobiographical and fictional events, reality and imagination, while rearranging the boundaries between internal and external realms, Appelfeld opened new modes of expression in telling the story of his life.

### **Modes of Expression: *Suddenly, Love* and *The Man Who Never Stopped Sleeping***

There were years when he didn't talk about it at all. He was convinced that writing about the Holocaust was impossible, forbidden. He found firm supporters for

25 Rina Dudai, "From Excess to Origin: Traversing Time Zones as an Act of Redemption in The Man who Never Stopped Sleeping by Aharon Appelfeld," *Yod: Revue des études hébraïques et juives* 19 (2014), accessed April 2, 2023, <https://journals.openedition.org/yod/2177>.

26 Pinsker, "Train that Rides Inside," 82.

27 Ibid., 89.

this opinion. The philosopher Theodor Adorno, for example, claimed that writing poetry after Auschwitz was “barbaric.” Ernst accepted this without challenge.<sup>28</sup>

The allusion to Theodor Adorno, the Jewish German philosopher who coined the verdict that writing after Auschwitz is barbaric,<sup>29</sup> illustrates one of Appelfeld's central dilemmas: how to write about the catastrophe, and what would be the appropriate language for it? For Appelfeld, testifying to the disaster is entangled with the struggle of portraying his own experience. As he confessed to Philip Roth, the futile attempts of telling the “story of my life” after escaping from the camps had to do with not only the shaking impact of the historical events, but also with the feeling that words are limited and fail to represent the horror; reality extends beyond imagination.<sup>30</sup> Later in the conversation and elsewhere, Appelfeld explained how different sources of inspiration, among them the Bible and the literature of the Austro-Hungarian writer Franz Kafka, helped him to find his voice.<sup>31</sup>

In the novel *Suddenly, Love* Appelfeld conveys this dilemma through Ernst, his invented double. Embodying a mixture of fictional and autobiographical elements the novel's protagonist is a writer who lost his family in the Holocaust. For years, he has failed to publish his prose work and struggled to find the appropriate expression for his traumatic experience. Living in Jerusalem as a retired investment advisor, Ernst is haunted by the memories of the war, his escape to the forests, recruitment by the Soviet Army and his arrival in Naples before immigrating with the youth movement to Palestine. In contrast to Appelfeld, who shifted from German into Hebrew, Ernst writes in German, his mother tongue. Moreover, the remark on writing his early poems in Czerowitz where he was born, might remind the readers of the poet Paul Celan (Pesach Anshel), whose work has become a milestone in discussions about the ethical, aesthetic and poetic representation of the Holocaust.

28 Appelfeld, *Love*, 114.

29 Theodor W. Adorno, “Criticism and Society,” in *Prisms*, trans. Samuel and Shierry Weber (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press), 19–34; 34.

30 Roth, *A Talk with Aharon Appelfeld*.

31 Aharon Appelfeld, *Essays in the First Person* (Hebrew) (Jerusalem: Hasifriya Hatzionit, 1979). On Kafka's influence on Appelfeld, as reflected in his memoir and the 2010 novel see Abigail Gillman, “Screams Turned into Whispers: Aharon Appelfeld's Poetics in *Story of a Life*, and *The Man Who Never Stopped Sleeping*,” in *Colloquia Germanica. Internationale Zeitschrift für Germanistik* 54 (1), ed. Harald Höbusch and Joseph D. O'Neil (Tübingen: Narr Francke Attempto Verlag, 2022), 31–58.

The novel begins two years after the surgery that Ernst underwent. Mental depression and physical pain that have paralyzed his body block his attempts at writing. This situation changes slowly as Irena, who takes care of him after his release from the hospital, enters Ernst's life. In the course of the novel, they develop an intimate relationship parallel to Ernst's growing ability to tell Irena about his parents and grandparents. Life and story intertwine, as Irena becomes a listener and witness to Ernst's fears and desires. This belated love, unexpected and surprising, opens up in him long-forgotten feelings of trust and faith in the other, while rearranging the boundaries between inside and outside, imagination and reality.

The loss of parents lies at the core of the traumatic experience during the Holocaust, which resonates with Ernst's guilt about disconnecting himself from them before the war. Failing to "meet" both his father and mother in his dreams, he refers to his parents who disconnected themselves from their own parents and the Jewish religion when moving from the Carpathian Mountains to the city, as an "open wound."<sup>32</sup> These generational ruptures embedded in reenactments of private and collective breaks also occupied Appelfeld in the memoir.<sup>33</sup> However, in contrast to the memoir, Ernst is able to work through the painful loss by reviving in writing memories from his childhood visits to his grandparents' village. In the wake of his developing memoir, he can finally come to terms with the departure, which turns into an imagined reen-counter. The return of the dead is also a return to the Jewish cultural tradition bound up with the Eastern-European landscapes (the synagogue in the Carpathian village), which he is able to do with the help of the woman he loves: "Because of some mistake we are driven from this paradise and cast into exile. But finally the mistake has been corrected and we have returned to the place where God and man dwell together."<sup>34</sup>

In both autofictional novels, this "homecoming" that occurs through the process of literary writing plays a central role. For instance, Ernst reflects on lost poetic traditions, which reappear as his own sources of inspiration. Mentioning the enormous impact that Kafka has had on him, he is also aware of the dangers

32 Appelfeld, *Love*, 33.

33 Appelfeld, *Story*, 121.

34 Appelfeld, *Love*, 223–224. According to Adam Kirsch, "For an Israeli writer to locate the Promised Land, not in Israel, but in the dreaded and despised Europe of the Holocaust, is an audacious and pointed move [...] it is intriguing to think that perhaps the way to heal the traumas that still afflict Judaism is to restore that breach—to regain a more loving and less fearful view of our ancestors' lives." See "Aharon Appelfeld Creates a Jewish Saint in *Suddenly, Love*," *Tablet*, May 1, 2014, accessed April 20, 2023, <https://www.tabletmag.com/sections/arts-letters/articles/appelfeld-kirsch-suddenly>.

resulting from the total attraction to and fascination with his voice: "Kafka's focus was entirely inward. Even the exterior was his interior."<sup>35</sup> This relationship between outside and inside is translated into the aesthetic texture of writing. Only when Ernst is able to free himself from the "spell" of Kafka, whose interior took over the external, does he succeed in finding his own poetic voice.

An additional source of inspiration for his literary work appears toward the end of the novel, when Ernst formulates a poetic principle he identifies with and is willing to employ:

It is now of the greatest importance to Ernst for his writing to be clear, orderly, without superfluity, and without any exaggerations. If a sentence has an air of coquetry or a hint of ornamentation, he crosses it out [...] Writing has to be direct and to the point, without twists [...] Good writing has to be like Grandfather's peasant smock: a simple tunic, with no decoration, comfortable to wear. Once Grandfather told him that there is not a superfluous word in the Bible. Every word counts and has its place.<sup>36</sup>

The metaphor of the peasant shirt relates to the frugal language of the Bible. For Ernst the writer should not compose superficial, arabesque textures. His interwoven words have to adhere to clear, authentic lines. This view is congruent with Appelfeld's searching for modes of expression and representation of the Holocaust. His wish to relate what happened in way that is "faithful to reality," and to bear witness without ending up with a weak scaffolding and an unconvincing imaginary tale, reverberates with the protagonist's attempts of writing the story of his life.

Whereas in *Suddenly, Love* Ernst finds his way into the therapeutic writing through the power of love, in *The Man Who Never Stopped Sleeping* it is rather Erwin's injury that sets in motion the process of writing through which he seems to recover. Here too Appelfeld develops the character of the protagonist, his literary double, by combining biographical and fictional elements. Among the autobiographical components are the arrival in Palestine via Naples, the youth movement and the agricultural school, the life in Jerusalem and becoming a Hebrew writer including his sources of inspiration, information about the grandparents in the Carpathian Mountains and about his parents and finally his birth name Erwin. Moreover, in this later autofictional novel Appelfeld interweaves fragments of his earlier lyrical and prose texts with Erwin's first

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 117.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 222.

attempts at writing.<sup>37</sup> Among the fictional components are the injury during an engagement with snipers followed by a painful process of rehabilitation, first in the hospital and later in the sanatorium.

The novel initially focuses on the act of sleeping: "At the end of the war, I became immersed in constant slumber [...]. Waves of darkness carried me along, and I moved forward. *Where are you heading?* I asked myself. *Home*, I replied, surprised at my own answer."<sup>38</sup> This in turn reveals an additional set of oppositions: existential (deep sleep and wakefulness) and mental (unconsciousness and consciousness), temporal (backwards and forwards, day and night), and territorial (the homeland in Europe and the new land of immigration in the Middle East). The sleep that overtakes the protagonist at the beginning of the novel denies the traumatic break by returning him to the years before the war and reconnects him with the dead grandparents and parents. These encounters that illuminate Erwin's inner world suspend his confrontation with the external environment and historical events, first by denying his family's death in reality and second in the way he keeps experiencing the European sound (German, Yiddish, Ruthenian) and landscapes (Ukrainian and Romanian) in the new land (Israel).<sup>39</sup>

The struggle for survival in the present demanded disconnection and even denial of the past in a cultural process that scholars have defined as a "negation of exile."<sup>40</sup> For example, as part of the national ideology, the immigrants had to replace their foreign names with Hebrew names. This complexity is shown in the novel when Erwin's first reaction to his mentor's suggestion to change his name to Aharon is a refusal. Slowly, but not without resistance

37 Rina Dudai claims that this intertextual relation "brings to light the mental process undergone by the writer that leads him from the trauma, through the experience of revelation, and ultimately to the redemptive act of writing." See Dudai, "From Excess to Origin."

38 Appelfeld, *Man*, 3–4 (emphasis in original).

39 In his memoir Appelfeld reflects how the language "which promised to be my mother tongue was nothing more than a stepmother" (111). On the issue of the language see Stanley Nash, "Sippur Hayyim," *Prooftexts: A Journal of Jewish Literary History* 22 (3) (2002): 334–354.

40 Based on binaries such as past and present, diaspora and homeland, this narrative called for the negation of Exile (Shililat Hagaluth) and was embedded in major literary works. See Dan Miron, *Bodedim Bemo'adam – Lidyokana shel Harepublika Hasifrutit Ha'ivrit Bithilat Hame'a Ha'esrim* [When loners come together – A portrait of Hebrew literature at the turn of the twentieth century] (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1987); Yigal Schwartz, "Our Shadows and Ourselves: The 'Yom Kippur Generation' in Israeli Fiction," *BGU Review – An Online Journal of Israeli Culture*, 2017, accessed January 12, 2023, <https://in.bgu.ac.il/en/heksherim/Pages/2017.aspx>.



and internal conflict, the Hebrew pushes the German aside. The sleep that protected him from the external world and reconnected him to his past life now becomes less secure as the hegemonic language takes over. Erwin's response to this insecurity is conveyed in his attempts to write his own literary work that gradually replaces his sleep, and within which he can freely across the borders between here and there.

As in Ernst's case, Erwin's writing draws on European landscapes and memories from his birthplace, visits to his grandparents' village in the Carpathian Mountains and conversations with his parents. Moreover, rather than calling the "event" by its name, while mentioning the explicit subject matter (writing on the Holocaust), his poetic texture reveals the horror by interweaving words associated with the catastrophe, including the names of homes and places that were erased and characters who are no longer alive. However, unlike the novel *Suddenly, Love*, now the invented double, like Appelfeld himself, chooses to write in Hebrew although the new language evokes in him feelings of dismay and betrayal.

In his memoir Appelfeld defined the common approach to the new language as "functional," admitting how in time it became clear to him that he needed to have "a different connection to the Hebrew, not an external connection but an interior one."<sup>41</sup> Moreover, following his physical immigration resulting from the violent wrench from his parents, the process of acquiring the new language further uprooted him from home: "From the moment I arrived in Israel, I hated the people who forced me to speak Hebrew, and with the death of my mother tongue, my hostility toward them only increased."<sup>42</sup> What the memoir reveals about the dilemma of the language, the novel exposes through an imagined conversation between the fictional double and his mother. In response to her pointing out his use of "incomprehensible words" and "secret language," he concludes:

Finally, I realized that I was mixing words from home with new words, so I tried to separate them. I wanted to tell her about all my adventures since I had been parted from her. I knew I had a lot to tell her, but it seemed beyond my power, like a pile of broken stones that I had to load onto my back.<sup>43</sup>

To some extent, Erwin's emerging prose in the 1950s elucidates and mirrors Appelfeld's poetic style, which embraces in addition to the Bible,

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<sup>41</sup> Appelfeld, *Story*, 113.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 111.

<sup>43</sup> Appelfeld, *Man*, 53–54.

influences from Hassidic legends, partially through the relation to Kafka, and foreign languages such as the Yiddish spoken in the Carpathians and the German spoken in Czernowitz.<sup>44</sup> At the time, however, Appelfeld's European landscapes stood in contrast to the local landscapes portrayed in the emerging Israeli literature and hegemonic culture. Moreover, the literary representations of the Holocaust in post-1948 Hebrew literature hardly related to the suffering of the survivors and either depicted the heroic moments of resistance in the ghettos and the forests (focusing on the partisans) or simply remained silent about the victims.

Anita Shapira pointed to the silence surrounding the Holocaust in the literature of the "1948 Generation," which was intended to disconnect the Zionist heroic narrative from the victimhood associated with diasporic Jews.<sup>45</sup> In this respect as well, the prose written by Appelfeld's fictional double is innovative. For instance, his ambivalence regarding national identity recurs in the depiction of military service. Similar to Appelfeld's memoir in which the military role attributed to the formation of Israeli identity constitutes a humiliating experience for the memoir's reporter, the novel continues this unheroic depiction. However, instead of focusing on the mental pain, here the narrator thoroughly depicts his physical pain. On being wounded in an engagement with snipers, Erwin has to spend long months recovering from multiple surgeries and trying to regain the use of his legs. During this period, he copies passages from the Bible into his newly acquired Hebrew when taking his first steps as a writer.

As in *Suddenly, Love*, here too a prominent source of inspiration for his literary writing is Kafka. While in the hospital, Erwin imagines recurring conversations with his father, which revolve around the father's attempts at writing. The father, who struggles to find a genuine mode of expression, invokes Kafka's work as the only possible way of writing. In the father's view, Kafka broke away from the restrictions and barriers of expression, which is what he demands from his son. In one of these conversations, while his father

44 See Sidra DeKoven-Ezrahi, "The Jewish Journey in the Late Fiction of Aharon Appelfeld: Return, Repair or Repetition," *Mikan: Journal for Hebrew Literary Studies* 5 (2005): 47–56; Shahar Pinsker, "The Language That Was Lost on the Roads: Discovering Hebrew through Yiddish in Aharon Appelfeld's Fiction," *Journal of Jewish Identities* 7 (1) (2014): 129–41.

45 Anita Shapira, "Dor Ba'aretz (Generation in the Land)," in *Yehudim Hadashim Yehudim Yeshanim* [New Jews, old Jews] (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1997), 122–154. See also Avner Holtzman, "'They Are Different People': Holocaust Survivors as Reflected in the Fiction of the Generation of 1948," trans. Ralph Mandel, *Yad Vashem Studies* XXX (Jerusalem, 2002), 337–368; Iris Milner, "Writing and the Holocaust: Problematics of Representation in Second-Generation Literature in Israel," *The Journal of Israeli History* 22 (1) (2003): 91–108; 106–107.

encourages him to follow in Kafka's footsteps, the son is thinking about his broken legs:

That night I saw my father sitting at his desk and writing. It seemed to me that his efforts and my efforts to rejoin my legs to my body were shared. I wanted to call out to him. *We'll both do it*, but I realized that this was erroneous. There was no connection between his writing and my injury. "Will my legs be reattached to my body?" I asked father fearfully. "I have no doubt," he replied as he raised his big eyes to mine.<sup>46</sup>

The literal wound depicted in the novel belongs to the fictional components of Appelfeld's poetic output: the double. Through the imaginary conversation between the son and his father, the physical and the mental traumas are connected. The broken legs embody the mental break that resulted from the catastrophe in Europe and the immigration to the new land of Israel. In the final pages of the novel, Erwin apparently repays this devotion to succeed where his father has failed, when he reenounters his mother in a dream, telling her that he broke through the barriers. Coming to terms with or working through the loss of the family by means of poetic writing is thus bound up with the long process of recovery. In this sense, Erwin's reclaiming of the language (his tuning and mastering of a poetic language) operates in parallel to reclaiming his walk. He learns to write while he is practicing walking. The analogy gains another perspective through the depiction of connecting the disconnected organs and reattaching the broken, fragmented parts. For Appelfeld, writing about the Holocaust has nothing to do with the subject matter. The essence and meaning of such an ethical project lie in the organic and authentic (rather than functional and artificial) way its parts are connected.

### To This Day I Cannot Do Anything with It

I address him in German and say, "Herr Appelfeld" and he comes down the ladder, looks at me and cannot speak a single word, only the tears flow down his face. And for a whole day he could not speak a word, just this terrible crying. He does not tell me that he is my father, I do not tell him that I am his son. To this day I can't do anything with it. It brings me to tears, it's not something I can touch. I cannot. Not yet. Maybe in 20 years I will be able to touch this fire.<sup>47</sup>

<sup>46</sup> Appelfeld, *Man*, 120–121 (emphasis in original).

<sup>47</sup> Michael Gluzman, "Until Now, I Have Written the First Part: An Interview with Aharon Appelfeld" (Hebrew), *Mikan: Journal for Hebrew Literary Studies* 1 (2000): 150–165.

Appelfeld described being reunited with his own father in Israel in an interview with Michael Gluzman in the journal *Mikan* in 2000. The interviewer wondered why Appelfeld had not mentioned the encounter in the memoir published only a year earlier. The answer the writer provided reveals another story. He described how he saw his father's name on the Agency's list of refugees and immigrants yet could not tell whether it was his father or not. He went to Be'er Tuvia, an immigrant transit camp at the time. Arriving there a man working as a fruit-picker was pointed out, whom he addresses in German.

The story continues further, but resists dissolving into a harmonious closure. Instead of culminating in relief resulting from the reunion of father and son, and their acknowledgment of finally reaching out to each other, this moving report leaves readers with deep feelings of discomfort. Facing their deep grief, both men cannot speak the words "father" and "son." The break paralyzes, refusing any kind of repair and consolation. In his memoir, Appelfeld is unable to "do anything with it." What is still impossible for the reporter of the autobiographical text becomes possible through the literary doubles of the autofictional novels that were to follow. Only by means of his doubles, which kept tracing the wound, experiencing and reflecting, close and distant, inside and outside, can he work through the catastrophe.

Over the years, Appelfeld's views in essays and conversations clarified that the challenges of bearing witness to the Holocaust absorbed him. Repeatedly, he pointed out the fundamental part of the poetic realm and the aesthetic perspective in searching for accurate modes of representing this event. In light of this, the literary work became a laboratory not only for probing the ethical limits and possibilities of testifying to the disaster, but also for working through its paralyzing effects. As I have shown here, with regard to current scholarship in the field, the figure of the double plays a prominent role in this dynamic by oscillating between self and other, reflection and experience, reality and imagination.

Both novels discussed in this article combine biographical and fictional elements. Their protagonists whose given names are (Erwin) or echo with (Ernst) Appelfeld's are also writers. In struggling to find precise modes of expression, they allude to Appelfeld's own struggle as he revealed on various occasions, including his memoir. Whereas Ernst writes in German, Erwin switches into Hebrew; and yet the two of them reflect on the complexity of language. For Ernst whose German includes "secret words" that his mother can no longer understand, the immigration evokes in him feelings of betrayal. Erwin, for his part, incorporates in the Hebrew foreign words imbued with diasporic soundscapes that the Israeli culture has repressed. While illustrating the life of their stories, both writers create alternative zones that blur the boundaries between Europe and Israel, exile and homeland, thereby

challenging the hegemonic national identity. These zones reverberate with intertextual relations such as the literary work of Franz Kafka. Conflicts with the mother but particularly with the father figure regarding the process of writing allude to the Jewish Czech writer and illuminate Appelfeld's aesthetic and ethical dilemmas within a wider cultural context.

In *Suddenly, Love*, Ernst works through the past that haunts him in the present by reviving in writing private childhood memories, which ended for him when the war broke out. The reconnection with the grandparents and parents also evokes in him the lost connection to Jewish tradition. This happens with the help of Irena who teaches him to love. The ability to look outside, towards a caring and protecting other sets in motion the writing process. Furthermore, the novel ends with Irena, who "will reinforce the house on every side. No harmful creature will ever dare to approach the window."<sup>48</sup> This rearrangement of an outside-inside relationship embodies the primary mechanism of the double.

In *The Man Who Never Stopped Sleeping*, the search for an appropriate vehicle to tell of a damaged life is conveyed through the physical description of the injury. The unheroic position associated with the exilic conditions recurs through descriptions of the hospital and the ideological conversations in the sanatorium. Yet Erwin seems to find his way into the new world without relinquishing the world he came from. The joined organs (legs), like the verbal fragments of his newly acquired language, do not deny the break. Rather the scars of the wound are etched in the recovered body, as the foreign components of the diasporic experience are engraved in the Hebrew from which these stories are made.

Unlike the mechanistic or somewhat functional use of the Hebrew as reflected in Appelfeld's memoir, his literary doubles seek in their language for an authentic reconnection of its different parts. Like Appelfeld, they transgress the lines between inside and outside, imagination and reality, creating a new intimate space – an interior that reverberates with the exterior, which in turn, does not block or deny what it supersedes. Appelfeld's fictional narrators incorporate autobiographical components, similar to Roth's who captures the radical twoness between Philip and Aharon: "because each recognizes in the other the Jewish man that he is *not*... because we are heirs jointly of a drastically bifurcated legacy – because of the sum of Jewish antinomies, yes, we have much to talk about and are intimate friends."<sup>49</sup>

The stories they tell include a present that does not exclude the past, a living that does not forget the dead. They challenge familiar categories of identity

48 Appelfeld, *Love*, 225.

49 Roth, *Operation Shylock*, 201 (emphasis in original).

shaped by monolithic ideologies, and subvert the hegemonic narrative by echoing with diasporic traditions. Against Appelfeld's admitting to his inability "to touch this fire" in the interview following his 1999 memoir, almost twenty years of creation have passed since then, revealing his ongoing, uncompromising attempt to write his story of life that embeds the self without ignoring the other.

## Abstract

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*The Life of a Story: Aharon Appelfeld's Double as a Mode of Holocaust Representation*

In a 2000 interview, Aharon Appelfeld, a Holocaust survivor and prominent Israeli writer, was reminded of what he had not mentioned in his memoir. This article focuses on two of Appelfeld's novels following the memoir, *Suddenly, Love* (2004) and *The Man Who Never Stopped Sleeping* (2010), by exploring the figure of the "double" (Doppelgänger). My claim is that the literary double demonstrates Appelfeld's attempts to work through his trauma by transgressing the lines between experience and reflection, imagination and reality, hegemonic and diasporic cultures, the living and the dead, within a story that embeds the self without ignoring the other.

## Keywords

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Aharon Appelfeld, double (Doppelgänger), modern Hebrew literature, memoir, Holocaust fiction

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Vanessa Joosen

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## Frozen in Sorrow: *Winterijs* [Winter ice] by Peter Van Gestel

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TEKSTY DRUGIE 2024, NR 1, S. 221–238

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Studying Holocaust fiction for young readers means touching upon the core characteristics of children's literature. Various critics have identified in children's literature about the Holocaust a crucial dilemma:<sup>1</sup> on the one hand, authors and educators cherish the desire to inform readers in a way that does justice to the atrocities of the persecution and genocide of Jewish people and that raises awareness in the young that history must not be repeated. On the other hand, children's literature has a tradition of providing mostly optimistic, or at least hopeful, narratives that often put young people's agency and growth central. These two perspectives cause friction in Holocaust literature for children. What Geoffrey Hartman calls "the limits of representation" may weigh in on children's books even

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1 See, for example, Adrienne Kertzer, *My Mother's Voice: Children, Literature and the Holocaust* (Ontario: Broadview, 2002); Lydia Kokkola, *Representing the Holocaust in Children's Literature* (London: Routledge, 2003); Joanne Pettitt, "On Blends and Abstractions: Children's Literature and the Mechanisms of Holocaust Representation," *International Research in Children's Literature* 7 (2) (2014): 152–164.

more than on literature for adults,<sup>2</sup> argues Katrien Vloeberghs.<sup>3</sup> This observation helps to explain why until the 1970s, relatively few titles addressed the Holocaust for a young readership in Dutch literature. Since then, children's literature has seen a wave of fiction and non-fiction about the Second World War and the Holocaust, in which authors have to strike a balance between presenting history faithfully and respecting the emotional needs and capacities of child readers.

In this article, I will present an analysis of the Dutch children's novel *Winterijs* [Winter ice], authored by Peter van Gestel and first published in 2001.<sup>4</sup> The novel tells the story of two ten-year-old Dutch boys, the narrator Thomas, and his new friend Zwaan. They meet at school in the city of Amsterdam in 1946. During the autumn and winter of 1946–1947, an extraordinary friendship develops between them that is based on a strange combination of attraction and repulsion, sadness and humour, and joint memories of their earliest childhood, which they discover together. Thomas is raised by his father and mourns the death of his mother, who died of typhoid fever. Thomas and his father mostly try to deal with their loss by suppressing their memories and grief. Zwaan is a victim of the Holocaust. He has spent most of the war in hiding and is now living with his aunt and cousin Bet. Zwaan has started to give up hope that his parents and uncle will return home after they have been deported. When Thomas's father has to move to Germany to earn some money, Thomas is temporarily housed by his aunt. In this period, his friendship with Zwaan and Bet intensifies and he gradually starts to retrieve more of his memories and gets a better understanding of his friend's grief. Thomas realizes that he had already met Zwaan when they were toddlers, and that Zwaan's former home, where they met, has been claimed by Dutch people who are not prepared to give it up to its former owners. Through such scenes, as well as many others, *Winterijs* [Winter ice] addresses the fraught process of personal and collective memory. At the end of the book, Zwaan leaves Amsterdam for New York to live with his uncle, sending Thomas a long letter that provides some explanations about his past and pays tribute to their friendship.

2 Geoffrey H. Hartman, *The Longest Shadow. In the Aftermath of the Holocaust* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1996), 151–152.

3 Katrien Vloeberghs, "Kinder- en jeugdliteratuur over de Holocaust: Een ontmoeting tussen Werkelijkheid en Weergave," in *Uitgelezen jeugdliteratuur: Een ontmoeting met traditie en vernieuwing*, ed. Vanessa Joosen and Katrien Vloeberghs (Leuven: LannooCampus, 2008), 176.

4 Peter Van Gestel, *Winterijs* (Baarn: De Fontein, 2001) (all English translations are made by the author of this paper).



*Winter Ice* has received great critical acclaim. It was published in a period in which the Holocaust became a prominent theme in Dutch-language children's literature, with works by authors such as Roger Vanhoeck, Guy Didelez and Katrien Seynaeve, as well as various translations and reprints of older works (e.g. by Ida Vos). Few of these titles, however, have reached the cultural status that *Winterijs* holds in Dutch children's literature. It is one of few books to have won the two most important awards for Dutch children's literature, the Gouden Griffel (Golden Slate) and the Woutertje Pieterse Prijs (in 2002); in addition, it also received the biennial Nienke van Hichtumprijs in 2003. *Winter Ice* has been translated into various European languages, including Ukrainian and Russian, as well as Chinese and Korean, though it is not yet available in English. The novel has been particularly praised for its style of narration, which literary critic Joke Linders calls "effectief en geestig" [effective and humorous], as well as observant and precise.<sup>5</sup> In this article, I explore how *Winter Ice* and its evocation of the Holocaust can be contextualized in the functions of children's literature as a literary discourse and in three tensions that Katrien Vloeberghs has identified in children's literature about the Holocaust. Thomas's narrative voice will be central to that analysis.

### Three Functions, Three Domains of Tension

As Ann Rigney argues, creative arts have an important role in making past events "memorable," by "supplementing what has been documented with imaginative power and creatively using cultural forms to generate vibrant (if not always literally true) stories."<sup>6</sup> Children's literature is such a cultural form that contributes to the commemoration of the Holocaust, while doing so within its own characteristics and conventions. All children's literature is marked by a combination of three different functions: didactic, recreative and aesthetic.<sup>7</sup> The didactic function can take various forms: the books can impart knowledge, but also teach values, attitudes and desired behavior. Holocaust education fits into this didactic function on several levels, not just informing children about the facts of what happened in the 1930s and 1940s, but also provoking moral questions and fostering desired attitudes. Various children's

5 Joke Linders, "Ooit zal de sneeuw toch smelten: Winterijs van Peter van Gestel," *Literatuur zonder leeftijd* 16 (2002): 114–117; 115.

6 Ann Rigney, "Remaking Memory and the Agency of the Aesthetic," *Memory Studies* 14 (1) (2021): 10–23; 12.

7 Vanessa Joosen and Katrien Vloeberghs, *Uitgelezen jeugdliteratuur: Een ontmoeting met traditie en vernieuwing* (Leuven: LannooCampus, 2008), 15–16.

books invite young readers to connect the persecution and murder of Jewish people in the past with prejudice, discrimination and genocide in the present, teaching them how to recognize xenophobia and spurring them to take action when they witness it.

In addition to this didactic impetus, children's literature also fulfils other functions which may seem at odds with accounts of the Shoah. As a field, children's literature emerged from John Locke's pedagogical principle of combining learning with play and Jean-Jacques Rousseau's admiration of childhood's innocent happiness.<sup>8</sup> The notion of "play," which Katrien Vloeberghs and I catch under the broader term of the "recreative function" of children's literature, can also take various forms. It cannot be reduced to just "fun" but can be understood as a form of pleasure that is potentially evoked by various aspects of the story, such as humour, narrative tension and resolution, opportunities for identification and immersion in the narrative. Some of these kinds of pleasure are not incompatible with Holocaust fiction, even if it may feel paradoxical to derive "pleasure" from stories about this disturbing period in history. Finally, the aesthetic function of literature also applies to children's books about the Shoah. Their form – the language, style, narrative structure, but also the images – can elicit an experience of beauty or deep reflection and new insights in the reader.

In my analysis of *Winter Ice*, I will reflect on these three functions of children's literature in the context of three domains of tension that Katrien Vloeberghs has theorized specifically for children's books about the Holocaust. These tensions are structured around three parameters:

1. the epistemological level (knowing),
2. the psychological level (feeling),
3. the ethical level (acting).<sup>9</sup>

I will explain each of these parameters as I apply them to Van Gestel's novel. Interestingly, the book does not only contribute to the commemoration of the Holocaust, but also thematizes the (lack of) remembrance – an aspect of the novel that I will also address in my analysis.

### **Between Informing the Reader and Telling a Compelling Narrative**

Vloeberghs explains that on an epistemological level, children's books face a tension between the need to pass on knowledge about the Holocaust on the

8 Karen Coats, *The Bloomsbury Introduction to Children's and Young Adult Literature* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018), 22–23.

9 Vloeberghs, "Kinder- en jeugdliteratuur over de Holocaust," 177.

one hand and the need to provide a fictional narrative rather than the dry facts of a history book on the other hand.<sup>10</sup> The didactic function may completely overrule the recreative function of children's literature if a book is overloaded with facts, or if those facts are shared in artificial dialogues that do not succeed in pulling in the reader. An additional risk arises from the tension between informing the reader on the one hand and producing an enticing narrative on the other. Some narratives, including books published for children, stage some of the horrific events in the Holocaust to raise the narrative tension, in a way that does not so much seem to serve the need to inform the reader as to produce a sensationalist narrative with spectacular moments of cruelty.<sup>11</sup>

In the light of this careful and ethically complicated choice between informing the reader about disturbing historical facts and telling a compelling story, *Winter Ice* strikes a careful balance. It enlightens the reader about parts of the Holocaust that are essential to capture the characters' pain, while not going into so much detail that the storyline is obstructed or that the Holocaust is exploited for a sensationalist narrative. Peter Van Gestel's novel productively uses the "multiple addressee" of children's literature as well as a naïve narrator to achieve this balance. With the concept of the multiple addressee, I refine the concept of the double addressee that critics like Zohar Shavit and Barbara Wall have identified in children's literature.<sup>12</sup> It refers to the idea that children's books are not just read by children, but also by adults, and that the stories often provide layers that address the adult reader, sometimes along with, and sometimes also over the head of the child. Fiction about the Holocaust, such as *Winter Ice*, compels us to further refine this notion of the double addressee. Here it takes shape not necessarily in the distinction between a child and an adult; for a discussion of this fiction, it makes more sense to distinguish between a readership that has already been educated about the Holocaust, and those who know little or nothing about it.

The narrator of the book, ten-year-old Thomas, is in the latter position. His unreliability manifests itself in two aspects. First, he has little knowledge about the world around him and his country's very recent past. This ignorance can be attributed to his father's lack of communication skills, his aunt's discomfort to inform him, and the taboo on the Second World War in his school.

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 177.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 184.

<sup>12</sup> Zohar Shavit, *Poetics of Children's Literature* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1986/2009); Barbara Wall, *The Narrator's Voice: The Dilemma of Children's Fiction* (London: Macmillan, 1991).

Van Gestel's novel offers an instance of what Anna Laura Stoler, with reference to colonialism, calls "disabled history," which results in aphasia.<sup>13</sup> Stoler prefers these terms over "historical amnesia" because they draw attention to "both loss of access and active dissociation."<sup>14</sup> Drawing on Stoler, Rigney describes the idea of "disabled history" as "a mnemonic pathology whereby people collectively fail to make sense of the evidence before their eyes and link it to what they already know about the past."<sup>15</sup> This is exactly what happens in *Winter Ice*, where Van Gestel further complicates the idea of remembrance because his protagonists are children.

Thomas himself has developed a habit of downplaying what is important to him, especially when it comes to difficult memories. Understatements are his stylistic hallmark. His narrative opens as follows:

I'll just start with something. Over a year and a half ago my mother died.<sup>16</sup>

The casual tone that Thomas adopts when he talks about the death of his mother belies the pervasive way that this loss has turned his and his father's life upside down. He then describes how his father wanders around at night, thinking that Thomas is asleep, while the boy lies awake in his bed. While he catches his father talking to a frozen tap, the man seems unable to address his son – no proper conversation unfolds between the two of them. Instead, the frozen tap gives readers a first indication of the metaphor of frozen water that is also evoked in the title *Winter Ice*, and that can be interpreted as representing their inability to access their memories and emotions. This idea recalls Stoler's concept of aphasia:

In aphasia, an occlusion of knowledge is the issue. It is not a matter of ignorance or absence. Aphasia is a dismembering, a difficulty speaking, a difficulty generating a vocabulary that associates appropriate words and concepts with appropriate things. Aphasia in its many forms describes a difficulty retrieving both conceptual and lexical vocabularies and, most important, a difficulty comprehending what is spoken.<sup>17</sup>

13 Anna Laura Stoler. "Colonial Aphasia: Race and Disabled Histories in France," *Public Culture* 23 (1) (2011): 121–156.

14 Ibid., 124–125.

15 Rigney, "Remaking Memory," 12.

16 Van Gestel, *Winterijs*, 11. All translations from *Winterijs* are my own.

17 Stoler, "Colonial Aphasia," 125.

Thomas's and his father's failure to talk about the profound loss of a loved one is indicative of the general absence of direct communication in the book when it comes to addressing painful memories. Moreover, as we soon learn, Thomas is also forgetful, a trait he shares with his father, and often gets things wrong:

I always forget where I've put up my coat. When it's three o'clock, I often think: it must be four o'clock already.<sup>18</sup>

Such statements further serve to establish Thomas as an unreliable narrator, but also as a character who is modest and, given his grief and evasive father, whose ignorance and forgetfulness can be excused.

As the friendship between Thomas, Zwaan and Zwaan's cousin Bet develops, the young narrator's ignorance and forgetfulness serve a triple narrative purpose. First of all, until well into the novel, readers are left in the dark about what happened to the main characters and their family members during the Second World War. Any reader would expect Zwaan to have a mother and father and may wonder why he does not live with them; their curiosity may motivate them to read on. About a third into the book, Thomas starts wondering about Zwaan's family members himself – if readers hadn't asked themselves the same questions, they are invited to do so at that point. The question of what happened to Zwaan's parents and uncle creates narrative tension, which can yield a form of reading pleasure, even if the resolution of that tension is tragic.

As a second consequence of Thomas's ignorance, readers who have not been taught the facts of the Holocaust, learn about some of them as Thomas is being educated himself; and in fact, those who do know about the persecution of Jewish people by the Nazis, may still learn new things about how the German occupiers operated in collaboration with the Dutch. In this sense, *Winter Ice* may serve the didactic function of conveying knowledge. As Zwaan's cousin Bet explains to Thomas, her father was arrested, not by Germans, but by the Dutch police:

They put him on a transport to Poland, there they killed him, just like they killed uncle David and aunt Minnie and all the aunts and cousins and I don't know who else they have all killed.<sup>19</sup>

As Joanne Pettitt notes, trains often function metonymically in children's literature about the Holocaust: by evoking the journey eastwards, trains "allow the text to represent, without actually showing, the true horror of the

<sup>18</sup> Van Gestel, *Winterijs*, 12.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 151.

atrocities and, by extension, they facilitate the necessary juxtaposition of appropriateness and didacticism."<sup>20</sup> Bet here evokes the train, but also adds that the transport led her family to their deaths, without providing further details.

Gradually, the main characters are more informed about what happened to the Jewish people who were deported from Amsterdam and did not return: first Zwaan, who then tells Thomas, and with Thomas, also the reader. At the end of *Winter Ice*, after Zwaan has moved to live with his only surviving uncle in Brooklyn, New York, he shares more details with Thomas in a letter. In New York, he has met two Polish women who survived the concentration camps. While Zwaan never learns what happened to his parents specifically, he now realizes how many Jewish people were killed:

They told me about the corpses and the gas chambers in the camps with German names. Then uncle Aaron started crying. I didn't. I was glad I had finally heard something.<sup>21</sup>

Some readers might share the sentiment that Zwaan expresses, because it is only in the final pages that they finally learn more facts about the Holocaust.

Third, readers who have been educated about the Holocaust before reading *Winter Ice* will have inferred much sooner what happened to Jacob, David and Minnie Zwaan. Their Jewish names, their absence, and the silent grief of the older adults are all important clues that are distributed in the first chapters and that indicate that they have perished in the concentration camps. Once readers have made these connections, several conversations between Thomas and Zwaan produce a dramatic irony that may have a profound literary and emotional effect. At one point, for example, the two boys arrive at the Amsterdam train station. Thomas loves the atmosphere of the train platform and he enjoys imagining departing on a train; he does not understand why Zwaan does not share in his delight:

At a counter, I bought two platform tickets. Zwaan was standing behind me and kept grumbling. I couldn't hear a word he was saying.  
I turned around and asked: 'What are you all nagging about?'  
'Why am I doing this?' said Zwaan.  
Still he went along with me to one of the platforms, as he kept shaking his head,  
no no no.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Pettitt, "On Blends and Abstractions," 158.

<sup>21</sup> Van Gestel, *Winterijs*, 234.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 119.

The informed reader will understand that Zwaan is not just grumbling and nagging, but that he is imagining the fate of the Jewish people – including his parents – deported from the station. Moreover, Zwaan may be recalling his own grief when he visited the station in the early days after the war, in the vain hope of his parents' return. He does not find the words to make clear to Thomas, however, that he does not want to enter the station, and as a consequence is dragged to a place and a set of memories he is trying to forget.

Even when Zwaan tries to explain his trauma to Thomas, he does not succeed in bringing across the facts of his family's deportation to his friend:

Zwaan looked very worried and resembled a little old man who has forgotten what errands he needs to run.

Zwaan pointed.

"There is the east," he said.

"What's with the east?"

"There is Central Europe. A year ago I came here with Bet every day. Then we would wait for the trains."

"Why?"

"You never knew. The Red Cross had said: some people come back."

"O," I said.

"You can say that again," said Zwaan.<sup>23</sup>

In the passage that follows, Van Gestel privileges an aesthetic effect over a chance to share the facts about the Jewish transports with his readers. Thomas is observant but evasive, and fails to understand the situation because he cannot look beyond his own perspective. Zwaan decides to leave it at that for the moment:

"What's with Central Europe?"

"Nothing," said Zwaan.

He looked at me and winked the way only he can.

"I will make sure to tell you one day, Tommie."

I just left it at that – I felt it wasn't the right time to tell him my name is actually Thomas.<sup>24</sup>

As a result of his ignorance, Thomas leads Zwaan into spaces and conversations that are extremely painful for the Jewish boy who has had his parents deported and murdered. The informed reader is invited to sympathize with

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 120.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 120.

Zwaan, and to admire the strength that he displays in reassuring Thomas – a strength that is put in a humorous contrast with Thomas's pedantic thought about getting his name right.

As Alice Curry points out,

Novels can control the reader's knowledge of, and access to, key events by adopting inherently naïve, ignorant or prejudiced focalizing or narrating voices. In doing so, they can manipulate the margins of the visible and the non-visible, creating a looming textual blind space through which the reader can explore the consequences of literal and ideological blindness.<sup>25</sup>

Indeed, Thomas's ignorance raises questions about his education and by extension, the "ideological blindness" affecting the Dutch after the Second World War. To what extent can he be considered complicit in "disabling" history? The ironic distance that separates informed readers from Thomas is not stretched to the point that they are likely to lose sympathy for the ignorant boy, however. Van Gestel can rely on the trope of childhood innocence here – a quality in children that is often admired and cherished, and for which Thomas seems to bear no blame. After all, what child could imagine the horrors of Auschwitz on its own?

At the same time, the passage shows that childhood innocence is a privilege that is only allowed to some children, and it illustrates the other side of the coin of adults who try to maintain childhood innocence. Since the adults who care for Thomas have not educated him, that burden lands on the shoulders of Zwaan. Zwaan is the same age as Thomas – ten years old – but he is "adultified" in this passage, that is, he is forced to take an adult role. This is first signaled by the comparison with a confused old man, and then by the knowing wink and reassuring message that Zwaan gives to Thomas. He is safeguarding Thomas's innocence, while also putting him at ease at a moment when Zwaan himself is hurting. The diminutive "Tommie" signals that adultification as well. That Thomas rejects this sign of endearment shows his desire to be taken seriously, while it also underlines his inability to read the situation beyond his own perspective and to provide comfort to his traumatized friend. At the same time, however, Thomas's more naïve take on life also allows Zwaan to experience some more carefree moments when they are together, for example when Thomas is making up stories for Zwaan or when they are fantasizing about girls they might fall in love with.

25 Alice Curry, "The 'Blind Space' That Lies Beyond the Frame: Anne Provoost's *Falling* (1997) and John Boyne's *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* (2006)," *International Research in Children's Literature* 31 (2010): 61–74; 62. See also Pettitt, "On Blends and Abstractions," 160.



### A Psychological Tension

The conversation between Thomas and Zwaan at the train station exemplifies a second tension that Katrien Vloeberghs identifies in children's literature about the Holocaust, one that can be situated on the psychological level and relates to the emotional impact that the stories aim for. This tension revolves around the need and the reticence to describe the horrors of the genocide faithfully, and the emotional impact that reading about the Holocaust may have on the reader.

In the words of pedagogue Chaim Schatzker: "The problem is how to present the truth without causing dangerous mental consequences – how to impress without traumatizing."<sup>26</sup> Vloeberghs identifies so-called "circles of Holocaust representation," with few children's books entering into its darkest center, the concentration camps and gas chambers, as the Jewish victims experienced them.<sup>27</sup> Instead, she lists recurrent motifs that appear in children's books, such as the infringement of Jewish characters' lives by the Nürenberg laws, the razzes on Jewish people, life in Jewish ghettos or people hiding in attics, secret rooms and farms.<sup>28</sup> The mass murder is sometimes addressed through metaphors, such as "the endless night" or as we have seen above, with metonymies, such as the departing trains.<sup>29</sup> Second and third-generation traumas are also a recurrent trend in recent children's literature.

*Winter Ice* uses an array of techniques to create distance and mitigate the potential emotional impact of the gruesome events of the Holocaust on young readers. First of all, by situating the main events in the years after the war, the novel reassures the reader from the start that the main young characters have survived. This takes away the – sometimes unbearable – tension of following Jewish characters as they are being persecuted and killed, as is the case in Gudrun Pausewangs' *Reise im August* [The final journey, 1998] and John Boyne's *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* (2006). When Thomas and Zwaan become friends, the war has ended and Zwaan has already given up hope that his parents will return. The story puts his acceptance, commemoration and grieving central. Moreover, all of the characters who have perished in the novel are adults, not children with whom young readers may identify more easily and directly.

26 Schatzker, cited in Vloeberghs, "Kinder- en jeugdliteratuur over de Holocaust," 180.

27 Vloeberghs, "Kinder- en jeugdliteratuur over de Holocaust," 182–183.

28 Ibid., 181–182.

29 Ibid., 183.

Moreover, while Bet does tell Thomas that “they killed an infinite number of people, an infinite number of children and baby’s too,” those numbers remain vague and the murdered children remain anonymous.<sup>30</sup> Instead of confronting readers with unbearable tension or gruesome scenes, *Winter Ice* relies on what Alice Curry calls “blind space” and what Wolfgang Iser calls “gaps” in the narrative to elicit an emotional response in the reader. The conversation at Amsterdam train station is one instance of such a blind space. As Zwaan and Thomas listen to Al Jolson’s *Sonny Boy*, another gap appears. Zwaan explains how during the German occupation, he was moved to Deventer, where he spent most of the war in hiding:

“[...] He [Al Jolson – V.S.]’s singing about the angels who are feeling lonely and therefore want Sonny Boy back in heaven, very pitiful and very beautiful, oh well. My father said, he said: Sonny, the angels aren’t getting you, what are they thinking – tomorrow we are going to Deventer, by bike.”  
 “By bike all the way to another city?”  
 “Yes, he didn’t find the train very pleasant and he insisted that he wanted it to be a pleasant day.”<sup>31</sup>

The emotional impact of this passage lies in what is not said rather than in what is said, and it takes readers who have mastered theory and mind and feel empathy to fill these gaps and grasp the full emotional load of the scene. They might infer that Zwaan’s father was lying about his reasons for going by bike, as the two Jewish characters might have faced a greater risk of being checked on the train. To phrase this risk in terms of pleasant and unpleasant (“gezellig” in Dutch) is a serious understatement, though his desire to have a pleasant day with his son can nevertheless still be true. After all, from what we later learn about David (Zwaan’s father), he was highly aware that he and his wife would probably be deported if they stayed in Amsterdam. This means that David also realized that the bike ride to Deventer was possibly the last day he got to spend with his son. Rather than filling it with sadness, he wanted it to be a day of joy, both on his own behalf as for the child. From the way Zwaan describes it, David has succeeded in imprinting that last day as a good memory on his son. The emotional impact is not achieved through shocking the reader, but rather through the appeal to slow reading and empathy – otherwise a significant passage like the one just quoted can easily be missed.

<sup>30</sup> Van Gestel, *Winterijs*, 152.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 78.

### Human Agency

It is through empathy that the book also revolves the third tension that Katrien Vloeberghs identifies, namely the ethical level, on which she situates questions of meaningful human agency:

That dimension relates to the message that authors want to convey to their target audience of children and adolescents when it comes to human nature, the way people behave towards each other, which factors lead to certain behavior, and so forth. Probably the negotiation on the level of the description of human behavior is also the most impactful, that on which the fewest answers are found.<sup>32</sup>

Children's literature has a tradition of showing children as beings with agency despite adult control and it typically displays strong faith in human progress and future hope. Vloeberghs confronts this tradition with the fundamental questions that the Holocaust has raised about humanist worldviews, as phrased by the author Primo Levi and the philosopher Jürgen Habermas.<sup>33</sup> How can children's books still offer faith in humanity in the light of a historical event that shook this belief to its core?

*Winter Ice* can only succeed in this by largely ignoring the perspective of the perpetrators, pushing the crimes of the Holocaust to the margins, and focusing instead on the trauma of the survivors and the power of empathy to foster human connections and give meaning to life. As mentioned above, the events described in *Winter Ice* mostly take place after the war. The main characters are victims, children, or conscientious objectors (like Thomas's father). Readers are not directly confronted with any perpetrators of crimes against humanity. That being said, the novel does evoke a feeling of frustration that no one is held accountable. Not all forms of forgetfulness in the novel can be excused. After the war, Zwaan moved in with his aunt and cousin, but together with Thomas, he visits the house in Amsterdam where he grew up with his parents. The Dutch couple that lives there gets angry when Thomas and Zwaan stare through their windows. The house has been robbed and taken over, and this situation is not amended or wreaked after the war. Moreover, some Dutch people, including the boys' teacher and some of their classmates, still express antisemitic feelings. Even a tragedy like the Holocaust has not cured them of those kinds of prejudices, and they are not penalized for it. Zwaan and his family are still met with disdain, in addition to pity.

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32 Vloeberghs, "Kinder- en jeugdliteratuur over de Holocaust," 187–188 (all English translations are mine).

33 Ibid., 188.

Various children's books on the Holocaust cast child protagonists who ask critical questions when adults dare not do so, Vloeberghs finds, and thus the children exemplify a humanist spirit of goodness combined with rational and ethical thinking.<sup>34</sup> That is not the case for Thomas and Zwaan, whose communication is fraught, as I have already shown. While Thomas sometimes asks pertinent questions, he is also often evasive and does not push through when his inquisitive spirit is discouraged. Zwaan and Thomas do manage to stand up to the antisemitic bully in their classroom, but they are still highly at the mercy of adult decisions, for example when Thomas has to live with his aunt or when Zwaan moves to Brooklyn. The children's agency lies in their potential for empathy, in the distraction they can provide for each other, and in the fact that they cannot only discuss, but also create memories together, thus providing a powerful counterpart to the sadness in Zwaan's life. *Winter Ice* thus bears witness to an important aspect of artistic works that address traumatic events of the past that Rigney highlights. In her discussion of narratives about colonialism, she remarks:

It bears highlighting, however, given the emphasis in memory studies on traumatic experiences, that creativity is being used here not just to build empathic bridges to the *sufferings* of others but also to their desires and pleasures. [...] artists can also use their medium creatively to open perspectives beyond trauma. By staging moments of joy, excitement and the hope of happiness on the part of willful subjects who are also interesting personalities, artists make it easier to keep company with strangers. This provides different, more positive, and potentially more durable grounds for memorability than an abstract imperative to remember the lives of "others."<sup>35</sup>

After Zwaan has left the Netherlands for Brooklyn to live with his only surviving uncle, Thomas is left feeling lonely and disoriented. Zwaan writes a long letter to offer an explanation and comfort:

Do you know what it is, Thomas. I had no memories in the Netherlands. Deventer was nothing more than a memory of a few minutes, you see? I didn't know anyone from before. I knew nothing about nurseries and the like, nothing about playing in the streets. Now, here in America I do have memories. I remember that stroll we took through the city with Bet. I remember that nice movie.<sup>36</sup>

34 Ibid., 189.

35 Rigney, "Remaking Memory," 17.

36 Van Gestel, *Winterijs*, 232.

The end of the novel suggests that Thomas and Zwaan's agency lies in their potential to create meaningful memories and use these as a basis for friendship and personal resilience. *Winter Ice* fits into a preoccupation that various critics, including Britta Jung, have identified in recent fiction about the Holocaust.<sup>37</sup> The books do not just present memories, but thematize the act of remembrance. At the same time, in *Winter Ice*, the capacity to remember is presented as complex, capricious, and fraught. Previous passages from the novel destabilize the hope that Zwaan offers in his letter about the memories he will cherish. Earlier in the book, it is discussed how quickly such memories can fade. Neither boy can really remember his deceased mother well, for example. Zwaan explains that he can still remember his father's hat and coat,

"But my mother," he continued after a while, "jeez, that was hard, I had so many aunts after all, I got confused when I thought about her, well when I wanted to think about her [...]. Do I not want to remember or am I unable to remember?"<sup>38</sup>

One might think that this lack of memories is due to Zwaan's young age the last time he saw his mother – probably at the age of five or six. However, even a year after Thomas's mother has passed away and despite his older age, he has the same problem:

"[...] What did your mother look like?"  
 "I wasn't paying attention to that," I said.  
 "If you squeeze your eyes shut, can you see her then?"  
 I squeezed my eyes shut. I did so out of kindness, because I wasn't expecting too much. Thinking is different from seeing. [...]  
 "My mother always had wet hands," I said.  
 "How do you know?"  
 "She would pinch my nose a whole damn lot."<sup>39</sup>

The memories of the boys are patchy and unsentimental, and what is remembered is not necessarily what one wants to recall. This makes it questionable what will remain of the memories they created together.

There is some hope, however, that their friendship will not be forgotten despite the fact that they may never meet again. A first sign of hope lies in

37 Britta Jung, "Een nieuwe lust in het vertellen: Het 'Derde Rijk' in de hedendaagse Duitse jeugdliteratuur," *Literatuur zonder Leeftijd* 25 (2011): 64–86.

38 Van Gestel, *Winterijs*, 133.

39 Ibid., 133.

the book's structure: it is told retrospectively, a few months after the friends have been abruptly separated and Zwaan has left for New York. The ice has melted, and the suffocating heat makes it difficult to recall the cold winter that Thomas and Zwaan spent together, but when Thomas gets a long letter from Zwaan, that triggers him to tell the story of their friendship in all its details. Second, if we tread outside of the limits of the book, Van Gestel also claimed the novel was based on his own memories from childhood, supplemented with elements from a diary that his mother kept.<sup>40</sup> Only after the war did he discover that his own father was half Jewish. While Van Gestel's own father survived, one of his uncles was killed in the Holocaust. In secondary school, Van Gestel befriended a Jewish boy, but they did not talk much about the war. Moreover, as Joke Linders has noted, "the book is dedicated to Daniel K, a friend of Van Gestel's five-year older brother, who died in Auschwitz."<sup>41</sup> This autobiographical link once again makes clear the tension between the Holocaust faithfully and respecting the conventions of children's literature: while the real child Daniel (Danny) did not survive Auschwitz, his fictional counterpart Zwaan was able to go into hiding and live. Just as Zwaan and Thomas first encountered each other at a birthday party when they were toddlers, Peter van Gestel met the Jewish boy Daniel at a young age, and he still had very vague memories of that party.<sup>42</sup> This shows that some memories can make such a strong impression that they do not only stay with you for a lifetime, but that they can compel you to write. His memory of Daniel was one of those, and one can expect that within the fictional realm of the novel, the friendship between Thomas and Zwaan will have made a similar strong impression, that may change over time, but cannot be washed away.

## Conclusion

When Thomas is in Zwaan's house, he thinks at one point: "Nee, dacht ik, ik ga er geen mooi verhaal van maken" [No, I won't turn this into a beautiful story], a thought that echoes reservations about the desirability and

40 Joukje Akveld, "'Het zijn de schrijvers die tellen, niet de genres': Een interview met Peter van Gestel over het autobiografische gehalte van *Winterijs*," *Literatuur zonder leeftijd* 15 (2003): 89–94; 89.

41 Joke Linders, "Peter van Gestel," *Lexicon van de jeugdliteratuur* (2007): 1–10; 8, accessed May 30, 2023, [https://www.dbnl.org/tekst/coiloo1lexio1\\_01/lvdjoo353.php](https://www.dbnl.org/tekst/coiloo1lexio1_01/lvdjoo353.php).

42 Joke Linders, "'Het zijn de schrijvers die tellen, niet de genres': Een interview met Peter van Gestel over het autobiografische gehalte van *Winterijs*," *Literatuur zonder leeftijd* 17 (2003): 89–94; 92.

possibility of representing the suffering of Holocaust victims and survivors through art.<sup>43</sup> While Van Gestel puts limits to the facts of the Shoah that he chooses to represent in his book (for example by opting out of evoking the real Daniel K.'s life more faithfully), a beautiful story is exactly what he tells in the end, through Thomas's narrative voice. *Winter Ice* turns the aesthetic function of children's literature into a form of reading pleasure by relying on a narrator who is naïve and uneducated, but also witty, well-meaning and gradually more understanding of Zwaan's pain. The novel's aesthetic appeal does not lie in a polished or sentimental plot, but in its frictions and gaps. It privileges the aesthetic over its didactic function, and relies on readers' capacities to read between the lines. In *Winter Ice*, Van Gestel seems to have struck a careful balance in all three fields of tension that Vloeberghs identifies in children's fiction about the Holocaust: by informing his readers about the genocide of the Jewish people without overburdening the plot (what Vloeberghs calls the epistemological level of tension), by respecting the emotional vulnerability of some of his readership (the psychological tension) and by acknowledging some people's oblivion to Jewish people's suffering, while showing that human connections are possible and that they can offer comfort and hope in meaningful ways (the ethical level). In striking this delicate balance, Van Gestel has produced one of the most widely lauded novels on the Holocaust written in Dutch – one that remains relevant over 20 years since its first publication.

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43 Vloeberghs, "Kinder- en jeugdliteratuur over de Holocaust," 175–176.

## Abstract

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*Frozen in Sorrow: Winterijs [Winter ice] by Peter Van Gestel*

Peter Van Gestel's *Winterijs* [Winter ice] from 2001 is one of the most lauded Dutch children's books. This article contextualizes its evocation of the Holocaust in the didactic, recreational and aesthetic functions of children's literature, and in the epistemological, psychological and ethical tensions that Katrien Vloeberghs identifies in children's literature about the Holocaust. *Winter Ice* informs readers about the Shoah without overburdening the plot and by respecting readers' emotional vulnerability. Its naïve, witty narrator is central to this process. While acknowledging malice, indifference and memory's fallibility, *Winter Ice* suggests that human connections are possible and offer comfort and hope in meaningful ways.

## Keywords

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children's literature, Dutch literature, Holocaust, memory, aesthetics



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Sławomir Jacek Żurek

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## **A Jewish Child in a Polish Hiding Place. Children, Adults and Animals in Nava Semel's *And the Rat Laughed* and Wilhelm Dichter's *God's Horse***

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TEKSTY DRUGIE 2024, NR 1, S. 239–266

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In comparative studies in literature one often encounters claims that Polish and Hebrew literatures on the Holocaust belong to two different orders of culture.<sup>1</sup> The former is written by both Jews and non-Jews from the positions of the victims and bystanders (less frequently of the perpetrators). Hebrew Holocaust literature is written by Jews, nearly always from the position of the victims and from an outside perspective, far from the site of the Shoah: Poland.

In this article two novels will be analyzed: *And the Rat Laughed* by Nava Semel and *God's Horse* by Wilhelm Dichter. The former was originally written in Hebrew, while the latter in Polish. They come from different linguistic backgrounds, yet they belong to the same order of culture: both were written by Jewish authors affected by the trauma of the Shoah, even though they belong to different generations – Wilhelm Dichter is a child of

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. *Polish and Hebrew Literature and National Identity*, ed. Alina Molisak and Shoshana Ronen (Warszawa: Dom Wydawniczy Elipsa, 2010); *Jews and Non-Jews: Memories and Interactions from the Perspective of Cultural Studies*, ed. Lucyna Aleksandrowicz-Pędich and Jacek Partyka (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2015).

the Holocaust,<sup>2</sup> while Nava Semel is a representative of the post-Holocaust second generation.<sup>3</sup> Both of them speak from the position of victims, and in both cases, the main protagonist is a Jewish child.

In 1996, at the age of sixty-one, Dichter published his first novel on the Holocaust, *Koń Pana Boga* [*God's Horse*], amidst a series of late literary debuts of children of the Holocaust. When in 1986 Semel published her *כובע זכוכית* [*Kova Zekhukhir*] [*Hat of Glass*], a short story collection and the first work of fiction in Israel to address the topic of the second generation, she was thirty-one years old. The novel *צהוק של עכברוש* [*Cahok shel akbarosh*] [*And the Rat Laughed*] was published in 2001. Both novels discussed here thus opened new chapters in the history of Holocaust literature, although in different ways.<sup>4</sup>

2 Wilhelm Dichter was born in 1935 in Borysław (then in Poland, today in West Ukraine) to a family of assimilated Polish Jews. His father died during the Shoah, while he and his mother survived in his hometown. After the war they moved to Warsaw, where he grew up in a communist social environment. He graduated from the Warsaw Polytechnic (receiving a doctorate in mechanical engineering) and worked in Poland until March 1968. He was forced by the antisemitic campaign of Władysław Gomułka to immigrate with his family to the United States. He settled in the Boston area and worked as an expert in ballistics and algorithm design. His literary debut was *Koń Pana Boga* [*God's Horse*, 1996], an autobiographical novel in Polish based on his personal experiences from early childhood and youth. His second book, *Szkoła Bezbożników* [*The Atheists' School*, 1996], deals with Polish postwar communist reality and the situation of young Holocaust survivors. Both novels were nominated for the Nike Award. All the quotations here come from their English translations: *God's Horse* and *The Atheists' School*. Trans. Madeline G. Levine (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2012) [hereinafter *God's Horse* by Wilhelm Dichter will be designated by the letter "D"].

3 Nava Semel was born in Tel Aviv (Israel) in 1954 and passed away in 2017. She was a poet, author of prose for children and adults, playwright and writer of television scripts and opera libretti, as well as a translator. She also worked as a journalist and a producer for television and radio. Her mother was an Auschwitz prisoner and survivor. Semel received several literary prizes, including the American National Jewish Book Award for children's literature (1990), the Women Writers of the Mediterranean Award (1994), the Austrian Best Radio Drama Award (1996), the Israeli Prime Minister's Award (1996), and Tel Aviv Woman of the Year in Literature Award (2007). All the quotations here come from the English translation of her book, originally written in Hebrew: *And the Rat Laughed*, trans. Miriam Shlesinger (Melbourne: Hybrid Publishers, 2008) [hereinafter *And the Rat Laughed* by Nava Semel will be designated by letter "S"].

4 Cf. Joanna Stöcker-Sobelman and Michał Sobelman, "Bypass pamięci: Myśli wokół książki Śmiech szczura Nava Semel," *Miasteczko Poznań* 2 (2019): 15–21; Marek Sawa, "Indywidualne doświadczenie przestrzeni kryjówek w prozie Michała Głowińskiego, Wilhelma Dichtera i Henryka Grynberga," in *„Rozliczanie” przeszłości. Relacje polsko-żydowskie w tekstach kultury XX i XXI wieku*, ed. Tadeusz Sucharski and Marta Murawska (Słupsk: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Akademii Pomorskiej, 2016), 145–168; Piotr Szewc, *Koń Pana*

### Memories/Post-memories/Sub-memories/Non-memories

Several kinds of memory are activated in these novels: the memory and non-memory of a survivor (Dichter), the post-memory of the child of a survivor, the unnatural sub-memory of future reality (Semel), and once again, the non-memories of new generations of readers (in both). After an initial read of the novels, one may hypothesize that the Holocaust is still traumatizing to all who carry these kinds of memories.<sup>5</sup> But which memory is now the most universal among the contemporary public?

One can find an answer to this question in Semel's novel, in the attitude of one of the last eye-witnesses of the Shoah: "Non-memory – that's what she ought to have talked about" (S, 22). The witnesses have passed away, their memories must be preserved, although people who have lost their memory are envied. Holocaust survivors do not usually lose their memory, though children of the Holocaust sometimes do.<sup>6</sup> Representatives of the second generation are deeply traumatized by these memories, so, surprisingly perhaps, it is those from the no-memory population who can really absorb the experience of the Shoah and feel real compassion for its victims.<sup>7</sup> The protagonist of *And the Rat Laughed* (a teenager, granddaughter of a Holocaust victim) wonders: "Why [does her grandmother talk about her Shoah experiences with – author's note] her granddaughter? Why not her daughter? The old woman's daughter, no longer young and not yet old, had been ruled out as possible listener to the story" (S, 18). The old woman ("the little-girl-who-once-was") from Semel's

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Boga (review)," *Nowe Książki* 1 (1997): 12; Magdalena Rabizo-Birek, „*Koń Pana Boga* (review)," *Twórczość* 8 (1997): 128–131; Mieczysław Orski, *Koń Pana Boga* (review), *Przegląd Powszechny* 3 (1997): 362–364; Ranen Omer-Sherman, "To Extract from It Some Sort of Beautiful Thing": The Holocaust in the Families and Fiction of Nava Semel and Etgar Keret," *Humanities* (Basel) 9 (4) (2020): 137.

5 Cf. Marianne Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture after the Holocaust* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012); Maria Rice Bellamy, *Bridges to Memory Postmemory in Contemporary Ethnic American Women's Fiction* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2016); Marta Cobel-Tokarska, "Memory and Postmemory of War in the Realities of Contemporary Ukraine in *Everything Is Illuminated*, a Novel by Jonathan Safran Foer," in *Niepamięć wojny. Europa Środkowo-Wschodnia w XX/XXI wieku*, ed. Justyna Budzińska, Edyta Głowacka-Sobiech and Bernadette Jonda (Poznań: Instytut Historii UAM, 2017), 117–134; *Entangled Memories: Remembering the Holocaust in a Global Age*, ed. Marius Henderson and Julia Lange (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2017); Griselda Pollock, "The Lessons of Janina Bauman: Cultural Memory From the Holocaust," *Thesis Eleven* 107 (1) (2011): 81–93.

6 See Paul Valent, *Child Survivors of the Holocaust* (New York: Brunner-Routledge, 2002).

7 See Erin Heather McGlothlin, *Second-generation Holocaust Literature: Legacies of Survival and Perpetration* (Suffolk: Boydell & Brewer, 2006).

novel remains a child forever, “inside her [...] time has become fossilized” and only “on the outside it has taken its toll” (S, 29). A child of the Holocaust is able to share his or her tragic experience only with a no-memory child. A witness commits that experience “to the Holocaust, a huge submemory folder” (S, 72), a vision of the future memory of the Shoah. On the other hand, all generations after the Holocaust “would be trapped in a never-ending loop of murder, hatred and fear,” with “each generation starting the terrible cycle anew, having learned no lesson whatsoever” (S, 72). “The little-girl-who-once-was” decided to give testimony to her grandchild. She approached “the danger zone, the limits of control, the place where she would no longer be able to hold on to the story line” (S, 19):

For a moment, the old woman feels as if she has not told the story at all, but has merely imagined doing so. And even before her granddaughter gets up to leave, she is overcome with a burning desire to go back and try again to tell it more smoothly, in a way that would include whatever the little girl hunkering in the pit knows. (S, 28)

The memory of the Shoah is shown in Semel’s novel as a transgenerational process, in which representatives of three generations take part, but the matter also affects the next generation as a so-called memory-implant.

The problem of memory looks different in *God’s Horse*. In Dichter’s book, the child of the Holocaust is also the main protagonist-narrator (in this novel there are no protagonists who belong to the future generations). His name is Wilhelm. He is shown by the narrator (meaning himself) in the process of growing-up – at the moment the war breaks out (1939) he is four years old, while in 1947, when the plot ends, he is a twelve-year-old boy and moves (with his mother and stepfather) to Warsaw. His experience of a traumatized childhood opens another dimension. His memory is protected by adults who allow him to remain a child – he therefore feels chosen.

The events which form the basis for the plot of the novel are related by the narrator-protagonist on the basis of his own personal memory, which along with the relations of his parents and grandparents, are a very important source for the plot’s construction. In the novel one can see the child’s knowledge of his family history, events which took place before his birth (he knew for instance the love story of his grandparents, and even the details of their meeting as young people). Semel’s heroine knows nothing about her parents and grandparents and does not know their names or even her own. She knows nothing about herself and only assumes she is a Jewish child.

In the beginning of the novel *God’s Horse* we meet the grandmother from the mother’s side – Antonina – “short and somewhat prickly,” who “was always carefully attired in a black dress” and had “black hair and black eyes, like

Mother and me" (D, 7). One detail is particularly important about her – "everyone except [...] [her – S. J. Ż.] spoke in German [at home – S. J. Ż.]" (D, 7). Her husband, a key-figure in the boy's miraculous escape from the Shoah, is described by him. The grandpa organized hiding places on the Aryan side for the whole family as well as money to live on. He himself stayed in the ghetto. In the memory of the child, the photograph of the man in an "Austrian uniform, with a medal and a saber" (D, 7) was the only recollected image of his ancestor from his mother's side.

Other episodes clearly remembered by Wilhelm are the entry of Soviet troops into Borysław in September 1939 and the anti-Jewish pogrom carried out by the Ukrainians after the Germans entered the city in July 1941. The protagonist of Dichter's book thus has a conscious knowledge of reality and history.

When the Jews were being locked up in a closed district designated as a ghetto by the Germans, the boy and his mother remained on the Aryan side. They wander from one hiding place to the next in the apartments of friends and strangers, and the boy, not having a normal life, begins to exist in his own world of his imagination. He learns about the outside world only from the accounts of his loved ones, who sometimes come out of confinement (in the hiding place on the Arian side). Above all, he hears about the slow disappearance of the Jewish world and its people, among them people known and close to him. However, he prefers to forget immediately the things that hurt him. In addition, for security reasons, his memory also deletes details about subsequent hideouts and those who organized them. Astonishingly, this process accelerates after the war:

During the Hitler times I lived on Pańska Street, at Janka's, at Pani Sprysiowa's, at Pani Hirnikowa's, and in the well. I was always losing someone and I had to remember more and more dead people. At Andzia Katz's I started to forget. What did Grandma Antionina look like? I didn't know. (D, 94)

In the end the boy becomes afraid that he is beginning to lose his memory, not only of the deceased but also of living persons who survived the Shoah: "If they seal the border, Nusia and Kopcio will remain in Borysław forever. Will I forget them, too?" (D, 94).

Even during the Holocaust, he realized that memory was really his enemy, because remembering meant danger and could even threaten him with death. So, he was afraid not only of his own memory, but also of those who might have remembered him as a Jewish child from before the war. Therefore, he wanted to change his own memory and that of others into non-memory. This can be clearly seen in the scene when the mother goes outside during her stay

in the hiding place. When the woman does not return for a long time, the boy thinks about his father appearing as an omnipotent figure who could reverse a bad fate:

I was terrified that something bad had happened to her. Only father could fix it. Who else was capable of turning things around and erasing everything from the memory of witnesses? (D, 83–84)

After the war, when he leaves these hiding places and is repatriated to Poland, his mother many times verifies the memory of her son as a child:

“Do you remember how we went to the orphanage from the hospital?”

“No.”

“And do you remember Uncle Unter?”

“No.” (D, 116–117)

With the passing of time the boy notices something worrying at himself. First, a few days after leaving his hiding place and finding his mother's colleague's (Andzia Katz) home, at first, he could not recall the voice of his Grandmother Antonina, or even her appearance. Then, living in the so-called Recovered Territories, he could also not recall his other Jewish relatives. He tries at any cost to recall his beloved uncle Milo (the older brother of his mother), who signed up in the Red Army in 1940 and was evacuated to Russia as a medical officer. He wants to find him very much: “I follow every Russian officer with creaking straps. If he's not a Kalmuk, I wonder if he's my uncle” (D, 117) – the boy associates his relative only with the sound of the leather belt and harness from his uncle's uniform. And what about his beloved grandfather? There was only a one trace in the boy's smell. He remembered the scent of a poison in a little bag that his grandpa wore around his neck. He was to use it if the Nazis caught him: “Mother sends me out unnecessarily to follow people in wooden shoes or striped camp clothes. I wouldn't recognize Grandfather! I've even stopped dreaming about him. I can only smell the odor from the ampule” (D, 117).

Memory loss progresses to manifest itself most terribly several months after the war: “Suddenly, I realized that I no longer remembered Father's voice. I tried to picture his mouth, in vain. His cheeks. His forehead. Hair. Nothing! ... Only his eyes.” (D, 118). Maybe this happened because after his father's death his traumatized and suffering mother never mentioned him and “only once, she took his photograph out of her bag,” asking her son: “do you remember?” (D, 146), but then the boy answered only with silence.

The problem of memory is shown in completely different ways in these two novels. In Dichter's work, the reader can observe the personal memory

of a child of the Holocaust, which shapes the fabular construction of the literary text. In Semel's book, memory seems to be only a cultural construct, serving to make possible the trans-generation process of Holocaust memory transmission.

### A Polish Hiding Place

"Hiding places" is a very important motif for Holocaust history and literature.<sup>8</sup> The protagonist of Semel's *And the Rat Laughed* is a five-to-six-year-old Jewish girl, who, upon the liquidation of the local ghetto, was entrusted by her parents to the care of a Polish family – without any alternative. She was forced to spend many months alone in hiding places in extreme conditions or in the company of complete strangers. The protagonist of *God's Horse* is a little older, an eight-to-nine-year-old boy, who also spent time in different hiding places (in both the city and the countryside) but always in the company of family and friends. He feels loved and cared for. The unnamed girl from Semel's book was hidden in a village in a potato pit: "They lowered her into a pit under the ground. The stranger, the one whom she would come to call the 'farmer's wife,' dragged her down the ladder and said, this is where you stay" (S, 16). Through this horrible experience, the girl, who was too little to remember her own name, remains forever "the little-girl-who-once-was" in "the pit-that-once-was." She remembers only "darkness" and "nothing more" (S, 63); many years after the Holocaust she is still "forever in a pit" (S, 67) and feels as if she "never ever left" it (S, 35).

The next hiding place for the girl was a niche in the apartment of a priest who agreed to take care of her after she had spent many months in the pit. When she was handed over to a priest, she looks and acts as if she were dead. The priest narrates:

I try everything. Water, bread, a blanket, but she will not let me near her. All night long I watch her, contorted in her strange position – half lying, half sitting. Protecting every part of her body, trying to keep from being noticed. Whenever I approach her, she shrinks into the little niche in the wall adjoining my quarters. I yearn to tell the huddled soul: There is a place for you in this world. If only I could promise her a place in the next world. (S, 78)

She spends long periods of time with her eyelids shut tight, hunkered down "in her niche like a clump of mud" (S, 79). At last, she ventures out of the niche

8 Cf. Marta Cobel-Tokarska, *Desert Island, Burrow, Grave: Wartime Hiding Places of Jews in Occupied Poland* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2018); Natalia Aleksiu, "Gender and the Daily Lives of Jews in Hiding in Eastern Galicia," *Nashim* 27 (2014): 38–61.

and starts “walking gingerly through [...] quarters” (S, 83) but she still “cringed in the niche that she dug in [...] [the priest’s – S. J. Ż.] quarters, and covered her hair with dirt” (S, 85), lying “quietly in her niche” (S, 86). As the war closes in, the niche becomes the girl’s and the priest’s common place of hiding: “the bombs felled so close that the blast caused the ground and the walls of the church to shake. [...] [They – S. J. Ż.] huddled in the niche; the little girl shut herself in there at once. The smell of fires and smoke filtered through” (S, 97).

The protagonist of the novel *God’s Horse* also spends time during the Holocaust in hiding places, as mentioned above. The first of those was under the bed in the apartment of their former Polish housekeeper. But he was not alone: “during the day Mother and Nusia sat in the corner and I lay under the bed,” while at night “we slept on the floor, and the husband and wife slept in the bed” (D, 28). In the second hideout, he begins to feel and to behave like an animal:

I saw her feet. I was like a mouse. Invisible myself, I observed everyone who entered the room. I would turn over slowly, from one side to the other, so the floor wouldn’t creak. Freshly scrubbed, it smelled like soup. That smell lingered for a long time, especially in the cracks between the boards. Hunger made me press my nose against the floor and inhale. (D, 29)

He deals with physiological matters like a pet. In order to relieve himself under the bed, he turned onto his stomach and slid a chamber pot under him. At night, the host “dumped out the bucket in the latrine, which was a communal one for several apartments” (D, 28). He felt like a mouse, any sound could betray him, “especially if there was a stranger in the kitchen” (D, 29). The boy relates:

I would grow sleepy from boredom, but I was afraid to fall asleep, because Mother told me that I groaned in my sleep. When my eyelids grew heavy I opened them with my fingers and, turning onto my back, I looked at the boards on top of which lay a straw-stuffed mattress. (D, 29)

During the day he “heard the sounds of birds outside the window. Their voices didn’t mean anything.” He liked them because “he was indifferent to them.” He was only afraid of “the voices of the people who would come to get [...] [him – S. J. Ż.]” (D, 30). In his opinion, the biggest danger were the children because “they would recognize [...] [him – S. J. Ż.] instantly in the street and hand [...] [him – S. J. Ż.] over to the Germans. Grownups might take pity on [...] [him – S. J. Ż.], but not children” (D, 30). Polish children persecuted him at night in his dreams:



I dreamed that I was running away from them. I was running blindly, farther and farther, until I stopped because I didn't know what to do next. I slowly lost the ability to walk. (D, 30)

But the most important matter was that at night he slept in his hideout together with his mother, who lay next to him "on the floor and talked with Janka, who leaned down from her bed" (D, 30). After many weeks under the bed he begins to think: "Are there any Jewish children alive besides me?" (D, 31). He would not want to be the only Jewish child in the world: "I don't want to be alone" (D, 31).

Finally, the mother and the child are thrown out from this hiding place by their Polish hosts. Their next hideout is a little space in a garret and then in an attic. Inside those places there was only "a mattress covered with a blanket and on it were red pillows with feathers sticking out of them. Next to it was a bucket covered with a board and a jug of drinking water with a dipper." Their new hostess, Pani Spryskowa, had been paid by the boy's grandfather to take care of them – she emptied their bucket, topped up the jug with water from the well, and brought them bread. In the next hideout, at the home of Pani Hirniakowa, they lived inside a little space in the attic, in which "besides a straw pallet there was an empty iron bucket with a round wooden lid." The boy had to lie bent over under "the rafter that supported the roof above the pallet" (D, 40). Pani Hirniakowa was a prostitute, and at night the boy heard the creaking of the bed ("elbows and knees banged against the wall"), laughing and groaning. Sometimes Pani Hirniakowa "howled wildly and the bed banged the floor, faster and faster. Terrified by the roars of the men." At those moments the boy looks in the direction of his mother, but he "couldn't make her out in the darkness." He only remembers soldiers puffing out cigarette smoke – "some of them stayed until morning" (D, 41).

The last hiding place was a well, where the boy and his mother were taken by their cousins. They reached the destination after footslogging for several hours. One of their relatives lowered them down and another grabbed their legs. Next, they found themselves in the arms of the boy's aunt Nisia, his mother's sister. They hugged and wept for a very long time. The mother and her son began the last stage of their hiding, an underground life, which was wet and smelt of moss:

During the day it was hot. Soaked with sweat, we sat or lay on clay through which water was always seeping. An intense odor of earth and roots permeated everything. [...] Only a few narrow rays of light in which dust was pitch black. (D, 46)

The boy began to perceive himself and his family as moles "huddled against each other" (D, 47). He thought about the death of his grandfather, who

disappeared in the ghetto, and about his father, who committed suicide in their previous hideout, after they left him alone and went to a new hiding place. They had left him because he was too ill to flee with his wife and son. But then the war was over and so was the nightmare: the boy, his mother, and all the cousins made their way to freedom.

Both novels show very precisely the situation of Jewish children in hiding places. Semel strongly emphasizes the interior situation of the child in the hiding place (the feelings of the girl in the potato pit) and the observation of the child by an adult (the memoir of the priest who decided to survive her). In Dichter's novel the attention of the narrator is focused on the outside world, and his observations and relating of events. The adults' relationships to him are made evident in dialogues quoted by the narrator.

### A Jewish Child

The child in the world of the Holocaust is one of the basic subjects in contemporary literature, not only that written in Polish.<sup>9</sup> The boy in Dichter's novel survives not only as a Jewish child but also as a human being. The heroine of the novel by Semel was not so lucky. The Holocaust destroyed her humanity forever. Although the boy lost his father, grandparents, many members of his family, and his friends, he saved himself, his internal world, and his Jewishness. It was possible thanks to his grandfather, parents and cousins, who were with him all the time – they did not leave or lose him.

Before the war the boy was raised in the cult of German culture: "In the living room, in a wicker *étagère*, there was a multivolume German dictionary bound in green leather. Its smooth, cold pages were covered with Gothic letters" (D, 7). In their conversations, his grandmother and mother recalled vividly their life in Austria, when they lived in Vienna, which in their memory was a city "where Jews were happy" and the "Danube flowed with milk and honey" (D, 7). Everything changed when the Soviet-German war broke out. First, the boy and his family heard news about Jews being deported from their

9 C.f.: Małgorzata Wójcik-Dudek *Reading (in) the Holocaust: Practices of Post-memory in Recent Polish Literature for Children and Young Adults* (Berlin: Peter Lang, 2020); Krzysztof Rybak, "Sparing Them the Trauma: Postmemory Practices in Contemporary Polish Children's Literature About the Holocaust," *Filoteknos* 8 (2018): 169–183; Małgorzata Wójcik-Dudek, "Memory Boom and Imaginarium of Holocaust in Polish Literature for Young Readers," *Filoteknos* 10 (2020): 309–323; Lydia Kokkola, *Representing the Holocaust in Children's Literature* (New York: Routledge, 2003); Hamida Bosmajian, *Sparing the Child: Grief and the Unspeakable in Youth Literature about Nazism and the Holocaust* (London: Routledge, 2002); *Global Perspectives on Death in Children's Literature*, ed. Lesley D. Clement and Leyli Jamali (London: Routledge, 2016).

homes by the Germans, about railway transports of people riding in inhuman conditions in stock cars, where they had to relieve themselves where they stood and where “children slipped onto the floor and suffocated under the feet of the grown-ups” (D, 25).

He heard about many Jews, who gave their children for a fee to Polish and Ukrainian families. Finally, the boy experiences the horror of the Shoah himself, when he has to escape together with his parents during an operation to round up Jews. At the time, he states, frightened and tired: “Mama I can’t go any farther. I don’t want to live” (D, 27).

During their next stay in hiding, he often analyzed his situation, and came to realize the antisemitism that dominated among non-Jews. He shared his reflections, in which special risks were posed by his non-Jewish peers:

I was most afraid of children. I was convinced that they would recognize me instantly in the street and hand me over to the Germans. Grown-ups might take pity on me, but not children. I dreamed that I was running away from them. I was running blindly, farther and farther, until I stopped because I didn’t know what to do next. (D, 30)

He was very interested in the fate of other Jewish children during the war. From his grandpa who visited him from time to time, he learned about them, and that “there weren’t any left in the ghetto by now,” that “the healthy ones were taken away,” and “the sick ones” were taken by “a gigantic German,” who “came to the hospital” and “ordered a nurse to pick them up and killed them, one after the other, with a shot from his pistol. He shot the nurse last” (D, 30). And he hears horrible news about his little cousin, whose family gave him to peasants for safekeeping:

“They took Romuś away,” [Grandpa – S. J. Ż.] said indistinctly.

[...]

“They took off his diaper to see if he was circumcised.”

“Who betrayed him?”

“The woman next door.” (D, 31)

The protagonist is tormented by the question: “Are there any Jewish children alive besides me?” (D, 31). He is afraid being alone in the world without other children. In Wilhelm’s subconscious, the fact that the Germans recognized Romuś reinforced his conviction that it was more difficult to survive as Jewish boy, leading him to dream that he had become a girl. In this dream, because of which his friend Marek Bernstein no longer wanted to play with him, being a girl enhanced in him the feeling of freedom: “I turned into a balloon. The

wind tossed me around in the courtyard where squares for hopscotch were drawn in chalk. Suddenly, I flew off in the direction of the oil fields. Way up high" (D, 47). But even this experience finished tragically – in his oneiric vision the balloon in the end burst...<sup>10</sup>

The months he spent hiding under a bed, then in the cramped space of an attic, and finally in a well, changed his physiognomy. When the war was over, after many months of hiding, he sees his own reflection in the mirror and notes:

In front of me hung a cracked mirror in a frame with daisies on its corners. My black hair, forehead, and the tips of my ears looked like they'd been lopped off with scissors. (My hair was curly, even though I'd tried flattering it all the time in the well, holding my hands on my head.) Black eyes filled with rage looked at me from under a crack in the mirror. The dry skin on my face was wrinkled. My upper lip was raised, revealing my teeth. [...] With a face like that I had survived! (D, 56)

It was like a picture from the antisemitic caricatures disseminated in Nazi propaganda during the war.

The boy was very knowledgeable about the risks posed by antisemitism, risks which did not pass after the end of the war in Poland. For this reason, he was still afraid of his Polish peers. He did not go out on the playground to spend time with them and *de facto* remained in his hiding place out of fear of the non-Jewish world:

Now the Germans were gone, but the children were still here. [...] I imagined that they would beat me as soon as I came out of the house. Before anyone could notice, it would all be over. (D, 57)

When they were near him, he responded nervously: "I heard children's voices and withdrew into the far corners of the kitchen" (D, 59). Although he was no longer threatened by war – as he notes – when he went out with his mother into the streets, "out of the fear of the children" he "looked at the ground" (D, 60). After the Germans' departure, he could not return to his own house in Boryslaw because "pan Skiba was living there now" (D, 55).

After settling with his mother and stepfather (in Lower Silesia), he continues to experience persecution from non-Jewish children. He is marked as a "kike" and a "scab." At the sight of him, unknown boys recite a rhyme:

10 See *Psychoanalytic and Cultural Aspects of Trauma and the Holocaust: Between Postmemory and Postmemorial Work*, ed. Rony Alfandary and Judith Tydor Baumel-Schwartz (London: Routledge, 2023).

Who are you?  
 A little Jew.  
 What's your sign?  
 A slice of challah.  
 Who gave rise to you?  
 Bad times.  
 What awaits you?  
 A strong limb.  
 What's beneath it?  
 Level ground.  
 And what upon it?  
 Piles of shit. (D, 130)

Next, in Queen Jadwiga School in Warsaw, the children harassed him (splashing him with ink, pelting him with paper balls), calling out that "Jews killed Jesus," and that they were "Russian flunkeys" and "Communists" (D, 177).

The situation of the protagonist of Semel's novel was different. She was completely alone among unknown adults – Polish people. A symbolic and highly suggestive description of the position of a Jewish child can be found there in the form of esoteric poems written many years after the Holocaust:

Once upon a time  
 There was a little Jewish girl  
 And she had  
 Little Jewish hands  
 And little Jewish eyes  
 And a little Jewish mouth  
 And a little Jewish body  
 And a big hole (S, *Lullaby*, 53)

The nameless girl never says her name out loud "in the muddles of the darkness." Similarly, to many children of the Holocaust, she was not "even allowed to pronounce it, because if she did, that would be end of her" (S, 27). The girl did not like the word "Jewish" or maybe she did not understand its meaning. When she was living with her assimilated parents during the war, she asked them: "What is a Jew?" – and then she commented on this question herself: "if it's such a terrible thing to be a Jew, why did you make me one?" (S, 14). Therefore, it is not surprising that she considered whether it was possible to "stop being Jewish at all." She was aware that "if being Jewish was such a terrible thing, then being a Jewish little girl was the worst thing in the world"

(S, 15). For the farmers as well, the girl was first of all a Jew, a “Christ-killer” (S, 78). At the time of the Holocaust, she belonged to a community of which there would soon be “no trace in this world” (S, 78).

While hiding in the potato pit, she perceives herself not as a human being, but as an animal, because “only the worst creatures in the world lived under the ground. Moles and snakes and worms. And the worst of all were rats. She was worse than any of them though, if she had to be hidden away from all the people up above” (S, 16). In the darkness, which was “her old ally” (S, 16), she did not think about the death of other people but about her own death: “maybe [...] [she was— S. J. Ż.] really dead. Because only dead people get pushed so deep down” (S, 16). She “kept thinking that even God, whoever he may be, was ashamed of her. Otherwise He wouldn’t be hiding her in the dark” (S, 18).

But what really took place in the pit? What was it that traumatized the girl so strongly? What did she hear and what did she feel? An old woman or “the little-girl-who-once-was” told her a story in a children’s language.

The footsteps of the farmer’s son.

At five she could count already. Up to ten, and one more. Coming down, closer, his legs heavy, the wooden ladder creaking. The ninth rug is shaky. Ave Maria, Holy Mother, make him stumble and crash. But the farmer’s son knows about the weak rug, and tread carefully. She counts till she runs out of numbers.

She doesn’t know exactly how old he was. To her he was a man. How could she tell?

A breed of giants, mean, deceitful, treacherous. (S, 19)

The five-year-old Jewish girl was regularly abused sexually, or even literally raped, by an adult Polish male.<sup>11</sup> Since that experience, the girl “didn’t want to become a grown-up. Ever” (S, 17). Adults were cruel, ruthless, and horrible. They lied, they did not keep promises, and they murdered one another.

I have a big pit outside me  
I have a little pit within  
The big pit is mine  
The little pit is the Stefan’s (S, 47)

The girl believed that only animals were honest. One of them was a rat whom she encountered in the pit and who became her friend. But she still

11 See *Sexual Violence Against Jewish Women During the Holocaust*, ed. Sonja M. Hedgepeth and Rochelle G. Saidel (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press; Hanover Mass.: University Press of New England, 2010).

did not feel that she was a human-being. What do the esoteric poems in the novel tell us about those two small pets, a Jewish girl and her rat? "One two. That's that. / One child. One rat," (S, 85) "Guess what it found / One child in the ground" (S, 85).

The way the Jewish child is created is completely different in these two novels. In *God's Horse* the protagonist is fully aware of his Jewishness and what it means. He experienced antisemitism, but he was always supported by Jewish adults. The unnamed girl from Semel's novel was always alone, outside of her Jewish background. Wilhelm, unlike the heroine from *And the Rat Laughed*, did not want to stop being a Jew; he was proud of his heritage, although he understood the consequences connected with this fact.

### Adults

The first adults presented in both novels are the parents of the children. In Dichter's book they accompany their son and hide together through the Holocaust. The boy's father was taking care of his son and wife. When they went to a new hiding place in the well, his father, sick and lacking hope, commits suicide. The child's mother plays a similar role as the father in this process of surviving. Dichter's young protagonist was surrounded by the love and care of his parents and other members of his Jewish family. But he also had a traumatizing experience when they had to change hideouts. The Poles were a threat:

Grandfather and Mother didn't turn around to look at me. Had someone recognized me and shouted, "Grab the little Jew!" they would have disappeared without turning their heads to look. (D, 39)

Jewish adults accompanied him all the time, especially when they hid in the well. The boy remembered:

We came up to the surface at night. First Moszek, with Max's help, then Nusia, me, Mother, and finally Kocio, who had no one to hold his legs from below. [...] We walked around in the orchard. (D, 49)

In Dichter's novel Poles play an important role, though this remains in the background. On the one hand side, without their help (which was always richly paid) it was impossible for him and his Jewish relatives to survive, but on the other hand, Poles could betray hiding people without any consequences, to denounce them at the police station or to the Gestapo or kill them. For the protagonist-narrator a special area where he experiences the antisemitism

of Polish adults is Borysław Street. On this street, when his mother was leaving the ghetto in a hurry (before the displacement action), “two women who were laundering linen in the river started shouting when they sight of her. ‘Catch her! She’s a Jewess!’” (D, 31). When he was in town with his mother and grandfather, the boy preferred to avoid looking at anybody, directing his gaze towards the pavement:

All I saw was legs. Cuffed trousers and work pants tucked into clumsy boots with foot wrapping sticking out of them, the bare calves of women standing on tiptoe, and the black, mind-caked feet of children pushing their way to the front of the crowd. (D, 39)

In the case of Semel’s protagonist, the Jewish girl did not understand the decision of her parents. She was not sure if they loved her, and only remembered that “Mother said be a good girl,” “Father said nothing” (S, 48), and then they turned their backs on her. After this event, the girl changed her attitude to God: “if in fact He does exist – God is a mother who turns her back” (S, 18).

The second group of adults, like in Dichter’s novel, are the Polish housekeepers who decided, in both novels, to hide Jews for money. But these people have a place center stage. The protagonist of Semel’s novel thought that the majority of them “hate Jews,” and did not know why they had agreed to provide hiding places. The Polish host, who is shown to be a real monster, is named Stefan. This is how he is presented by the narrator:

Stefan, that was his name. The farmer and his wife had all kinds of nicknames for him. Stefcho. Stefaniu. Stefanek. They were his parents. She heard them calling him up above. She could detect the affection in their voice. With her sharpened senses she could detect everything from below. He ate pork sausage, worked on the farm, amused himself with the cats and the dogs. On Sundays he went to church in his finest cloths. The village darling. (S, 20)

When Stefan approached the pit, the tension rose. The girl felt that in a moment she would be “prey for the Stefan” (S, 48). When Stefan was close, she thought only about his “tail” (S, 50), located “between his two legs” (S, 51). In the following poetic way, the little girl describes her reaction to these moments:

When The Stefan climbs down

This is what I do:

I bang my head and hope (S, 51)

In the beginning she understands it as “the game that we play / The Stefan, the child” (S, 52). She asks herself why he is such an inhumane person – when did “the sweet, rosy-cheeked child” turn into “a predator?” (S, 82). She makes



up a mythological story of a little Stefan who is a “Saint,” and is “as small as an elf”:

He was snatched from his bed  
By Mister Satan himself  
  
A horrible monster  
Was what his parents found  
Their sweet and cuddly baby  
Disappeared in the ground (S, 53–54)

“The Stefan” in the pit was not an elf from the myth. He “thrashes,” “bashes,” “slashes.” He was like a wild animal and the little-girl-who-once-was during this time vomits “in silence” (S, 54). He forces the child to perform oral sex, saying to her: “I’ll stick it in your mouth. / Swallow it. / And again, swallow it. Always swallow” (S, 21), raping and humiliated her repeatedly: “Open your Jewish legs. More. Much more. A Jewish hole. That’s what you are” (S, 22). In her perception, Stefan belongs to the Christian world: his prayer is the “Ave Maria” (S, 21) and she associates him with the Christian God: “Darkness. The farmer’s wife. A rat. Ave Maria. The Stefan. Darkness. The Stefan. Ave Maria. Darkness. The Stefan. Darkness” (S, 22). To the five-year-old girl, the nightmare seems to last forever: “the Stefan comes down,” “the Stefan goes up,” “yesterday is what came before,” “tomorrow is what comes next,” “down comes the Stefan,” “up goes the Stefan” – “that’s how time marches on (S, 55). Her only desire is for Stefan to perish, this would have been “the happiest day” for her (S, 57).

When the peasants’ family decide to bring the Jewish girl out, they take her to a priest. When she sees him, she thinks the cleric will be the next Christian rapist, the next Stefan. This association is triggered by the confessional from which the priest comes out:

Emerging from a black pit-box was another Stefan. [...] Six years old, the little girl understood they were about to shove her into another darkness. A black figure stuck a head-spike out of the other side of the pit-box. (S, 24)

This black figure was Stash – the parson in a Roman Catholic parish in a Polish village, the next Polish adult protagonist in Semel’s novel. He was a good man. He preached to his congregation:

[...] the Jews are part of the body of mankind. This part cannot be severed. That is the pit that all of us came from. Remember how you invite anyone who is hungry to join you in your holiday meal, and you even say: A guest in our home is God in

our home. After the meal you will pull the bundles of straw out from under the tablecloth, a symbolic wish for longevity. (S, 86)

When Stash becomes aware of what had happened to the girl in the farmers' pit, he is intent to cure her trauma. He wonders: "How many children of pits and of basements, children of cupboards, children of boxes and niches are coming out of their holes now? Who will wait for them in a light that is no light?" (S, 100). The girl, when he sees her first, is very scared and sad. She wanted to learn how to smile and said to Father Stash: "Teach me, please" (S, 94). And he did. But this therapy seemed to last forever – the situation of the little-girl-who-once-was was very complicated. On the one hand, she was very grateful to her teacher because "she never laughed like this in her whole life," but, on the other hand, when she tried to laugh, "she could hear a strange sound coming out of her, as if a weird creature was laughing somewhere in the dark" (S, 46). She did not smile because she was staying "forever in a pit" (S, 67). There was only one way out of this situation for the little-girl-who-once-was, traumatized by the Holocaust: she had "to break into [a – S. J. Ž.] Dream Machine" and begin a voyage toward non-memory. This meta-narrative chapter titled "Night of 31 December 2099" takes the readers to the future of the memory about the Holocaust. The protagonist also wanted to take Stash with her on this symbolic journey, which helped him to understand her traumatic situation better. The little-girl-who-once-was says to the priest: "You are my future, Stash. Maybe this argument will convince you to let me go. Something is waiting at the end of the voyage" (S, 67). For many months, Stash was traumatized by her story, which is why he also needed this "dreaming therapy" – the little-girl-who-once-was becomes an everlasting "remembrance" of Stash (S, 71). Maybe the one and only rescue for him was the planting of "a false experience" into his brain? At a certain point, Stash begins to identify himself with the rat from the potato pit. He becomes the rat:

Without a trace.  
This voyage...  
I must return to the pit...  
Need to go deep down. (S, 65)

During the Holocaust, and after a long therapy in the niche, where Stash tries to accompany the little girl as long as he can, she began to gradually believe and trust him. At last she says to him: "promise me something. [...] swear to me that you will never ever die" (S, 96). When after the war a Jewish officer from the Soviet Army takes her away, she reacts in the same way as

when her parents gave her to the farmers' family: "Stash! You're bad, Stash! The worst, Stash!" (S, 101). The priest notes in his memoir:

Her cries cut through me. I will know no peace, day or night. The beast of memory will remain trapped in the lair of my body, sinking its teeth into me and biting. But I am grateful, because the bleeding wound will keep me from forgetting her. (S, 101)

In this moment, he understood what was happening. He was as a mother who had forsaken a "nameless child" (S, 101), he was a bereaved father and she was his daughter: "Daughter. This is your true name" (S, 102). Paradoxically, she loved him so much and suffered so many times during the Shoah, that in the end she forgot him. Regardless of that, the priest hopes that "perhaps someday a miracle will happen, and you will find the strength to remember me. One vibrant moment of razor-blade memory. That is my only wish. I will rise out of the Tohu and Bohu within you. [...] Before the end – forgive me, my daughter, bless me, for I have sinned" (S, 102).

The adults in these two novels are both Poles and Jews. (In these two cases there were no Germans as protagonists). The tragedy of Jewish children is set among adults. In Dichter's book, Jewish people rescue the Jewish child. In the world of the Holocaust in Semel's novel the only Jewish protagonist is the unnamed girl surrounded by Poles – both bad and good. In both cases, the fate of the Jewish child is tragic. The girl from Semel's book is treated instrumental by everybody, all her life she will bear the imprint of the Holocaust. Therefore, the next generations will also suffer from the Holocaust. For the boy who stayed in Poland the Holocaust was not over when the war ended. He experiences how antisemitism remains alive in Poland after the Second World War.<sup>12</sup>

## Animals

Before the Holocaust, the little girl was afraid of animals that lived underground, especially rats.<sup>13</sup> What had been her nightmare became her friend

12 See *Children in the Holocaust and its Aftermath: Historical and Psychological Studies of the Kestenberg Archive*, ed. Sharon Kangisser Cohen, Eva Fogelman and Dalia Ofer (New York: Berghahn, 2017).

13 "Among the numerous animal phobias, the one targeting rodents, especially rats, has a name – *rodentophobia*. Rats in the anthropocentric order occupy one of the lowest positions. 'The Rat has acquired a low status because, as Marek Mikołajec states, it seems to embody itself/evil; What is defiled, what is dirty, is closely linked to the symbolism of purity and impurity, which is the fundamental order that organizes culture.'" [Marek Mikołajec, *Profanacje, rewizje – przeciw doktrynom: dwa opowiadania z debiutanckiego tomu Witolda Gombrowicza* (Katowice: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego, 2014), 89]. "In the Dictionary of Symbols under the entry 'rat' we read that this animal symbolizes,

in her hiding place. Paradoxically – from the postwar perspective – the rat was the one and only good remembrance of the Jewish girl from the pit. She mentioned the rat many times during her stay at the priest's niche, and her voice always became soft when she spoke of it. After many years, she wrote in a poem: "I have a friend with a tail / And he has four legs" (S, 51):

I give you the name  
First just Rat  
Then My Pet

Then I give you one with panache  
Like Stanislaw or Stash  
Tell me yours, Little Girl  
You implore. (S, 50)

A very important part of Semel's book is a legend about the rat, created by God but dissatisfied "with what God had given him" (S, 41). He did not accept audacity and preferred "the ability to laugh" (S, 41). The rat from the pit was a messenger from God, a kind of angel who wanted to be able to laugh. He was unable to succeed, but "tried everything he could to make her laugh" (S, 42):

He hopped around in the pit, he crawled out of the tunnel, he climbed back in, he sniffed at her smooth skin covering, he ate out of her hand, and she almost laughed, till the rat was convinced that pretty soon he'd succeed in laughing along with her. (S, 42)

Amazingly, his behavior showed that it was not a human being that was created in a divine image – it was the rat. In the darkness of the pit the rat met not only the little Jewish girl but also Stefan. He saw Stefan "bite her," "digging tunnels inside her." The rat compared himself with the young adult and "concluded that it was definitely a human creature" (S, 42). The world of the Holocaust, it is implied between the lines, was God's worst mistake:

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among other things, a demon, the devil, rape, destruction, disease, pestilence, plague, famine, decay, death [See Władysław Kopaliński, *Słownik symboli* (Warszawa: Wiedza Powszechna, 1990), 409], and therefore everything that is the worst. The Rat has very negative connotations, mainly in Western European culture." (I would like to note here Justyna Tymieniecka-Suchanek's article: "'Oto, jaki jest szczur,' czyli jak podążać w stronę hipotetycznej wizji koegzystencji ludzi i szczurów..." ["Behold the Rat' or How to Move Toward a Hypothetical Vision of Coexistence Between Humans and Rats"], *Teksty Drugie* 4 (2022): 169–170.

Because a world where children need to be placed in hiding, a world like that isn't just a glitch, it's the total collapse of all systems. A world like that ought to be wiped out completely and started from scratch. (S, 43)

To the little girl, the rat was the most wonderful creature and "the happiest creature on earth!" (S, 43). When she scared it in the darkness, the rat laughed:

His laughter made the ground shake. It was his first and last laugh, and it made the pit shake too from end to end till it shook so hard that the rat collapsed into the pit, and was buried without a trace. (S, 43)

The priest, Stash, reacts to the efforts of the rat and the child's reaction in the following way:

Blessed is the child who has heard the laughter of a rat. Somewhere in the heart of the light that leads to the traces of the life that was, this memory too lives on. To expect laughter in pitch darkness is complete madness. But the rat continues to gape.

And God saw that laughter was good, and left the flawed world as it was. Teach Him to laugh, Little Girl, and He will be forever grateful. (S, 96)

The rat became, for the little girl, the only real human being in the world of the Holocaust because only he loved her so much.<sup>14</sup> By contrast, Stefan became "the Rat" (S, 44), the girl's nightmare: "The Stefan also has a tail / It's between his two legs" (S, 51) – his mouth called her "the Whore." In a poem, the little girl talks to the rat about her tragic situation as a female:

Lucky you're a he-rat  
And not a she-rat  
Lucky you're a he-animal  
And not a she-animal  
Because only a he-rat  
Can get out and move on  
And every she-rat  
Is prey for the Stefan (S, 47)

<sup>14</sup> Kolář notices that the protagonist of *Painted Bird* by Jerzy Kosiński – a child of the Holocaust – also emphasizes relations with animals: "The Boy's approach to animals is understandable: in his exposure to dangers and in his muteness, he is like them. Actually, he is one of them: in his imagination he becomes an animal." Stanislav Kolář, "Animal Imagery in Kosinski's *The Painted Bird* and Spiegelman's *Maus*," 89.

This is what Father Stash thought about the rat in the girl's hiding place: "I was so happy that there was something human in the pit with her" (S, 42). This story became so deeply engrained in his memory that "the little girl and the rat are deep inside" (S, 45). This story stayed alive inside him: "the little-girl-who-once-was existed. The pit-that-once-was existed. Darkness. Nothing more. And the Stefan..." (S, 63). In this underground story the girl and rat were nameless, only Stefan had a name. This is because in this way the story, with all its horrors, will be better remembered "before it'll be forever buried" (S, 63).

In the girl's new hiding place, Father Stash, a Polish Roman Catholic priest, assumed the role of the friendly rat. The girl once told him that "she never ever left the pit. Only the rat did" (S, 35). The man wanted to cheer her up when she was barely alive in her niche, so he hopped, sniffed, moved his whiskers, pricked up his ears, beat his "hairless tail against the walls." In the end he concluded: "I am her human rat" (S, 90). The girl liked it very much. She pulled at her rat and said: "Stash, you're the best rat in the world" (S, 94). He also wanted the girl to keep smiling: "I will stretch out my rat tail, and I will laugh to you" (S, 102).

One day when Father Stash returned from the school, he found the girl "squatting in the niche, drawing on the walls with her piece of charcoal" (S, 96). When he tried to peek inside, she hid the picture with her body. He then discovered that it was "a charcoal drawing of the Last Judgment on the wall" (S, 97). The little Jewish girl had painted it in complete darkness. The priest could see in this drawing her own imagination of the Last Judgment Day. It was also an interpretation of her own story, which Stash quickly understood. In the girl's artistic imagination, "the hand of God reaches under the altar, tipping the scales in full view of the archangel Gabriel. Above them is the Holy Mother on her throne, holding a rat in her lap" (S, 97).

The same motive recurs in this fantastic vision of the future of the next generations: "I activated the location search engine. The implachip [an implant of memory – S. J. Ž.] probes put me in Eastern Europe, and the database crossed me with the ruins of a forgotten church that was uncovered only recently" (S, 65). This was the Madonna-of-the-Rat Church, and inside there was a strange iconography of "the Last Judgment Day, drawn with something solid, possibly a piece of charcoal. In the center was the Madonna cradling a gaping-mouthed rat. Next to her, the earth had opened wide, and a long procession of people was emerging, led by a little girl, her face a blur" (S, 65).

As the priest describes in his diary (December 25, 1944; Christmas Day), the Madonna painted by the girl was a Jewish woman with "the Star of David around her neck," which the priest "added using a twig that had been covered over with dirt." The rat was "not laughing out of joy or derision." The rat's

mouth was “gaping at the horror” of that which would be and that which had been. “It is the laughter of those who accompany the dead,” as they stared “into the pit” (S, 101). In the picture in the niche, the whole story of the Jewish girl was encoded: a Jewish woman, a Jewish girl, people, the rat, and the pit of the Holocaust. But the rat was situated where in traditional iconography one finds Christ. This imaginary vision of the Last Judgment Day is more horrible than the traditional one: although the people around “are rolling with laughter” (S, 101), this is not the laughter of rejoicing but a nervous laughter of horror. Was it “[a – S. J. Ż.] disgrace. A desecration” (S, 101)?

How did the Jewish girl know Christian iconography? When Stash realized how bare the walls were in his room, he removed “the icons from the dusty shelves in the sacristy and scattered them in the corners” (S, 83). The painted Christian saints were the only humans the girls saw for many months. “From time to time, she steals a glance at the icons, but leans tightly against the wall of her niche, so as to leave it free” (S, 83).

What is the meaning of the animal in Dichter’s novel? The protagonist of *God’s Horse* also lives during the Holocaust in the underground world. Nonetheless a rat but the horse is the key-figure in this book.<sup>15</sup> It symbolizes first of all the longing for freedom. The boy’s father, staying with his next of kin in their hiding place in the attic, often sketched horses in crayon:

During the day Mother sat near Father and watched him sketch. A horse’s head with crazed eyes. A couple of lines with his pencil. The mane, reins, the horse’s back, a saddle, a knight’s leg in iron plates. Then he started in a different place. A sword, a gloved hand and an arm. He sketched rapidly. Spears, wings at the shoulders. A galloping hoof. (D, 37)

This horse expressed also protest against the situation in which the Jews were forced to live. In these hastily made sketches, a horse together with a hussar bestrode it, which was usually meant to depict the strength and efficiency of the Polish military, in this place becomes a symbol of God or His messenger, who winged as a hussar rescues the Jews.

Then, during their move from the attic to a new hiding place, this time in a well in the country, the boy was reminded of how he sat on Moszek, who was carrying him on his back. He “sat on Moszek as if [he – S. J. Ż.] were riding

<sup>15</sup> In Dichter’s novel like in Semel’s, the relationship of a little protagonist to rats are depicted: “In the early afternoon I went to the cemetery with Mother to look for Father’s grave. Mother kept smoothing her hair. I had been never in a cemetery and I was afraid that rats were living there in underground labyrinths. When we were in the well I was always touching the damp wall to make sure that a rat wouldn’t emerge through it” (D, 60).

a horse, holding tight to his forehead" (D, 45). He understood this way as the path toward freedom, oddly enough, because it led to the next hiding place, and the perspective of being together with a wide range of relatives, not only with his mother. Since this time, he often had dreams, in which a horse played an important role:

Lying on my left side with my knees tucked under my chin, I imagined that I was a hussar. I was riding on the back of an immense horse with a sword in my hand. The hoofs were pounding. I could hear the sound of wings and the clanking armor of the men who were chasing me. However, I had forgotten about the lances, and I had to break off the attack. We moved off again with sword and lances. And the reins? While galloping I bent over the horse's mane and caught the reins between my teeth. (D, 61)

These images did not persist after the war. The word "horse" appeared also in another meaning and context. In one moment, his stepfather began to call him irreverently: "philosopher," "three-toed sloth," "prophet," "tzaddik Elimelech" (D, 151); yet he was so alienated from reality, that in fact he did not know if he was alive... And finally, he simply refers to him as "God's horse" (D, 151).

The animals it these two books play an important role and acquire new symbolic meanings.<sup>16</sup> In both cases they are found in the novels' titles.<sup>17</sup> In Semel's novel, the rat<sup>18</sup> is also a protagonist, the one who saved the girl's humanity and became the guiding light for a human heroine. He attains a messianic rank. The end of the world according to Christian mythology is nothing compared to the horror of the Holocaust. In this vision, people were a disap-

16 Cf.: Dobrosława Węzowicz-Ziółkowska and Emilia Wiczorkowska, *Biological Turn. Idee biologii w humanistyce współczesnej* (Katowice: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego, 2016); Joshua Patel, "The 'Biological Turn' in History Writing," *Exchanges* 4 (2) (2017): 280–297.

17 Kolář writes: "The use of animal imagery enables writers to explore the relationship between perpetrators, bystanders, and victims during the Nazi genocide and clearly exemplifies the predatory nature of Nazism." Referring to the figures of animals present in the titles of books about the Holocaust, he states: "The titles themselves call the reader's attention to animals that play very important roles in the novels' structures. Not only do they help to organize and unify the entire work but they also underscore the traumatic ordeal of the main characters and clarify the hierarchy of the war-stricken society." (Kolář, "Animal Imagery," 87).

18 Justyna Tymieniecka-Suchanek writes, that "[...] there are few animal studies devoted exclusively to rats (and mice). Usually these are single articles, scattered in scientific journals, or a few chapters in monographs." See for instance, in Polish literary studies: Piotr Krupiński, "Dlaczego gęsi krzyczały?" *Zwierzęta i Zagłada w literaturze polskiej XX i XXI wieku* (Warszawa: IBL PAN, 2016), 24–27, 71–104, 105–144. (Tymieniecka-Suchanek, 174–175).



pointment. The Stephan, an adult human-being, became a horrible monster, like a wild rat from the girl's pre-Holocaust nightmares. After the Holocaust, the rat and animals in general replaced humans. This is why Stash realized that if he wanted to maintain his humanity, the girl had to see a rat in him. The Rat replaced Christ and, as an animal, is the only savior after the experience of the Shoah. In Dichter's novel, the name "God's Horse" was given to the main protagonist – a Jewish child who survived the Holocaust, living through its horror. His situation after the Shoah changes. He belonged to those who remained of the Polish Jewry; the Communist period in postwar Poland gave him a chance for a normal life. He is the instrument in God's hands. The boy survived, he was like God's horse, who had a mission concerning humankind. This mission was the rescue of Jewishness. Whereas Semel's use of animals is more metaphorical, Dichter's image of animals serves as an allegory.

### **Perspective of Memory Studies, Animal Studies, and Trans-generation Studies (Conclusion)**

The Holocaust violated the traditional structure of reality and of culture. Historical memory of it proved to be useless in narrating this tragedy of the subsequent generations of Jews. The number of victims, the ways in which they were murdered, their inconceivable suffering, the indifference of bystanders, and the cruelty of the perpetrators proved impossible to express. Therefore, as twenty-first century literature on the Shoah speaks to the young generation of readers, it makes an effort to propose new forms of memory.

During the Holocaust, children were no longer children, adults were no longer adults, and animals were no longer just animals. Jewish children and adults became Untermensch, sub-children and sub-human-beings, similarly to rats, which were considered sub-animals.<sup>19</sup> As Gabriela Jarzębowska writes:

The description/extermination of these animals in sanitary rather than environmental management terms, which is a consequence and reflection of the process of symbolic exclusion of the rat from the vertebrate community and its degradation

<sup>19</sup> "In reference to the figure of *homo sacer* of Agamben, Robin Mackenzie proposes the figure of the *beast sacer*, i.e. the category of 'subanimal.'" (See Robin Mackenzie, "How the Politics of Inclusion/Exclusion and the Neuroscience of Dehumanization/Rehumanization Can Contribute to Animal Activists' Strategies: Bestia Sacer II," *Society & Animals* 19 (2011): 407–424). Quoted from: Gabriela Jarzębowska, "Retoryka deratyzacji w PRL: od czystki etnicznej i politycznej do czystki gatunkowej," *Teksty Drugie* 2 (2018): 123.

to the level of “sub-animal,” shows analogies with the processes of dehumanization in genocide programs.<sup>20</sup>

In this context, traditional anthropological research tools have nothing to offer in approaching the Holocaust literature, which is powerless in its dealing with the nature of the Shoah.<sup>21</sup> After Second World War, the concept of being human found itself in great crisis. Authors began to propose a new vision of humanity, destroyed in the Holocaust. Therefore, perhaps only post-human methodology<sup>22</sup> can produce analyses of the Holocaust, and the ontological status of it can only be addressed in animal studies.

The newest literature also shows that the Holocaust completely destroyed Jewish trans-generational relationships.<sup>23</sup> The second generation was so traumatized by their parents (mainly children of the Holocaust) that they could not be confronted with their ancestors’ testimonies: this was only possible for the third generation. Thus, the latest literature has the ambition to act as a new inter-generational medium that would be capable of relaying the horror of the Shoah, but experiencing at the same time the utopianism of the wish to express the inexpressible. Since the Holocaust, the Jewish hiding place has become a symbol of coverture from antisemitism and, at the same time, of the disruption of relations between Jews and non-Jews. Throughout the diaspora, many Jews have remained in hiding, psychologically and mentally, until today... Life in post-Holocaust reality, together with the memory of the Holocaust, has proved difficult for the next generations of both Jews and non-Jews. Nevertheless, attempts are made in contemporary literature to tell the experience of the Shoah in many ways. Paradoxically, the Holocaust today is not only the experience of the first generation: the next generations did not

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20 Ibid. C.f.: Adrian Franklin, “An Improper Nature? Introduced Animals and ‘Species Cleansing’ in Australia,” in *Human and Other Animals. Critical Perspectives*, ed. Bob Carter and Charles Nickie (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2011); Dinesh Joseph Wadiwel, *The War against Animals (Critical Animal Studies)* (Leiden, Boston: Brill/Rodopi, 2015).

21 *Annihilating Difference: the Anthropology of Genocide*, ed. Alexander Laban Hinton (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002).

22 See Rosi Braidotti, *The Posthuman* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2019); Rosi Braidotti, *Posthuman Knowledge* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2020); Zoe Jaques, *Children’s Literature and the Posthuman: Animal, Environment, Cyborg* (New York: Routledge, 2015); Andrew John Hicks, *Posthumanism in the Novels of Kurt Vonnegut: Matter that Complains So* (New York: Routledge, 2020).

23 *Generations of the Holocaust*, ed. Martin S. Bergmann and Milton E. Jucovy (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990); Dan Bar-On, *Fear and Hope: Three Generations of the Holocaust* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014).

experience it in reality but they were affected by it. The Holocaust is responsible for their psychological and mental suffering.

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Comparative literary studies on Polish and Israeli Holocaust literatures written by Jews (specifically, the novels by Wilhelm Dichter and Nava Semel) is making an effort to address many questions that arise in different fields of study. In memory studies, it has been asked: How can one live with/without the memory of the Holocaust? Is this memory necessary for subsequent post-war generations? Why do old and young authors write about the same events at the same time? What is the future of this memory and the new forms of it? In animal studies, the following questions have arisen: What kind of new truth about the Shoah can be obtained through literary portrayals of animals? What is the meaning of animals in the newest literary creations of the Shoah? Finally, from the perspective of trans-generation studies, the questions are: Is it possible to build mutual understanding between the first and successive post-Shoah generations? What role can literature play in this process?

## Abstract

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**Sławomir Jacek Żurek**

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*A Jewish Child in a Polish Hiding Place. Children, Adults, and Animals in Nava Semel's And the Rat Laughed and Wilhelm Dichter's God's Horse*

The article offers a comparative analysis of two contemporary novels by Polish and Hebrew writers of two different generations: Wilhelm Dichter, a child of the Holocaust, and Nava Samel, representing the second post-Shoah generation. The article analyzes the novels with a view to how they portray the situation of Jewish children in hiding places in Poland during Second World War. The literary images of children, adults, and animals in these novels are compared from the perspective of memory studies, animal studies, and trans-generation studies.

## Keywords

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children, adults, animals, Holocaust, Polish and Hebrew contemporary literature, comparative studies, memory studies, animal studies, trans-generation studies

# Jewish Childhood, Holocaust and Twenty-First-Century Literature

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Sylwia Karolak

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## The Holocaust Literature for Children in Translation into Polish

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TEKSTY DRUGIE 2024, NR 1, S. 267–289

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DOI: 10.18318/td.2024.en.1.15 | ORCID: 0000-0002-2438-4577

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The collection of books that can be described as Holocaust literature for children is relatively extensive, even though the exceptional over-representation within the topic was initiated in the first decade of the twenty-first century. This collection is also significant reception-wise, in terms of the number of analyses devoted to the topic: reviews and articles on individual works, but also more extensive problematic discussions, covering a larger number of publications and cognitively significant research areas. Małgorzata Wójcik-Dudek writes that the Second World War, but also the Holocaust, were present in children's books basically "from the beginning," that is from the first post-war years<sup>1</sup>. It is difficult, however, to speak of even a relative balance between the number of literary representations of the Polish and Jewish wartime experience. The Jewish fate was treated marginally and selectively during the People's Republic of Poland (1944–1989), hence today's search when it comes to the

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1 See Małgorzata Wójcik-Dudek, *Reading (in) the Holocaust. Practices of Postmemory in Recent Polish Literature for Children and Young Adults*, trans. Patrycja Poniatowska (Berlin: Peter Lang, 2020), 38–43.

first traces – stories addressed to children and telling the fate of their Jewish peers,<sup>2</sup> is a collection of rarities.<sup>3</sup> The situation of translations of texts about Holocaust was similar at the time.<sup>4</sup> The state of affairs that prevailed in literature in principle until 1989 is not surprising if one considers the social, political or socio-literary situation at that epoch. The problems of the time, moreover, have already been thoroughly described.<sup>5</sup> Chronologically, the dynamics of change within this corpus would be as follows: after years of silence, of being overlooked, the Holocaust as a phenomenon appears in the Polish culture and literature in the 1980s,<sup>6</sup> becomes important in terms of reception.<sup>7</sup>

2 "Holocaust was never the plot axis in literature for a young readership, and Holocaust victims (who are often treated with compassion or offered help in defiance of lethal risk) and/or witnesses were consigned to the margins of the narrative world. It is precisely because the Jewish theme is absent from the national pantheon of heroic twins or valiant teddy bears ..." (Wójcik-Dudek, *Reading (in) the Holocaust*, 39–40).

3 This collection certainly includes the short story *Przełomowy dzień Buraska* by Sophia Petersowa from the volume *Odwet. Opowieści okupacyjne* (Łódź: Księgarnia Naukowa, 1947), 43–49. The work tells the story of the friendship between the dog Burasek and Lucia, a Jewish girl who was hiding outside Warsaw with her parents. She was executed together with her mother. Several other books are cited by Wójcik-Dudek.

4 *The Diary of Anne Frank* was translated into Polish in 1957, but it is a reading for teenagers rather than children.

5 See Piotr Forecki, *Od "Shoah" do "Strachu." Spory o polsko-żydowską przeszłość i pamięć w debatach publicznych* (Poznań: Wydawnictwo Poznańskie, 2010); Bartłomiej Krupa, *Opowiedzieć Zagładę. Polska proza i historiografia wobec Holocaustu (1987–2003)* (Kraków: Universitas, 2013); Marek Kucia, *Auschwitz jako fakt społeczny, Historia, współczesność i świadomość społeczna KL Auschwitz w Polsce* (Kraków: Universitas, 2005); Michael C. Steinlauf, *Pamięć nieprzyswojona. Polska pamięć Zagłady*, trans. Agata Tomaszewska (Warszawa: Cyklady, 2001).

6 Przemysław Czapliński, "Prześladowcy, pomocnicy, świadkowie. Zagłada i polska literatura późnej nowoczesności," in *Zagłada. Współczesne problemy rozumienia i przedstawiania*, ed. Przemysław Czapliński and Ewa Domańska (Poznań: Wydawnictwo "Poznańskie Studia Polonistyczne," 2009), 155–156.

7 See more on this topic *Męczeństwo i zagłada Żydów w zapisach literatury polskiej*, ed. Irena Maciejewska (Warszawa: Krajowa Agencja Wydawnicza, 1988); Władysław Panas, *Pismo i rana. Szkice o problematyce żydowskiej w literaturze polskiej* (Lublin: Wydawnictwo Dąb, 1996); Jacek Leociak, *Tekst wobec Zagłady* (Wrocław: Fundacja na rzecz Nauki Polskiej, 1997); *Literatura polska wobec Zagłady*, ed. Alina Brodzka-Wald, Dorota Krawczyńska and Jacek Leociak (Warszawa: ŻIH, 2000); Sławomir Buryła, *Prawda mitu i literatury. O pisarstwie Tadeusza Borowskiego i Leopolda Buczkowskiego* (Kraków: Universitas, 2003); Aleksandra Ubertowska, *Świadectwo – trauma – głos. Literackie reprezentacje Holocaustu* (Kraków: Universitas, 2007); *Ślady obecności*, ed. Sławomir Buryła and Alina Molisak (Kraków: Universitas, 2010); *Literatura polska wobec Zagłady (1939–1968)*, ed. Sławomir

In 2009, the work *Doświadczenie Zagłady z perspektywy dziecka w polskiej literaturze dokumentu osobistego* [Their childhood and the Holocaust. A child's perspective in Polish documentary and autobiographical literature]<sup>8</sup> was published, where Justyna Kowalska-Leder analyses the wartime diaries and memoirs of child victims of the Holocaust: Renia Knoll, Dawid Rubinowicz, Dawid Sierakowiak or Rutka Laskier. By reading them and placing them in the field of research reflection, the author gives children a voice, appreciates their importance and "brings out their specificity when confronted with the diaristic messages that have come out of the hands of adults."<sup>9</sup> The end of the first and the second decade of the twenty-first century have brought in Poland an interest in the wartime fate of women, also in the context of the Holocaust.<sup>10</sup> Children and their experiences are presented as in passing and through the prism of the specific situation of mothers and caregivers – pregnant, giving birth, bringing up, protecting, trying to save loved ones when taking into account the so-called border conditions. Alongside, though not completely separate, developments were taking place within children's literature.<sup>11</sup> Since the turn

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Buryła, Dorota Krawczyńska and Jacek Leociak (Warszawa: IBL PAN, 2012); Bartłomiej Krupa, *Opowiedzieć Zagładę. Polska proza i historiografia wobec Holocaustu (1987–2003)* (Kraków: Universitas, 2013); Marta Cuber, *Metonimie Zagłady. O polskiej prozie lat 1987–2012* (Katowice: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego, 2013); Sławomir Buryła, *Wokół Zagłady. Szkice o literaturze Holocaustu* (Kraków: Universitas, 2016); Beata Przymuszała, *Smugi Zagłady. Emocjonalne i konwencjonalne aspekty tekstów ofiar i ich dzieci* (Poznań: Wydawnictwo Naukowe UAM, 2016); Beata Przymuszała, *Smugi Zagłady – książki przeoczone. Borowicz i inni* (Poznań: Wydawnictwo Naukowe UAM, 2019).

- 8 Justyna Kowalska-Leder, *Their Childhood and the Holocaust. A Child's Perspective in Polish Documentary and Autobiographical Literature* trans. Richard Reisner (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2015).
- 9 Sławomir Buryła and Justyna Kowalska-Leder, "Doświadczenie Zagłady z perspektywy dziecka w polskiej literaturze dokumentu osobistego. Wrocław 2009," *Pamiętnik Literacki* 4 (2010): 180–184; 180.
- 10 See publications from this time by Agnieszka Nikliborc, Joanna Ostrowska, Joanna Stocker-Sobelman, Aleksandra Ubertowska, Agnieszka Weseli, among others.
- 11 See on the changes in the representation of war and the Holocaust in children's literature: Ewa Teodorowicz-Hellman, "Pamiętnik Dawida Rubinowicza na tle polskiej literatury dla dzieci o czasach wojny, okupacji i Zagłady," in *O tym, co Alicja odkryła... W kręgu badań nad toposem dzieciństwa i literaturą dla dzieci i młodzieży*, ed. Alicja Ungeheuer-Gołąb, Małgorzata Chrobak and Michał Rogoża (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Uniwersytetu Pedagogicznego, 2005), 227–233. Krystyna Zabawa and Grzegorz Leszczyński, among others, have written about changes in the situation and themes of the historical novel for children. See on this subject Krzysztof Rybak, "Zagłada i ideologia w polskiej literaturze dziecięcej XXI wieku," *Narrations of the Shoah* 1 (2021): 155–173; and Agnieszka

of twentieth century, genres such as a detective fiction and romance have been present in this literature. In addition, topics previously absent, tabooed and reserved for adults have appeared, such as human anatomy and physiology, existence and difficult, borderline situations and phenomena, such as homophobia, disabilities, illnesses, death or, last but not least, war and Holocaust.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, taking a broader perspective into account, it should be said that in the first half of the twenty-first century, ideas and practices of the new humanities are beginning to appear on Polish ground, including posthumanism, encompassing "the study of things, materiality, the natural environment, the plant and animal worlds," making it possible to cross borders, overcome barriers and enlarge the "area of anthropological cognition."<sup>13</sup> Within literature, including Holocaust literature,<sup>14</sup> these inspirations are reflected in the gesture of empowerment of hitherto marginalized beings and entities, be it animals, objects or children, endowed with a model of transmitting and receiving sensitivity, tenderness but also sincerity.

### The Holocaust (Not Only) in the Polish Language

The books translated into Polish are certainly an example of a selected collection,<sup>15</sup> which "would be a selection from a list of works that are widely available, and this is where the real choices, dictated by different needs,

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Karczewska, "Pamięć i empatia. O dziecięcej literaturze Zagłady," in *Pamięć o Zagładzie w polskojęzycznej i niemieckojęzycznej literaturze autorek i autorów drugiego oraz trzeciego pokolenia post-Szoah*, ed. Irmela von der Lühe and Sławomir J. Żurek (Lublin: Towarzystwo Naukowe Katolickiego Uniwersytetu Lubelskiego Jana Pawła II, 2019), 265–300.

- 12 Aleksandra Sikora writes about this in the article "W jaki sposób mówimy dzieciom o wojnie? Charakterystyka prozy o tematyce wojennej na podstawie wybranych książek dla dzieci," *Acta Universitatis Lodzensis. Folia Librorum* 2 (2014): 25–44; 25–26.
- 13 Ryszard Nycz, "Nowa humanistyka w Polsce: kilka bardzo subiektywnych obserwacji, koniektur, refutacji," *Teksty Drugie* 1 (2017): 18–40; 28.
- 14 Marta Tomczok, "Getto łódzkie we współczesnej literaturze dla dzieci i młodzieży. Krytyka 'nowej wrażliwości,'" *Zagłada Żydów. Studia i Materiały* 16 (2020): 665–684.
- 15 On the mechanism of publishing selection of foreign books see Katarzyna Biernacka-Licznar, Elżbieta Jamróz-Stolarska and Natalia Paprocka, *Lilipucia rewolucja. Awangardowe wydawnictwa dla dzieci i młodzieży w Polsce w latach 2000–2015. Produkcja wydawnicza. Bibliografia* (Warszawa, Wydawnictwo SBP, 2018), 30–40. What is translated and when, is important, but also (perhaps above all) what has not (yet) been translated. The translations make literature transnational, international, but not universal – the differences in experience and the multiplicity of perspectives seem particularly important cognitively in the context of the Holocaust and its representation.



come into play.”<sup>16</sup> It is worth noting, however, that the translations primarily include items for a younger audience (young readers), rather than for a group that could be described as adolescents or teenagers (young adults, 12–18 years). The children’s (picture) books in question include, among others, Antón Fortes’s *Smoke*, translated from Spanish,<sup>17</sup> from the English language: *My Dog Lala* by Roman Kent<sup>18</sup> and *Otto. Biography of a Teddy Bear* by Tomi Ungerer,<sup>19</sup> from the Italian language: *Bruno. The Boy Who Learned to Fly* by Nadia Terranova,<sup>20</sup> as well as several publications by Batsheva Dagan translated from Hebrew, such as: *What Happened in the Shoah? A Story in Rhyme for Children Who Wish to Know*,<sup>21</sup> *Czika, the Dog in the Ghetto*<sup>22</sup> and *If the Stars Could Only Speak*.<sup>23</sup> These books are not available in public libraries, as they are in the possession of one selected title. Instead, these are publications which can mostly be purchased online. Although the reception of

16 Jerzy Świąch, “Burze wokół kanonu/kanonów,” in *Kanon i obrzeża*, ed. Inga Iwasiów and Tatiana Czerska (Kraków: Universitas, 2005), 16.

17 Anton Fortes, *Dym*, trans. Beata Haniec, il. Joanna Concejo (Toruń: Tako, 2011). No pagination. Further quotations from *Smoke* are marked D. in the main text, without page numbers. English version: *Smoke*, il. Joanna Concejo (Pontevedra: OQO Editora, 2009).

18 Roman Kent, *My Dog Lala. The Touching True Story of A Young Boy and His Dog During the Holocaust*, il. T. McWilliams (Auburn Hills: Teacher’s Discovery, 2006). Polish version: *Mój pies Lala*, trans. Katarzyna Łaziuk, il. pupils of the Municipal Art School in Minsk Mazowiecki (Warszawa: Muzeum Historii Żydów Polskich POLIN, 2015).

19 Tomi Ungerer, *Otto: The Autobiography of a Teddy Bear*, il. Tomi Ungerer (New York: Phaidon, 2010). Polish version: *Otto. Autobiografia pluszowego misia*, trans. Michał Rusinek, il. Tomi Ungerer (Łagiewniki: Format, 2011).

20 Nadia Terranova, *Bruno. Il bambino che imparò a volare*, il. Ofra Amit (Roma: Orecchio Acerbo, 2012). Polish version: *Bruno. Chłopiec, który nauczył się latać*, trans. Joanna Wais, il. Ofra Amit (Wrocław: Format, 2016).

21 Batszewa Dagan, *Co wydarzyło się w czasie Zagłady. Opowieść rymowana dla dzieci, które chcą wiedzieć*, trans. Szoszana Raczynska, il. Ola Cieślak (Białystok: Opera i Filharmonia Podlaska – Europejskie Centrum Sztuki, 2012). English version: *What Happened in the Shoah? A Story in Rhyme for Children Who Wish to Know*, il. Shraga Heller (Cleveland: Kay Teen, 1992).

22 Batszewa Dagan, *Czika, piesek w getcie*, trans. Szoszana Raczynska, il. Avi Katz (Oświęcim: Państwowe Muzeum Auschwitz-Birkenau, 2012). In the second edition of 2018, the book was illustrated by Aleksandra Cieślak. English version: *Chika, the Dog in the Ghetto*, il. A. Katz (Cleveland: Kay Tee, 1993).

23 Batszewa Dagan, *Gdyby gwiazdy mogły mówić*, trans. by the author, il. Avi Katz (Oświęcim: Państwowe Muzeum Auschwitz-Birkenau, 2012). English version: *If the Stars Could Only Speak*, il. A. Katz (Notts: Holocaust Centre, 2006).

these works has been miscellaneous – ranging from being fully accepted, receiving favorable voices, to criticism, sometimes harsh opinions, each represents in its specificity an added value and deserves receptive attention.<sup>24</sup> Apart from the publications by Dagan and Kent, there are no publications written by Survivors in the Polish children's collection about Holocaust. Ungerer tells the story of the war and the Holocaust, giving voice to a plush toy, which is also a kind of novelty. Fortes' plot is set in the camp, culminating in a scene in the gas chamber. The translation of the book by Nadia Terranova introduces the fate of Bruno Schulz to a Polish young audience. This is one of the few works within a collection of children's books about the Holocaust published in Poland (apart from the very numerous Polish publications devoted to Janusz Korczak<sup>25</sup>) whose plot is based on the biography of a well-known and recognizable Jewish victim of the Holocaust. *My Dog Lala* and *Czika, the Dog in the Ghetto* are the books whose title characters are the dogs, it is from the perspective of their fate that the Holocaust is related. In the area of the Polish corpus of children's books about the Holocaust, they can be compared with the Ryszard Marek Groński's *Szlemiel*<sup>26</sup> – a book for older audiences (over 12 years old), in which first-person narrative is conducted from the perspective of a dog. Translated works seem particularly valuable because they written from a different perspective than the Polish one – one that dominates, appropriates and nationalizes the war experience, even when it comes to the Holocaust and its Jewish victims. Children's books about the Holocaust translated into Polish from other languages,

24 Often only the titles of translated books are mentioned contextually. In addition to the studies cited below, more extensive analysis can be found in the following articles: Hanna Dymel-Trzebiatowska, "Krótka lekcja latania. Werbalno-graficzna biografia Brunona Schulza," *Schulz/Forum* 8 (2016): 171–175; Ilona Klimek, "Nie potrzeba skrzydeł," *Znak* 12 (2016): 105–197; Angela Bajorek, "Zabawka jako historyczny artefakt w niemieckiej literaturze i kulturze dziecięcej," *Filoteknos* 9 (2019): 300–308; Katarzyna Slany, "Zabawka jako medium pamięci o Holokauście na przykładzie picturebooka *Otto. Autobiografia pluszowego misia* Tomiego Ungerera," *Ruch Literacki* 4 (2018): 441–456.

25 Beata Ostrowicka, *Jest taka historia. Opowieść o Januszu Korczaku*, il. Jola Richter-Magnuszewska (Łódź: Wydawnictwo Literatura, 2020); Iwona Chmielewska, *Pamiętnik Blumki*, il. Iwona Chmielewska (Poznań: Media Rodzina, 2011); Anna Czerwińska-Rydel, *Po drugiej stronie okna. Opowieść o Januszu Korczaku*, il. Dorota Łoskot-Cichocka, Tomek Głowacki (Warszawa: Muchomor, 2012); Adam Jaromir, *Ostatnie przedstawienie panny Esterki. Opowieść z warszawskiego getta*, il. Gabriela Cichocka (Poznań: Media Rodzina, 2014); Adam Michejda, *Skarb getta*, il. Tomasz Woody Borawski (Warszawa: Oficyna 4eM, 2019); Michał Rusinek, *Powieki: bajka dedykowana pamięci Janusza Korczaka*, il. Ola Cieślak (Białystok: Opera i Filharmonia Podlaska – Europejskie Centrum Sztuki, 2012).

26 Ryszard Marek Groński, *Szlemiel*, il. Krzysztof Figielski (Warszawa: Nowy Świat, 2010).

however, are scarce; a number of interesting foreign-language works are awaiting to be translated.<sup>27</sup>

I would like to take a closer look at just three of the books translated into Polish and their Polish reception. This is also a good opportunity to discuss problems related to expressivity, appropriateness and form, taboo areas, or genological classifications, pointed out by (older) audiences of Polish Holocaust literature for children.

### Antón Fortes's *Smoke* – Can Children Read about the Camp and Death in the Gas Chambers?

*Smoke* is certainly a unique, distinctive publication on the Polish children's and adolescent's publishing market. It's a picture book – it has illustrations, a format and form that might indicate that we are dealing with a book for non-adult readers. This is what the publisher intended for the book's target audience, which is between eight and ten years of age,<sup>28</sup> as indicated in the description of the Spanish-language edition.<sup>29</sup> Also, the Internationale Jugendbibliothek in Munich – which has recognized *Smoke* as a White Raven and therefore one of the most important and remarkable books of international children's and young adult literature – indicates that it is an item for slightly younger readers – above the age of nine.<sup>30</sup> Interestingly, in the context of the

27 Among the items that emerged as readings in the seminars of the project *21st-Century Literature and the Holocaust. A Comparative and Multilingual Perspective* noteworthy include books for both children and young adults: Reinhard Kleist, *The Boxer. The True Story of Holocaust Survivor Harry Haft* (London: SelfMadeHero, 2014) [German original published as *Der Boxer* (Hamburg: Carlsen, 2011)]; Iris Argaman, *Bear and Fred. A World War II Story*, il. Avi Ofer (New York: Amazon Crossing Kids 2020) [Hebrew original published as *HaDoobi Shel Fred* (Bnei Brak: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 2016)]; Tamar Meir, *Francesco Tirelli's Ice Cream Store*, il. Yael Albert (Minneapolis: Kar-Ben Publishing, 2020) [Hebrew original published as *סקו' פרנצ' של הגלידה חנות*, (Jerusalem: Keter 2017)]; Eve Bunting, *One Candle*, il. K. Wendy Popp (New York: Joanna Cotler Books, 2004); Ruth Vander Zee, *Erika's Story*, il. Roberto Innocenti (Mankato: Creative Editions, 2003); Jennifer Elvgren, *The Whispering Town*, il. Fabio Santomauro (Minneapolis: Kar-Ben Publishing, 2014); Benny Lindelauf, *Fing's War* (New York: Enchanted Lion, 2019) [Dutch original published as *De hemel van Heivij's*, Amsterdam: Querido, 2010].

28 This can be found in the National Library catalogue, accessed February 28, 2023, [www.bn.org](http://www.bn.org).

29 Anton Fortes, *Humo* (Pontevedra: OQO Editora, 2008). The book was published in Galician (Galego) and Spanish and translated into many languages: Italian, Portuguese, English, French and Polish.

30 See *The White Ravens 2009. A Selection of International Children's and Youth Literature* (Munich, 2009), 45.

discussion that this publication has provoked, on the website of the Tako Publishing House, which has launched the book on the Polish market, one can find information that the publication is intended for children above the age of twelve.<sup>31</sup> I refer to these issues quite extensively because some Polish reviewers<sup>32</sup> of the book pointed out that *Smoke* does not have a clearly defined audience. They had in mind as much the figure of the implicit reader<sup>33</sup> of this particular work, but also wondered about the age range of the potential child reader in a situation of perceived lack of verbal and visual reticence.<sup>34</sup> In addition to very firm statements that this publication should not get into the hands of children at all,<sup>35</sup> there have been voices pointing to reflection on this issue. Jędrzej Wijas wrote:

31 Accessed: February 21, 2023, <https://tako.biz.pl/p,92,dym.html>.

32 Wójcik-Dudek, *Reading (in) the Holocaust*, 203–204; Jędrzej Wijas, "Mała opowieść o wielkiej historii. Refleksje na marginesie książki *Dym*," in *Dziecko i baśnie świata w kontekście wczesnej edukacji*, ed. Urszula Chęcińska (Szczecin: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Uniwersytetu Szczecińskiego, 2016), 252; E. S., review, "Dym. Anton Fortes," [*Smoke*. Anton Fortes,] *Ryms* 15 (2011): 33.

33 "[...] I am assuming that the implied reader is reading the novel or picture book in question for the first time, has certain limited background knowledge the author can draw upon, and is willing to try to adopt the position directed by the work, that is, a non-resistant reader." Lydia Kokkola, *Representing the Holocaust in Children's Literature* (New York and London: Routledge, 2003): 28–29.

34 "Framed silences are quite unlike the active decision to withhold information. They provide a means of writing about the Holocaust which does not obscure or mislead young minds, yet at the same time protecting children from understanding more than they can cope with knowing. As adults, we are understandably reticent when it comes to telling the full history of the Holocaust. Reticence, the avoidance of expressing all one knows or feels, is a form of silence. [...] Withholding information from children can be considered an even more complex matter than withholding it from adults. Filling in missing information in reticent texts is left to the responsibility of the reader, but young children are likely to lack the requisite historical knowledge. Thus children's literature that is reticent is, in a way, doubly reticent – and perhaps even dishonest. On the other hand, such indirection may also be an adult strategy to protect young minds that are not yet prepared for history's grimmest truths, while simultaneously preparing them for it. In brief, the decision to withhold information walks the thin line between the desire to protect the child reader and confusing them." (*Ibid.*, 26–27).

35 "By contrast, in the artistically beautiful book *Smoke* by Antón Fortes, we find no consolation. Let no one be misled by the childish language of the several-year-old narrator. This is not a book for children." See Agnieszka Makowiecka-Pastusiak, "Holokaust i współczesne dzieci," *Cwiszn (pomiędzy) – żydowski kwartalnik o literaturze i sztuce* 1–2 (2013), accessed February 24, 2023, <http://psychoanaliza.org.pl/kultura/>.

I indicated earlier that I cannot answer the question about the minimum age threshold for the reader of this book... However, I am convinced that it is a valuable publication to read also (or perhaps especially) for a young audience.<sup>36</sup>

Magdalena Sikorska, however, pointed out:

If we decide to read this book together with middle school [12–14 years old – author's note] or high school [about 14–18 years old – S. K.] youth, we have to take into account the enormous emotional charge of the message, the power of despair and helplessness of the viewer increasing with each page, because there is nothing left to do in this story.<sup>37</sup>

Where does the controversy come from<sup>38</sup> as well as the doubts of literary researchers (and librarians<sup>39</sup>)? There are at least several reasons for this – some, which I would describe as internal, that is, those that have their origin in the book itself and stem from its content, others are due to external conditions: the specificity of literary works addressed to children, also or perhaps especially in the context of the Holocaust issues – the demands placed on it, the restrictions imposed, which are reflected in the content of the book collection of interest here, but also in the symptomatic discussion about whether children's books about the Holocaust may not have a happy ending.<sup>40</sup>

36 Wijas, *Mała opowieść o wielkiej historii*, 260.

37 Magdalena Sikorska, "Czy literatura piękna może pomóc w edukacji dotyczącej Auschwitz i Holocaustu?," in *Auschwitz i Holocaust. Edukacja w szkole i w miejscu pamięci*, ed. Piotr Trojański (Oświęcim: Państwowe Muzeum Auschwitz-Birkenau, 2014), 159.

38 About *Smoke* as "perpetually arousing controversy" has been written many times by Krzysztof Rybak, already quoted here. See Rybak, "Traumatyzować czy tabuizować? Narracje holokaustowe w literaturze dziecięcej," in *Annales Universitatis Mariae Curie-Skłodowska IV* (2021), 251–264; 258; also: Rybak, *Zagłada i ideologia w polskiej literaturze dziecięcej XXI wieku*, 155–173.

39 I will refer to the theses of literary scholars later in the sketch. I believe, however, that doubts may also apply to a wider range of librarians, as I experienced individually when I borrowed *Smoke* in one library. It turned out that the publication – "that sad book" – had been positioned on the shelf in such a way that young readers would not notice it. Purchased as an item for children, it was judged inappropriate and hidden.

40 See on this subject the article by Krzysztof Rybak, "I (nie) żyli długo i szczęśliwie. Konstrukcje zakończeń w polskiej literaturze dziecięcej o Zagładzie," *Literatura Ludowa* 1 (2019): 10–23.

It has already been pointed out that in Polish<sup>41</sup> literature for children,<sup>42</sup> it is difficult to find a work where plot would cover the second phase (after March 16, 1942) of the Holocaust. A similar situation exists in contemporary Hebrew literature. Dutch literature is different in this regard, where, in addition to the hiding places that were the main surroundings of the Holocaust, one can also find children's books set in the camps, including the Westerbork transit camp. English-language publications are also worth citing in this context, including *Luba, The Angel of Bergen Belsen* by Michelle R. McCann<sup>43</sup> (for six–nine-year-olds), *The Magician of Auschwitz* by Kathy Kacer<sup>44</sup> (for seven–ten-year-olds), or *The Harmonica* by Tony Johnston<sup>45</sup> (for seven–ten-year-olds). It is

41 Krzysztof Rybak wrote about this in the articles cited here: "I (nie) żyli długo i szczęśliwie," 10–23; "Zagłada (nie) dla dzieci. Nadużycia w polskiej literaturze dziecięcej XXI wieku," *Zagłada. Studia i Materiały* 17 (2021): 376–398; 387; "Traumatyzować czy tabuizować? Narracje holokaustowe w literaturze dziecięcej," in *Annales Universitatis Mariae Curie-Skłodowska IV* (2021), 251–264.

42 Also in publications for young adults, apart from just two examples: *Ta potworna wojna* by Grażyna Bąkiewicz and *Rutka* by Zbigniew Białas. Both approaches have met with public approval as well as critical readings. In the context of the former, Krzysztof Rybak wrote that "the Holocaust in Bąkiewicz's book is in fact neither named nor described. The scenes it contains, showing hostility towards Jews and their exclusion from society, are an anticipation of ghettoisation and extermination. The presentation of further stages seems problematic, as there is a significant shift in the characterisation of the victims – they are 'the people,' with no indication of specific national or ethnic groups." See Krzysztof Rybak, "Zagłada (nie) dla dzieci. Nadużycia w polskiej literaturze dziecięcej XXI wieku," *Zagłada. Studia i Materiały* 17 (2021): 376–398; 387. However, Marta Tomczok wrote about *Rutka*: "A falsely conceived empathy that violates the ethical boundaries associated with the depiction of the Holocaust leads the author to a final scene that, in my view, ends in disaster (and not in a historical or existential sense, but in a total sense). Białas creates a para-religious discourse in which he revisits repeatedly contested attempts to understand the Holocaust according to its Greek etymology (the chapter on Auschwitz is entitled "Fire cleanses better than water"). Taken to the crematorium in a wheelbarrow, the typhoid-sick protagonist meets an SS dog just before her death, escorting her to the gate with sympathetic eyes. The novel ends with her closure and the disappearance of Rutka." See Marta Tomczok, "Polecieć tam, gdzie nie ma getta, szopu..." *Dziennik Rutki Laskier między nekroestetyką a nekropolityką*, *Zagłada Żydów. Studia i Materiały* 14 (2008), 421–439; 432–433.

43 Michelle R. McCann, *Luba, The Angel of Bergen Belsen*, il. Ann Marshall (Berkeley: Tricycle Press, 2003).

44 Kathy Kacer, *The Magician of Auschwitz*, il. Gillian Newland (Toronto: Second Story Press, 2014).

45 Tony Johnston, *The Harmonica*, il. Ron Mazellan (Watertown: Charlesbridge, 2004).

worth adding, in the context of further analysis, that these publications have “a happy-endings.”

Polish literature is dominated by narratives dealing with the first phase, that of concentration – the ghetto. Authors do not go further, do not extend the perspective to the extermination phase, and this is regardless of the defined ages of the potential readers. The omission of the camp as a space of the Holocaust has significant consequences. Firstly, this stage is not presented as if the tragedy took place exclusively in the ghettos, which leads to an obscured picture of the entire Jewish experience. Young readers do not receive information about what was the most common fate of the inhabitants of the ghettoized districts, what happened to the people whose fate is covered in the plots of the Łódź or Warsaw ghetto books they are familiar with. Secondly, the omission also means in the context of the decisions made by authors who tell children about the first phase of the Holocaust, and explains why they choose the ghetto as the space for their works. For it is clear that a story set in the ghetto can have a happy ending, with being rescued – one can leave the ghetto, escape, find shelter on the so-called Aryan side. Another aspect is that such a scheme, reproduced in many works, may suggest that was the wartime standard.<sup>46</sup> In the reality of the camp, it is more difficult to find such “salvific” plot settlements, especially in accordance with the historical truth in the case of the fate of Jewish children. The omission we face in the Polish Holocaust publications of interest here is due, among other things, to this very aporia – irrevocable impasse, insurmountable difficulty in reasoning. The absence and the omission of the camp as a space where the Holocaust takes place, further reveals the weakness and impotence of this literature. It could be said that the camp and the gas chamber, constitute the taboo of Polish children’s literature on the Holocaust.

*Smoke* seems particularly interesting in the context of the considerations made here, as none of the mitigating procedures we are familiar with from other children’s books (also about Holocaust) are used in this publication: there are basically no color illustrations, no wonderful, fantastic twists and turns and no atmosphere-relieving or distracting dialogues, no references to saving cultural patterns. The protagonist is in a state of permanent danger, which finds its climax in the final stages of the story. The friendship born in the camp between him and Vadi, a Romani child, does not save him, however, neither does it lead to a happy ending, but we see the end scene

<sup>46</sup> See in this context: Justyna Kowalska-Leder, “Okupacyjne dzienniki i pamiętniki w konfrontacji z dyskursem o polskich Sprawiedliwych,” in *Zapisywanie wojny. Dzienniki z lat 1939–1945*, ed. Maciej Libich and Piotr Sadzik (Warszawa: Wydawnictwa Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego, 2022), 99–116.

in the gas chamber. In *Smoke*, the illustrations are kept in shades of grey, black, sepia. Color appears only occasionally and is used as a form of contrast to emphasize the beauty of nature (bushes, sunflowers). The camp is portrayed as a bleak place.<sup>47</sup> Another issue is that we are dealing with an attempt to illustratively reflect what is seen and sensually experienced by the child in the camp – the sender of the message. This complements Fortes' narrative – the overall vision is very consistent and the impact of text and image is immense. The story is told from the perspective of a child whose perception is juxtaposed with the realities of the camp. This brings to mind *Fatelessness* – as an anti-Bildungsroman<sup>48</sup> by Imre Kertész. This type of cognition is in the form of a protagonist-narrator and is precisely the camp's anti-education: "It is not good to have to stand for so many hours / in the cold and snow at assembly" (D.), "I never cry, / because when one boy cried at night, / they took him away" (D.), "They beat Vadi because he was too weak / and he dropped the bucket" (D.), "When the guards come with guns / and bad dogs, I always put my hands up" (D.). This dimension of Fortes' story has received attention. Magdalena Sikorska wrote that "*Smoke* does not teach about life, because there is hardly any life left in it."<sup>49</sup> The anti-educational dimension of the camp is also the truth about the Holocaust.

In *Smoke*, the camp is portrayed as a hostile, alien, frightening place which it is impossible to escape from. Reality has been compressed, confined within the camp, which is the only available space of existence for the main character and his parents. Here, life can only continue under certain rules, certain inhuman conditions prevail, which are depicted in the book: written and drawn out. Fortes and Concejo's book reveal the reality of the concentration camp: being cramped, the drama of the everyday assembly, starvation, beatings, selections, smoking crematoria, and finally death. However, there are more signals that we are dealing with a German extermination camp, as researchers have pointed out. The title itself refers to a symbolism that is recognizable and familiar, not only to literary scholars. One wrote: "The text [...] is rough, lacking literary panache, as if 'naked'."<sup>50</sup> At the same time, it has been argued

47 Magdalena Sikorska and Katarzyna Smyczynska write more about the illustrations in the book. See "Visual Narrative of Death and Memory. The Holocaust in Two Contemporary European Picture Books," in *Global Perspectives on Death in Children's Literature*, ed. Lesley D. Clement and Leyli Jamali (New York: Routledge, 2016), 177–190.

48 Arkadiusz Morawiec, "Dwie lekcje: Kertész i Borowski," *Polonistyka* 4 (2011): 35–42.

49 Sikorska, *Czy literatura piękna może pomóc w edukacji dotyczącej Auschwitz i Holocaustu?*, 159.

50 Ibid.



critically, referring to the book as a whole (visual and verbal communication), that we are dealing with “an attempt at a visual and linguistic metaphorization of the Holocaust, which consequently leads to the creation of a plot devoid of context, incoherent; although suspended in an unspecified time and in a symbolic space, it nevertheless ends in a gas chamber,”<sup>51</sup> but also approvingly that “the poetic power of the story is enshrined in the metaphor, but also in the decontextualization of events. They take place outside history, outside a geographically defined space, outside a specified time.”<sup>52</sup> These recognitions led to important conclusions. From a position of negation:

Such decontextualization risks, on the one hand, the universalization of the theme of the Holocaust and, on the other, an excessive identification with the protagonist, who becomes simply a representation of Everyone. The latter phenomenon would even be desirable, were it not for the obvious fact that the young reader is in no way guided out of the trauma that the reading leads him or her into.<sup>53</sup>

From a position of acceptance:

We come with our historical knowledge and encounter a nightmare of human cruelty, encapsulated in a story where we easily identify with the characters... Nothing separates us from the characters who pass into the shadows. Therefore, it is not an easy encounter.<sup>54</sup>

While one can discuss the function, legitimacy and consequences of metaphorization (on a visual and verbal level, since the text itself is definitely not metaphorical), it is difficult to agree at the point of departure with the thesis of the universalization of the topic of the Holocaust – precisely in *Smoke*. The protagonist is certainly Everyone, but his story reveals “the fate of the vast majority of child victims of the Holocaust who were exterminated in the gas chambers”<sup>55</sup>. In this sense alone, it is universal.<sup>56</sup>

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51 Wójcik-Dudek, *Reading (in) the Holocaust*, 254–255.

52 Wijas, *Mała opowieść o wielkiej historii*, 254.

53 Wójcik-Dudek, *Reading (in) the Holocaust*, 255.

54 Wijas, *Mała opowieść o wielkiej historii*, 254.

55 Rybak, “I (nie) żyli długo i szczęśliwie,” 14.

56 Magdalena Sikorska and Katarzyna Smyczyńska, “Visual Narrative of Death and Memory,” 178.

Thus, a certain (ir)resoluble impasse arises when one wants to tell children about the Holocaust as it was. It seems necessary to broaden the perspective and see that there is another insurmountable difficulty here, which was pointed out in the context of another cultural text by Maria Janion, who was quoted, by the way, many times just in discussions of Fortes' book: "The salvific narrative attempts to make the events of the Holocaust coherent, to arrange them in such sequences as to derive from them a conclusion that saves the sense of history and universal human morality." The author of the introductory sketch to the volume *Porzucić etyczną arogancję* [Giving up the ethical arrogance] added, quoting Claude Lanzmann: "The question of salvation did not arise at Treblinka or Auschwitz."<sup>57</sup> *Smoke* is certainly a book about the Holocaust, not a tailor-made consolation project – there is no colorful final scene in which life prevails. If we accept that death (in the gas chambers) cannot be shown in children's books, then it is impossible to present the Holocaust as it was. As Marta Tomczok wrote in the context of *Smoke*:

Well, yes, one would like to say, but this is, after all, a story about the Holocaust of thousands of children in the death camps. How else, if not precisely in this way, would its ending look like?<sup>58</sup>

### ***My Dog Lala – The Story of the Dog is the Story of the Holocaust*<sup>59</sup>**

While *Smoke* received many reviews, Roman Kent's *My Dog Lala* received little attention from Polish researchers. I have only found one discussion about this short story.<sup>60</sup> In view of this receptive lack, I will try to briefly present it, also in

57 Maria Janion, "Porzucić etyczną arogancję," in *Porzucić etyczną arogancję. Ku reinterpretacji podstawowych pojęć humanistyki w świetle wydarzenia Szoa*, ed. Beata Anna Polak and Tomasz Polak (Poznań: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Wydziału Nauk Społecznych UAM, 2011), 20; 21.

58 Marta Tomczok, *Anna Mach, Świadczenie świadectw. Postpamięć Zagłady w polskiej literaturze najnowszej* (Warszawa–Toruń: Fundacja na Rzecz Nauki Polskiej, 2016); Małgorzata Wójcik-Dudek, *W(ł)czytać Zagładę. Praktyki postpamięci w polskiej literaturze XXI wieku dla dzieci i młodzieży* (Katowice: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego, 2016); *Zagłada Żydów. Studia i Materiały* 13 (2017): 795–801; 800.

59 I am paraphrasing here the title of one of the chapters of Roman Kent's biography *Jedynym wyjściem była odwaga*, trans. Dariusz Dekiert (Łódź: Centrum Dialogu im. Marka Edelmana, 2020), which I will write about later in the discussion. English-language version: *Courage Was My Only Option. The Autobiography of Roman Kent* (New York: Vantage Press, 2008).

60 Anna Sałatarow, "(Nie)szczęśliwe zakończenia we współczesnej literaturze dziecięcej podejmującej temat Zagłady," *Paidia i Literatura* 4 (2022): 1–10.

the context of the author's silhouette, and then relate these findings to existing literary studies on the function of animal heroes in children's literature (with regard to the Holocaust). Researchers have primarily looked at two, very different works that share a canine protagonist: *Schlemiel* by Ryszard Marek Gronski, written in Poland and well received when it comes to reviews, and rather criticized by researchers, *Czika, the Dog in the Ghetto*. Kent's *My dog Lala* is a kind of transitional link, an intermediate form between the first-person narrative led by the first-person character – the English bulldog from Gronski's book – and the strongly didactically oriented perspective of the third-person narrator present in Dagan's text. These publications are also linked by the high status of the animal protagonists, important for their human guardians.<sup>61</sup>

Roman Kent (surname is Kniker), whose short story about the dog Lala I want to analyze, died on May 21, 2021 in New York. He was a Survivor of the Holocaust. He was born on April 18, 1925 in Łódź,<sup>62</sup> in Poland, then departed to the United States in 1946. Kent's biography is thus divided into parts, the war and the experience of the Holocaust becoming the fundamental caesura. It can be said that with its outbreak, and then – as a consequence of the successive tragic events of 1939–1945 – the *Lala* author's childhood ends. Marian Turski in the *Foreword* to Kent's autobiographical book *Jedynym wyjściem była odwaga*, writes: "Here you have, Readers, four chapters of his life: childhood, ghetto and camps, new American life and business career, social and philanthropic activities."<sup>63</sup>

The first stage covers growing up in the home of the owner of a Łódź textile factory, Emanuel Kniker, and Sonia (maiden name Lifszyc), surrounded by her siblings: two elder sisters, Reni and Dasha, and a younger brother, Leon. As Kent himself writes, "It was a wonderful, carefree life,"<sup>64</sup> filled with love and fun, providing a solid moral foundation: "These values became a part of my life, and were guidelines that helped me survive during the Holocaust and shape my future."<sup>65</sup>

61 The dog begins to become an important, valuable animal at the beginning of the twentieth century. It is then incorporated into the "modern family." See Patrycja Pokora, "Człowiek mówiący psim głosem. Psie życie Józefa Wilkonia w świetle studiów nad zwierzętami," in *Czytanie menażerii. Zwierzęta w literaturze dziecięcej, młodzieżowej i fantastycznej*, ed. Anna Mik, Patrycja Pokora and Maciej Skowera (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo SBP, 2016), 192–193.

62 Such a date appears in the *About the Author* note included in the book *My Dog Lala* (5). Roman Kent's erroneous year of birth (1929) appears on many websites.

63 See Marian Turski, *Foreword*, in Kent, *Jedynym wyjściem była odwaga*, 7.

64 Kent, *Courage Was My Only Option*, 13.

65 *Ibid.*, 21.

The second phase of Roman Kent's life begins when the Germans entered Łódź, on September 9, 1939. His family soon lost their flat and all their possessions, Emanuel Kniker's factory was confiscated, the synagogues in Łódź were burnt down. The move to the ghetto took place in March 1940. Shortly afterwards, Lala was handed over to the Germans. On November 13, 1942, Emanuel Kniker died of starvation. The surviving family was deported to Auschwitz-Birkenau in 1944, when the Łódź ghetto was being closed down. Sonia Kniker died in one of the concentration camps.<sup>66</sup> Roman Kent and his brother Leon were sent to Gross-Rosen concentration camp and Flossenbürg concentration camp, where they lived to see liberation. A few months after the war, as a consequence of extreme exhaustion and tuberculosis, Dasha died in Sweden. The brothers soon decided to move to the United States, where they lived their post-war lives. The children's book that interests me here was published in Auburn Hills, Michigan, in 2006 by Teacher's Discovery.<sup>67</sup> It also became the basis for a short animated film produced by the University of Southern California Shoah Foundation.<sup>68</sup> Translated into Polish in 2015, it was published by the POLIN Publishing House of the Museum of the History of Polish Jews. The illustrative material consisted of drawings by students of the Municipal Art School in Mińsk Mazowiecki.

The eponymous Lala joined the Kniker family in the early 1930s. However, Kent tells the dog's story in the biography, including a dedicated chapter *Lala's Story is a Story of a Miracle*<sup>69</sup> already during the war period, because it was then that all the inhabitants of the ghetto were forced to surrender their dogs to the Germans.<sup>70</sup> This extremely painful loss anticipated another – the death of his father: "The loss of Dad left an indelible mark on our entire family. It made the brutality and death in the ghetto a personal matter; until then, I had only lost Lala,"<sup>71</sup> both – will be characterised by an extremely strong injury potential: "Interestingly – and I have no logical explanation for this – the same thing

66 Ibid., chapter: *Reunion at Last*, 126–134.

67 Roman Kent, *My Dog Lala. The Touching True Story of A Young Boy and His Dog During the Holocaust*, il. T. McWilliams (Auburn Hills: Teacher's Discovery, 2006).

68 *Lala*, accessed March 17, 2023, [https://iwatch.usc.edu/sites/360/lala?clip=859&entry=0\\_734cpuii](https://iwatch.usc.edu/sites/360/lala?clip=859&entry=0_734cpuii).

69 Kent, *Jedynym wyjściem była odwaga*, 48–55. In the English-language version of the book, the chapter title reads differently: *My Dog Lala, a Child's Best Friend*, 37–44.

70 Karolina Wróbel-Bardzik writes engagingly about the situation of dogs in the ghetto, "Odwrócone zoopolis. Zwierzęta towarzyszące w getcie warszawskim," *Przegląd Kulturoznawczy* 4 (2019): 450–465.

71 Kent, *Jedynym wyjściem była odwaga*, 71.

happened to me at the time as that day when we had to hand Lala over to the Germans. I have repeatedly tried to recall the details of that turning point in my life, but my brain refuses to dig up those memories.”<sup>72</sup> The importance of the dog in the boy’s life is also highlighted in the children’s book. Indeed, Kent writes:

I must admit that Lala was more important to me than my brother or my sisters. She deserved such a privileged position with her patience, understanding and affection. I could cuddle with her while she listened to my complaints about my siblings, parents or classmates. She comforted me. ... Was anyone in my family able to do that much for me?<sup>73</sup>

In fact, the entire pre-war part of the story is filled with the memory of the extremely close relationship between the children and the dog. The parents’ attempt to return the animal to its previous owner fails, as it is met with determined resistance from the youngest members of the family<sup>74</sup>. This brief separation foreshadowed the next, which proved inevitable and irreversible: “The loss of the house and the move to the ghetto were material losses. The loss of Lala was felt as the departure of a family member. My love... Lala was the first to teach me the true meaning and understanding of the word.”<sup>75</sup>

Kent’s narrative is an example of a *pet memoir*, “a specific genre in contemporary American memoirs,” where the “emotional bond with the family pet” is highlighted, and the story of the pet’s life becomes “a so-called family autobiography (*relational life writing*), as the pet plays the role of a full-fledged family member, becoming a ‘significant other’ for its carer.”<sup>76</sup>

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> Kent, *My Dog Lala*, 15.

<sup>74</sup> As Ewelina Rąbkowska points out, it is only at the turn of the twentieth century that the child begins to be seen as a causal subject. Before then, interestingly in the context of the analyses conducted here, it was considered “more ‘animal’ than the adult.” In Poland, this analogy was challenged by Janusz Korczak, who wrote that the child “is a human being, not a pinscher on a satin cushion” and thus questioned another recognition: “My child, my property, my slave, my peace dog” (Janusz Korczak, “Jak kochać dziecko,” in *Pisma wybrane*, compiled Abraham Lewin, vol. 2 (Warszawa: Nasza Księgarnia, 1984), 138, 184. Quoted Ewelina Rąbkowska, “Śmieciowe zwierzęta (trash animals) i dzieci śmieci. Relacje dziecka i zwierzęcia w literaturze dla dzieci i młodzieży,” in *Czytanie menażerii. Zwierzęta w literaturze dziecięcej, młodzieżowej i fantastycznej*, 33.

<sup>75</sup> Kent, *My Dog Lala*, 48–49.

<sup>76</sup> Małgorzata Rutkowska, *Psy, koty, ludzie. Zwierzęta domowe w literaturze amerykańskiej* (Lublin: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Marii Curie-Skłodowskiej, 2016), 19; 135–175.

Interestingly, in the context of *My Dog Lala* and the history of the Holocaust, such works also analyse “ways of experiencing mourning after the death of a beloved pet.”<sup>77</sup> In Kent’s book, the dog is narrated as a member of the (human) family, sharing a fate, co-sentient. Strongly emphasised by the first-person narrator here is the ‘we,’ signifying the community of human and animal. At the same time, there are individualising strategies.<sup>78</sup> Thus, Lala gains subjectivity, which in this case, however, does not manifest itself in giving her a voice, but in making her the central point of the story. In Kent’s narrative, Lala is undoubtedly the title character, but also the main, foreground one, presented as a being endowed with wisdom, intelligence, willing to make sacrifices, patient, devoted, capable of love. As if at the same time, in the face of this shared human-animal history, there is a History taking place, in which the Holocaust is set. What Kent wants to talk about is the great love that united humans and the animal. At the same time, however, he talks about his family’s wartime experience. The story of the dog becomes the filter through which the tragic history of the Jews of Łódź unfolds. Placing love in the foreground, Kent shows what hatred and death are in the background. It is fair to say that it is the ‘sensitive narrator’ who guides the children through the story, without omitting or euphemizing the realities of the move to the ghetto.

The accents were distributed differently in the book by Bathsheva Dagan. This item, unlike Roman Kent’s book, has received quite an extensive reception. The most extensive coverage of *Chika...* was written by Piotr Krupiński, who pointed to the clearly educational profile of the book, conceived as a proposal for early childhood education, which was to explain the content limitation – the omission of those elements of the extermination reality that “could prove too difficult for a young reader, also in the moral aspect.”<sup>79</sup> Such a broadcasting strategy also has its consequences with regard to the most crucial plot point of the books analyzed here – the forced separation from the beloved animal, which, according to the cited researcher, “constitutes a kind of plot ‘spark,’ a priority moment of internal tension for the further development of the plot.”<sup>80</sup> Dagan explains, contrary to historical truth, that “the Germans

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77 Ibid., 19.

78 Anna Barcz, “Posthumanizm i jego zwierzęce odgłosy w literaturze,” *Teksty Drugie* 1–2 (2013): 60–79.

79 Piotr Krupiński, “Dlaczego gęsi krzyczały?” *Zwierzęta i Zagłada w literaturze polskiej XX i XXI wieku* (Warszawa: IBL PAN 2016), 286.

80 Ibid., 282–283.

did not want the Jews in the ghetto / to have dogs to guard their homes”<sup>81</sup>. As Krupiński points out, “the merciful narrator – also to the perpetrators – proposes an argument [...] that does not go beyond the threshold of the young reader’s perceptual capacities, while at the same time initiating him into the unambiguously sinister intentions of the aggressors.”<sup>82</sup> Anita Jarzyna takes a different view of this procedure, writing that the prohibition on dogs in the ghetto “is justified very clumsily (and, worse, not in a way that indicates the deliberate imitation of the indirect speech of a few year old boy).”<sup>83</sup>

Dagan’s publication is also criticised as a whole, as an item which is unsuitable when it comes to the needs of a contemporary audience. Despite the clear profiling of the message, aimed at the youngest children, it is not able to defend itself neither in terms of words nor illustrations. Researchers have claimed the text being biased,<sup>84</sup> too much of an infantile nature,<sup>85</sup> and when referring to Avi Katz’s drawings they are considered as archaic.<sup>86</sup> Aleksandra Sikora furthermore negatively assesses the way in which Dagan’s characters are constructed, how the narrative is conducted and the language of the stories. The characters are “paper,” making their fates “indifferent to the viewer.” Dagan does not try, according to Sikora, like other authors – especially if they are much older – to create a platform of understanding with a young audience. The introduction of third-person narration, and the perspective of speaking post – “speaking from the here and now” – also has a negative effect: “The monotonous flow of the narrative is rarely interrupted by dialogues, with expressions that differ little from the descriptive parts, while the general linguistic boredom is further emphasized by pathos, which makes the whole story seem even more distant to the child.”<sup>87</sup>

Agnieszka Makowiecka-Pastusiak, on the other hand, points out that there is no death in *Chika...*, even though it is clear who the perpetrator of evil is. According to the quoted researcher, thus “the basic truth of the Holocaust

81 Dagan, *Czika, piesek w getcie*, 12.

82 Krupiński, “Dlaczego gęsi krzyczały?,” 287.

83 Anita Jarzyna, “Szlemiele. Zwierzęta wobec Zagłady w literaturze dla dzieci,” *Narracje Zagłady* 2 (2016): 235–256; 241.

84 Jarzyna, *Szlemiele*, 241.

85 Sikora, *W jaki sposób mówimy dzieciom o wojnie?*, 33.

86 Krupiński, “Dlaczego gęsi krzyczały?,” 288.

87 Sikora, *W jaki sposób mówimy dzieciom o wojnie?*, 34–35.

remains unspoken.”<sup>88</sup> In the context of the ending of the Dagan story, Piotr Krupiński writes of a “miraculous *happy ending*,”<sup>89</sup> which facilitates identification with the characters, as does the fictional exploitation of the child-animal relationship<sup>90</sup>. He further points out that if the truth about the causes and consequences of the prohibition on Jewish ownership of animals were conveyed in the Dagan’s book analyzed here, we would be dealing with an “(anti-) fairy tale... that should not necessarily be applied to children at bedtime.”<sup>91</sup> I would like to pause for a moment at these identifications, as they point to further significant places of narrative encounter between the Holocaust and literature for younger audiences.

The presence of animal heroes, as Krupiński rightly points out, refers back to tradition – the fairy tale and fable convention. Alicja Baluch wrote that animals are those characters “which are the first to appear in a child’s literary experience.”<sup>92</sup> The path of this reading encounter leads from the simplest representations involving “appearance and basic life functions,” through animal characters anthropomorphized and endowed with human traits and features, to stories in which “animals remain animals and this existential situation becomes the subject of the story.”<sup>93</sup> Jerzy Cieślowski has pointed out that “the animal in a children’s work appears equipped with attributes of its appearance and its ‘character,’” usually with a humanizing epithet, for example faithful as a dog.<sup>94</sup> Ryszard Waksmund wrote about the evolution of children’s animals – from traditional depictions in fairy tales and fables to the presence in poetry of “concrete representatives of the world of animals and birds, not only in the rights of decorative, static motifs...”<sup>95</sup>

The pedigree of animal protagonists, including the canine characters, is therefore not in doubt. Unlike the role that animals play in these works, the

88 Makowiecka-Pastusiak, *Holokaust i współczesne dzieci*.

89 Krupinski, “Dlaczego gęsi krzyczały?,” 289.

90 In other contexts, Jarzyna has written about these recognitions in *Szlemiele. Zwierzęta wobec Zagłady w literaturze dla dzieci*, 239.

91 Krupinski, “Dlaczego gęsi krzyczały?,” 287.

92 Alicja Baluch, *Dziecko i świat przedstawiony, czyli tajemnice dziecięcej lektury* (Warszawa: Instytut Wydawniczy Nasza Księgarnia, 1987), 62.

93 Baluch, *Dziecko i świat przedstawiony, czyli tajemnice dziecięcej lektury*, 63.

94 Jerzy Cieślowski, *Literatura i podkultura dziecięca* [Wrocław: Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich, 1975], 276.

95 Ryszard Waksmund, “Wstęp,” in *Poezja dla dzieci. Antologia form i tematów* (Wrocław: Wydawnictwo Wacław Bagiński, 1999), 22.



possible transformations that are taking place in the ways which they are represented in literature (including the Holocaust literature) under the influence of “posthumanism and its animal noises,”<sup>96</sup> and attempts to name or (genologically) classify the stories analyzed here.

Krupiński wonders to what extent in this type of representation we are dealing with “the allegorical model of depicting animal creatures characteristic of anthropomorphizing fairy tales,” or whether we can discern, under the influence of posthumanism, a break with this type of depiction.<sup>97</sup> The purely instrumental treatment of animals, which are supposed to make it easier for children to identify with the protagonists (I would only add that identification itself and its ‘facilitation,’ based on the introduction of happy solutions, is also ethically debatable), as well as the reference to fairy-tale and fable conventions in works on the Holocaust, are also questionable to researchers.<sup>98</sup> This issue has been the subject of extensive literature abroad,<sup>99</sup> less frequently studied by the Polish researchers.<sup>100</sup> This aspect certainly deserves a separate discussion. At this point, I would only add that the term ‘Holocaust fairy tale’ is meant to refer to narratives that feature plot resolutions and motifs, images and themes familiar from fairy tales and fables, as well as to one that treats Holocaust stories for the youngest as “stories to be told.”

96 I refer to the title of the article by Anna Barcz cited earlier.

97 Krupiński, “Dlaczego gęsi krzyczały?,” 289.

98 Ibid., 289; Jarzyna, *Szlemiele. Zwierzęta wobec Zagłady w literaturze dla dzieci*, 239.

99 See, for example, E. R. Baer, “A Postmodern Fairy Tale of the Holocaust: Jane Yolen’s *Briar Rose*,” *Studies in American Jewish Literature* 24 (2005): 145–152; Daniela Carpi, “Fables of the Holocaust: Hansel and Gretel,” in *Fables of the Law: Fairy Tales in a Legal Context*, ed. Daniela Carpi and Marett Leiboff (Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter, 2016), 309–330; Philippe Codde, “Transmitted Holocaust Trauma: A Matter of Myth and Fairy Tales?,” *European Judaism* 1 (2009): 62–75; Anna Hunter, “Tales from Over There: The Uses and Meanings of Fairy-Tales in Contemporary Holocaust Narrative,” *modernism / modernity* 20 (2013): 59–75; Margarete Landwehr, “The Fairy-Tale as Allegory for the Holocaust: Representing the Unrepresentable in Yolen’s *Briar Rose* and Murphy’s *Hansel and Gretel*,” in *Fairy Tales Reimagined: Essays on New Retellings*, ed. Susan Redington Bobby (London: McFarland & Co., 2009), 153–167; Olivia Marsh, “Following the Breadcrumbs: Young Adult Holocaust Novels and Their Intertextual Use of Fairy Tales,” *Cambridge Educational Research e-Journal* 7 (2020): 125–140; Maria Jesus Martínez-Alfaro, “The Broken Voice of History: Fairy Tales, Anti-Tales, and Holocaust Representation,” in *Contemporary Fairy-Tale Magic. Subverting Gender and Genre*, ed. Lydia Brugué and Auba Llompart (Brill: Rodopi, 2020), 201–210.

100 See Kinga Anna Gajda, “Bajka dla dzieci o wojnie i Holokauście,” *Rana. Literatura – Doświadczenie – Tożsamość* 2 (2021), lack of pagination, <https://journals.us.edu.pl/index.php/rana/issue/view/1321>, accessed March 24, 2023.

The fundamental difference between a “bedtime story” and a story that one nevertheless does not want to tell children is also pointed out by Roman Kent (as well as Krupiński, quoted earlier, writing about the [anti-]fairy tale), who says in the film *Lala*:

My children’s favorite bedtime story, even when they became grown-ups was the story of the dog we had when we lived in Poland. [...] This is the story my kids wanted me to repeat many times, but it has a moral. It told me something too: that love is stronger than hate. But there is another part of this story, which I did not want to tell my children about.<sup>101</sup>

The first part of the *Lala* narrative analyzed here is, according to this recognition, a children’s story, a story about the relationship between man and animal (like many others, including classic fairy tales and fables). However, the second one, which consists of the events concerning *Lala* that took place after the German announcement that the dogs had to be surrendered, its inevitability, the death of the dog and the suffering it caused – no longer. What constituted the essence of the Holocaust experience according to Kent is not suitable for telling children. In his book, however, he does not save his beloved dog, he does not suspend the story, but presents the story to its painful end.

## Conclusion

The books analyzed here, both Fortes’ *Smoke* and Kent’s *My Dog Lala*, and their Polish reception, provide a critical look at Polish-language children’s literature about the Holocaust. They force to ask questions about the reality of the Holocaust experience as represented in Polish publications and the limits of this representation, to think about the function of silences and omissions and their consequences in the context of historical events and the truth about the Holocaust, as well as the validity of adapting existing formulas to describe Holocaust literature. *Smoke* and *My Dog Lala*, read in the context of a Polish collection of children’s books about the Holocaust, but also works that have been translated into Polish so far (such as Dagan’s *Chika...*), encourage reflection on specific issues: the reasons and consequences of the author’s decisions not to show death, omitting the space of the camp as a place of action, as well as the legitimacy and appropriateness of introducing both the fairy-tale and fable conventions, and of treating Holocaust stories for children as “stories to be told” and referring to them as

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<sup>101</sup> Words spoken in the film *Lala*.

'Holocaust fairy tales.' They reveal the many challenges facing Polish authors who want to tell children about the Holocaust – as it was.

## Abstract

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*The Holocaust Literature for Children in Translation into Polish*

In the article the image of the Holocaust contained in Polish books for children is subjected to critical analysis in the perspective of works translated into Polish from other languages. Two works are particularly interesting in this context: *Smoke* of Anton Fortes, which is considered controversial in Polish and focuses discussions, and *My Dog Lala* by Roman Kent, which is basically absent from analyses and discussions. The polemical point of reference becomes *Chika, the Dog in the Ghetto* by Batszewa Dagan, which is rather criticized by researchers. The analysis of the Polish reception of the translated works makes it possible to point out the problems of domestic children's literature about the Holocaust, related to expressivity, appropriateness and form, taboo areas, or genological classifications. Polish authors spin a salvific narrative, but do not allow young audiences to confront with the experience of the Holocaust, its tragedy and uniqueness. Fortes and Kent, on the other hand, avoiding pusillanimous didacticism, tell the story of the war without removing from the narrative what is indicative of the specificity and paradigmatic nature of the Holocaust.

The article examines the reception of literary texts, which are analysed comparatively, using the tools of narratology, with references to other methodologies of Holocaust literature studies.

## Keywords

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Holocaust, children's literature, translations, reception, camp, ghetto

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Daniel Feldman

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## Reading Time in Youth Novels about the Warsaw Ghetto

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TEKSTY DRUGIE 2024, NR 1, S. 290–305

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### A Bridge over Time

Children's books about the Holocaust use language to create a narrative bridge over time. The Holocaust was a temporal event delimited by traumatic history and bound by a grim geography of contested borders, surveilled walls, and electrified fences. Time and space were tightly controlled during the genocide. Accordingly, literary attempts to portray the Holocaust from within the event face formidable barriers to conceptual entry. Moreover, juvenile texts about this dire history are ineluctably challenged by the relatively narrow temporal scope of their young intended readers. History over eight decades in the past seems all the more remote to youth born in an entirely different century who are unlikely ever to meet a living witness to the genocide. How literature affords young readers access to the horrifying history of the Holocaust in an engaging yet responsible manner poses a continuing dilemma. Authors of children's fiction about the Holocaust are therefore obliged to develop innovative narrative approaches to representing time and space in order to forge an accurate reconstruction of this atrocity.

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Creating such chronological connection is the task taken up in two recent works of European children's literature about the Warsaw Ghetto. Both *Arka czasu* [The ark of time],<sup>1</sup> a 2013 children's novel in Polish by Marcin Szczygielski, and *28 Tage lang* [28 days],<sup>2</sup> a 2014 young adult novel in German by David Safier, stage a literary descent into the traumatic history of the Holocaust by transforming time into text. The texts exemplify how contemporary Polish and German youth literature provide a rhetoric and poetics of time that bridges the chronological gap between the wartime past and cultural coordinates of young Europeans today. The vocabulary of time is already foregrounded in the titles of both novels. Moreover, the works depict children's stories, book collections, and literary reading as constitutive elements of a transhistorical temporal structure. By conceiving of narrative as an independent chronological order that withstands brutal violence and appalling loss, *The Ark of Time* and *28 Days* give contemporary readers a point of access to the grave history of the Holocaust while also uncannily reproducing the historic conditions in which Jewish children read during the genocide – throughout the ghettos of Nazi-occupied Poland, books promised imprisoned Jewish children cognitive escape from unbearable current events. The two novels thus recapitulate the seminal role of reading in helping Holocaust victims overcome the stultifying morass of time during the genocide while also granting postwar students entry into a horrifying period of history.

In suggesting a deeper significance for the role of story in evoking survival, Szczygielski and Safier's novels revise the relationship between time and text. Temporal sequence is typically an essential component in producing narrative, but in these works, the situation is reversed. Time does not create story; instead, story creates time. Reading, narrative, and history converge in *The Ark of Time* and *28 Days*. The following examination of how time is rendered in these texts draws on theoretical concepts of narrative temporality, such as the *katabasis* and chronotope, and influential texts of temporally focused narrative, such as Herbert G. Wells's *The Time Machine*, to illustrate how the Holocaust has come to function as a topos of difficult memory in contemporary children's literature. This analysis underscores the central significance of reading time – both as practice and critique – in making the Holocaust legible to youth living long after the war.

1 Marcin Szczygielski, *Arka czasu, czyli, wielka ucieczka Rafała od kiedyś przez wtedy do teraz i wstecz* (Warszawa: Stentor, 2013).

2 David Safier, *28 Tage lang* (Reinbek: Kindler, 2014).

### Entering the Abyss

In the two texts under discussion, storytelling offers the young Jewish protagonists moments of evanescent release from the constant fear and hardship of the Warsaw Ghetto. The novels portray desperate children imprisoned behind walls who turn to fictional stories as a way of harnessing the virtual freedom found in books to mitigate the unremitting dread and privation found in the ghetto. While Safier's novel is written for a slightly more mature audience than Szczygielski's, both works portray protagonists who venerate stories as talismans of hope, autonomy, and even rescue from the misery they face under the Nazis. For Mira, the adolescent heroine of *28 Days*, books betoken promise of marvelous transport: "Why couldn't I disappear into a magic book and take everyone I loved with me?," she asks.<sup>3</sup> Concocting fantastic tales of flight and adventure also allows Mira's younger sister Hannah to escape in her mind to an enchanted if perilous island of her own imaginative making: "They knew that this was probably a dangerous world – as I said, they weren't naïve – but they weren't trapped in the ghetto anymore," the text says of Hannah's confabulating.<sup>4</sup> Rafał, the child protagonist of Szczygielski's *Ark of Time*, similarly cherishes books. His penchant for reading grants him safe passage through the ghetto, and at the book's climax his love of stories helps him elude death. Rafał memorizes the intricate route from his apartment to the ghetto library, which he describes as a refuge of open horizons within the otherwise claustrophobic space of the ghetto. "In the library. That's my favorite place in the whole district," he says.<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, reading also risks damnation: Rafał's embrace of an exotic tale forces him underground where he lives in subterranean fellowship with other hidden children to sustain his literary make-believe. In Hannah's story, a purloined book threatens to consign the literary, story-loving children to hell: "The bookseller threatened the children with death and damnation if they didn't give the book back at once. The book would swallow them and they'd end up in the Hell of No Return."<sup>6</sup> Books are hardly innocuous, these texts suggest. On the contrary, to plunge into reading is to risk falling into a hell of no return.

The motif of entering hell via story first appears in the annals of Western literature as the *katabasis*, the mythic theme of a descent to Hades. This narrative template reinforces depiction of the ghetto as an apocalyptic and agonizing abyss and establishes Holocaust literature as a modern successor

3 David Safier, *28 Days*, trans. Helen MacCormac (New York: Feiwei and Friends, 2020), 83.

4 Ibid., 81.

5 Szczygielski, *Arka*, 10.

6 Safier, *28 Days*, 81.

to the classical katabatic tradition. *Katabasis*, an ancient Greek term meaning “a going down,” refers specifically to the venerable genre of a hero’s descent to the underworld. Figures such as Orpheus, Heracles, Odysseus, and Aeneas undertake such journeys. Dante makes use of it as the theological and narrative scheme of his descent into Hell in the *Inferno*. Although the *katabasis* conveys the hero to a chthonic netherworld beyond the reaches of terrestrial geography, it also takes the traveler on a journey to a more capacious temporal continuum; the infernal space of the underworld allows the hero to visit figures from the past, speak with the dead, and gain prophetic insight about the future. Hell is thus a closed space that opens up new vistas in time. This helps to explain how the *katabasis* genre functions today. In contemporary culture, Rachel Falconer argues, Hell is not a place but a time: the Holocaust.<sup>7</sup> Expanding on George Steiner’s proposition that “the Holocaust is Hell made immanent in history,” Falconer finds that Holocaust literature satisfies the contemporary predilection to plumb the “katabatic imagination” through ethical refashioning of the genre.<sup>8</sup> Holocaust literature creates a narrative portal that allows the postwar reader to descend into the moral abyss and then emerge, transformed, like the katabatic heroes of yore. “More than Hell itself, then, it is this narrative of a descent and return in which we apparently continue to ‘believe,’” Falconer writes.<sup>9</sup> Like Auschwitz, the Warsaw Ghetto represents a cursed time and wretched place of bygone purgatory that still looms large in cultural memory. It serves as a durable signifier of utter depravity, a cultural *mise-en-scène* of modern moral collapse akin to the role of Hell in Dante’s medieval religious cosmology. Given authors’ longstanding and reasonable reluctance to portray the concentration and death camps in children’s literature about the Holocaust, accounts of the ghetto express a juvenile version of this katabatic paradigm by inviting readers to enter vicariously into a time and place that the Nazis sought to obliterate.

Safier and Szczygielski’s novels depict the inherent peril as well as redemptive possibility of storytelling amid the historic depths of suffering in the Warsaw Ghetto. The katabatic nature of these texts exemplifies how children’s literature of the Holocaust represents both descent into and ascent from what Barbara Engelking calls the “abyssal consciousness” of time in the ghetto.<sup>10</sup> “The ghetto was an island in time, isolated in the dense present,

7 Rachel Falconer, *Hell in Contemporary Literature: Western Descent Narratives since 1945* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004).

8 Ibid., 6.

9 Ibid., 1.

10 Barbara Engelking, *Czas przestał dla mnie istnieć...* (Warszawa: IFiS PAN, 1996), 59.

where the past was suspended and the future receded into eternity," Engelking says.<sup>11</sup> Using the spatial metaphor of an island to refer to the foreshortening of time in the Warsaw Ghetto, Engelking describes how past, present, and future were reduced in the ghetto to the immediate nullity of urgent needs, especially hunger. This is the warped temporal structure that Lejb Goldin attempts to measure in *Khronik fun eyn... mey'ey's l'ey's* [Chronicle of a... from time to time], his 1941 autobiographical story about how famine ravages time: "How terrifyingly long were each of those days and nights," Goldin writes.<sup>12</sup> The extreme constriction of time, space, freedom, nourishment, and hope in the ghetto created a gaping temporal rift that distorted conventional modes of chronology, Engelking argues.<sup>13</sup> Ghetto time and conventional time entirely diverged. Within the ghetto walls, "daily encounters with death, so omnipresent in the ghetto, brought its inhabitants closer to the eternal boundary of time," she writes.<sup>14</sup> Ghetto time also unfolded at its own irregular, harrowing pace. Samuel Kassow observes that time in the ghetto could stand still for weeks with stultifying torpor and then leap forward with "lightning speed" and capricious tempo as "months turned into days and years into months."<sup>15</sup> To reflect such painful and arbitrary temporal dilation, Holocaust literature requires calibration of "different measures of time," Ida Fink writes in her aptly titled *Scrap of Time*.<sup>16</sup> If the Warsaw Ghetto was an "island in time," as Engelking claims, then it was a temporal abyss governed by its own laws of time and detached from any contiguity with conventional chronology and geography. The young protagonist of Uri Orlev's *The Island on Bird Street*, a pioneering book of children's literature about the Holocaust, says that he clung to life in the

11 Barbara Engelking and Beata Chomątowska, "W czasie zawieszonym," *Tygodnik Powszechny* (April 16, 2018), accessed April 29, 2023, <https://www.tygodnikpowszechny.pl/w-czasie-zawieszonym-152758>.

12 Lejb Goldin, "Kronik fun [mes-les]" [Kronika jednej doby], *Ringelblum Archive*, ARG I 1219, vol. 26, 450-461; accessed May 3, 2023, <https://cbj.jhi.pl/documents/966113/111/>. For astute analysis of Goldin's story see Sven-Erik Rose, "Writing Hunger in a Modernist Key in the Warsaw Ghetto: Leyb Goldin's *Chronicle of a Single Day*," *Jewish Social Studies* 23 (1) (2017): 29-63.

13 Engelking, *Czas*, 17-19.

14 Barbara Engelking and Gunnar Paulsson, *Holocaust and Memory* (London: Leicester University Press, 2001), 99.

15 Samuel Kassow, *Who Will Write Our History?: Emanuel Ringelblum, the Warsaw Ghetto, and the Oyneg Shabes Archive* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007), 13.

16 Ida Fink, *A Scrap of Time and Other Stories*, trans. Madeline Levine and Francine Prose (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1998), 3.



Warsaw Ghetto “as though I were living on a desert island.”<sup>17</sup> The ghetto was an island in time and space detached from the rest of existence.

Representing such catastrophic circumstances challenges authors to innovate new techniques for addressing temporality and geography. The predicament is even more acute in children’s literature. In criticism on the role of chronology in children’s literature, scholars such as Maria Nikolajeva claim that, given child readers’ relatively limited temporal experience and historical range, time is always a fraught subject in any work of youth fiction.<sup>18</sup> However, such temporal difficulties multiply exponentially when representing the history of the Holocaust and its complex dimensions of terrifying time and suffocating space. Authors of children’s literature must therefore seek out alternate ways to recreate this traumatic history.

*28 Days* and *Ark of Time* attempt to resolve this difficulty by converting time into text. Reading time runs parallel to historical time but is also a way out of the chronological chasm of the ghetto. Safier and Szczygielski’s novels illustrate how literature creates its own chronology apposite to the temporal isolation of the Warsaw Ghetto by presenting reading as an alternate measure of time. This was especially true in the ghetto, where reading was pervasive and indispensable:

Reading books was a widespread form of participation in cultural life in the ghetto, a habit difficult to give up. Even people on the peripheries read passionately. Everything was read, depending on preferences, possibilities, and needs. To get away from the outside world, to forget about reality while experiencing the adventures of fictional heroes.<sup>19</sup>

Stories offered a readily available if ephemeral exit from history to prisoners in the ghetto. Orlev’s character, whose analogy of the ghetto to a desert isle derives from a book, namely *Robinson Crusoe*, claims that literary sustenance was as essential to him as physical nourishment. “I knew exactly what to look for: candles and food. That was all I needed. Except for a good book, if I found one,” he says.<sup>20</sup> Mira in *28 Days* likewise exchanges bread for books: “I showed

17 Uri Orlev, *The Island on Bird Street*, trans. Hillel Halkin (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1984), 87.

18 Maria Nikolajeva, *From Mythic to Linear: Time in Children’s Literature* (Lanham, Md.: Children’s Literature Association and Scarecrow Press, 2000).

19 Barbara Engelking and Jacek Leociak, *Getto warszawskie: przewodnik po nieistniejącym mieście* (Warszawa: IFIS PAN, 2001), 533.

20 Orlev, *Island*, 48.

him the book. 'I'll give you a piece of bread for it,'" she says to a bookseller.<sup>21</sup> Such zealous hunger for books was not restricted to Jews in the Warsaw Ghetto. Herman Kruk, the chief librarian of the Vilna Ghetto, reported that Jewish prisoners in Vilna also frequently sought refuge in reading. While some ghetto inmates preferred texts that in some way reflected their tribulations and ordeals, most ghetto inmates looked to literature as "a means of escape... Books carried them away, over the ghetto walls and into the world. A reader could thus tear himself away from his oppressive isolation and in his mind be reunited with life, with his stolen freedom," Kruk wrote in 1942.<sup>22</sup> Literature's capacity to enchant readers by transporting them to another time and place is also manifest in *28 Days* and *Ark of Time*. Mira delights in perusing books as a means of assimilating the languages and perspectives she will need in a future she envisions for herself on foreign shores. Books are virtual passports that grant her imaginary passage to a better life, even as the war still rages:

Whenever I had the chance, I took a detour through the book market. I enjoyed losing myself in the boxes and suitcases of books for sale: works by the likes of Thomas Mann, Sigmund Freud, Karl Marx, or Erich Kästner, all authors forbidden by the Nazis. And better yet, there were even books in English. I'd been able to teach myself some English using books, in case I ever got to America. I'd started with picture books like *Snow White*, *Little Red Riding Hood*, and *Winnie-the-Pooh*. But by now, I could read whole detective novels. My favorites were the Lord Peter Wimsey detective novels by Dorothy L. Sayers, even if she could only transport me as far as England in my mind and not all the way to New York.<sup>23</sup>

Losing herself in books allows Mira to find herself in ambitions inspired by her reading.

Libraries facilitated such dreams by serving as portals to heterotopic space within the ghetto.<sup>24</sup> Among the two dozen libraries that historically

21 Safier, *28 Days*, 62.

22 Herman Kruk, "Library and Reading Room in the Vilna Ghetto, Strashun Street 6," trans. Zachary M. Baker, in *The Holocaust and the Book: Destruction and Preservation*, ed. Jonathan Rose (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2001): 171–200; 192.

23 Safier, *28 Days*, 61.

24 On the Warsaw Ghetto as heterotopia in children's literature, see Ada Bieber, "Mentoring in a Heterotopic Space – Janusz Korczak's Orphanage in Contemporary Picture Books," *Filoteknos* 5 (2015): 181–189; and Mateusz Świetlicki and Dorota Michułka, "Unburied Practices of Memory: The Holocaust and the Polish-Jewish Relations in Joanna Rudniańska's *Kotka Brygidy* (2007) and *XY* (2012)," *Children's Literature in Education* (2022).

functioned in the Warsaw Ghetto was one at Leszno 67, where Basia Temkin-Berman operated a children's library.<sup>25</sup> This is the real address that the fictional Rafał in *Ark of Time* locates as his personal epicenter of the ghetto: "A special place on his personal map of the ghetto is taken by the library, a location to which he could find his way even if blindfolded. Rafał superimposes his personal map organized around this central point of the library," writes Małgorzata Wójcik-Dudek in her reading of Szczygielski's novel.<sup>26</sup> Literature and books reorganize the space of the ghetto just as they generate a substitute temporal order defying persecution. Krzysztof Rybak observes that Szczygielski visually illustrates the central role of books in *Ark of Time* by including in his novel a map of Rafał's conception of wartime Warsaw centering on the historic location of the ghetto children's library. Books help Rafał map his city; the map, in turn, becomes part of Szczygielski's book. Similarly, for Mira in *28 Days*, escape from the ghetto and reunion with her sister proceeds through a book: "Before I knew what was happening, I was sucked into the book, transported away from our world," she says.<sup>27</sup> Books offer spatial and temporal alterity.

The intersection between the history of juvenile reading in the Warsaw Ghetto and recent fiction about the ghetto for juvenile readers – which, we have seen, often depicts children reading in the ghetto – brings into focus a point of starting commonality: books present a way in and out of the ghetto. Imperiled Jewish children reading during the Holocaust and inquisitive young people today reading about the Holocaust engage in parallel acts of time travel and spatial transport. While reading in the ghetto served as a means of escaping a hellish world of tortuous time and little space, reading about the ghetto follows an opposite course by affording access to the lost world of the ghetto. Reading in the ghetto was a way of escaping history; reading about the ghetto offers a way of entering it. Both situate in literature

25 Engelsing and Leociak, *Getto*, 323; 536. See also Rokhl Oyerbakh, *Varshover tsavoies* (Tel Aviv: Yisroel Bukh, 1974), 268; and Krzysztof Rybak, "'Zupełnie inne miasto.' Obrazy warszawskiego getta w polskiej literaturze dziecięcej XXI wieku," *Dzieciństwo. Literatura i Kultura* 3 (1) (2021): 67–84; 74–75. On the children's library of the Warsaw Ghetto see also Basia Temkin-Berman, *City Within a City*, trans. Jerzy Michałowicz (New York: International Psychoanalytic Books, 2012), and David Shavit, *Hunger for the Printed Word: Books and Libraries in the Jewish Ghettos of Nazi-Occupied Europe* (Jefferson, NC and London: McFarland & Co., 1997).

26 Małgorzata Wójcik-Dudek, *Reading (in) the Holocaust*, trans. Lucyna Aleksandrowicz-Pędich (Berlin: Peter Lang, 2020), 187.

27 Safier, *28 Days*, 185.

a transhistorical means of representing time and space that is measured not by the clock, but by the word.

### The Holocaust as Chronotope: Time in Text

Holocaust memory geographically locates the history of the genocide in specific sites of atrocity and chronologically organizes the conflict's vast topography of horror into a sequence of historical events. This compression of historic time and place into language lends credence to Sue Vice's argument that the Holocaust is a narrative topos in time, a new and extreme version of the chronotope,<sup>28</sup> a term coined and defined by Mikhail Bakhtin as follows:

In the literary artistic chronotope, spatial and temporal indicators are fused into one carefully thought-out, concrete whole. Time, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history. This intersection of axes and fusion of indicators characterizes the artistic chronotope.<sup>29</sup>

The interrelationship of temporal and spatial coordinates in Holocaust memory makes literary representation of this atrocity a distinctive chronotope. As a chronotope of difficult memory epitomizing trauma, Vice says, the Holocaust evokes a set of abject historic experiences at the extreme limit of the human condition, such as the charged circumstances of "extermination (in the camps), imprisonment (in ghettos), hiding (in confined spaces), or attempted escape (over the thresholds of borders, walls, barbed wire)."<sup>30</sup> Framing Holocaust literature in terms of the Bakhtinian concept of the chronotope helps to elucidate how such texts reify the genocide's history of racial violence in "memory-time and the past," Vice says.<sup>31</sup>

Safier and Szczygielski's portrayals of the Warsaw Ghetto fit this theoretical model. The Warsaw Ghetto was a closed city within a city bearing its own tragic history within the broader history of the Holocaust. Destroyed in May 1943 following the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising and eradicated from the city's streetscape, the ghetto no longer exists except in memory. Its urban

28 Sue Vice, "Trauma, Postmodernism and Descent: Contemporary Holocaust Criticism in Britain," *Holocaust Studies* 11 (1) (2005): 99–118; 110–113.

29 Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 84.

30 Vice, "Trauma," 112.

31 Ibid.

geography was erased from the map of Warsaw. The passage of time and re-configuration of space since the war obscure memory of the ghetto. Artists and authors who choose to portray it must depict a time and place without contemporary referent; it is a “pure” chronotope that exists only in language and artifact. Engelking and Leociak write that the ghetto “is hidden from us by earth, asphalt, the foundations of new houses, and oblivion.”<sup>32</sup> The ghetto can be recalled but not inhabited; its terrain can only be glimpsed in memory or visited in words.

Excavating such condensed history and buried space is difficult work for any writer, let alone for authors of children’s books whose narrative styles generally hew to the more innocent perspectives of children.<sup>33</sup> Yet conceiving of children’s literature of the Warsaw Ghetto as a chronotope of difficult memory underscores the various ways in which authors experiment with narrative form to make reading time a central concern in historical fiction about the Holocaust. Reading time is a favorite activity among the characters in these texts; it is also an essential act of critical engagement. Time for reading and the reading of time coalesce to highlight the role of narrative in recreating this event as a key chronotope of traumatic memory. Language generates its own temporal order separate from ordinary chronology, but it is precisely in reading time in the Holocaust that literary children of the past and the present meet. And thus the chronotope of youth fiction about the ghetto invites readers to apprehend a multiplicity of temporal frames. “There is not just one chronotope, or spatio-temporal form of experience, but a plurality of them: there are different chronotopes for different views of the world and different social situations,” Bakhtin scholar Liisa Steinby says.<sup>34</sup> As a topos of traumatic experience, the ghetto allows for a diversity of temporal dimensions.<sup>35</sup> Time could be experienced in different ways, depending on circumstances or literary depiction. For instance, the chronotope of the ghetto could express the unrelenting bleakness of unendurable hunger, as in Goldin’s autobiographical story of slow starvation. Or it could also open up possibilities for imagining alternate futures, as in Safier’s *28 Days*. This temporal diversity

32 Barbara Engelking and Jacek Leociak, *The Warsaw Ghetto: A Guide to the Perished City*, trans. Emma Harris (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), ix.

33 Sue Vice, *Children Writing the Holocaust* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, U.K.: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 143.

34 Liisa Steinby, “Bakhtin’s Concept of the Chronotope: The Viewpoint of an Acting Subject,” in *Bakhtin and His Others: (Inter)subjectivity, Chronotope, Dialogism*, ed. Liisa Steinby and Tintti Klapuri (London: Anthem, 2013), 105–126, 107.

35 Vice, “Trauma,” 110–113.

reflects what Gary Saul Morson and Caryl Emerson claim is Bakhtin's "crucial point," namely that "time and space vary in qualities; different social activities and representations of those activities presume different kinds of time and space."<sup>36</sup> The history and depiction of reading in the Warsaw Ghetto engender precisely this shift.

Safier and Szczygielski's depictions of the "timescape"<sup>37</sup> of the ghetto as a chronotope of traumatic memory provide for temporal multiplicity by taking into account the role of reading in structuring time in this abnormal environment. The chronotope of the Warsaw Ghetto encompasses the historic role of literature in that place, including the desperate conditions under which people trapped in the anteroom of death voraciously read books to hold on to life. This broadens the significance of the ghetto as literary chronotope and makes it pertinent not only to the past but to the present. "*28 Days* is not just about the past. It's about all of us," Safier writes in the afterword to his novel.<sup>38</sup> He strategically invests his characters with an idiomatic, vernacular mode of modern speech as a means of connecting contemporary youth with the history of the ghetto. He says that he asked himself, "How can I bring this history back to life for today's generation? That is why I chose a direct and modern voice for this novel."<sup>39</sup> The multiplicity of timeframes indicated by the chronotope of the ghetto projects the relevance of Holocaust memory in various directions.<sup>40</sup> Although the Warsaw Ghetto was situated in fixed coordinates of past time and destroyed space, its literary depictions expand its frame of reference to include points of contact between the present and the past. The ghetto may exist only in language, but it is in language that victims from the past and readers from the present encounter each other in a literary space beyond the bounds of the ghetto's temporal constriction. The chronotope of the ghetto and the chronicle of its literary history complement each other in accentuating this dynamic quality of reading time in juvenile narrative accounts of the

36 Gary Saul Morson and Caryl Emerson, *Mikhail Bakhtin: Creation of a Prosaics* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), 367.

37 Falconer, *Hell*, 42.

38 Safier, *28 Days*, 331.

39 Quoted in Micha Brumlik, "Postmemory und transgeneracionales Trauma," in *Die Shoah in Bildung und Erziehung heute*, ed. Marina Chernivsky and Friederike Lorenz-Sinai (Berlin: Barbara Budrich, 2022), 15–30; 22.

40 On the coexistence of contradictory timeframes in children's literature of the Warsaw Ghetto, see Krzysztof Rybak, "Hide and Seek with Nazis: Playing with Child Identity in Polish Children's Literature about the Shoah," *Libri & Liberi* 6 (1) (2017): 11–24.

ghetto. This is literature that creates time both as traumatic memory and as transcendent time. Reading about the Holocaust serves to transport contemporary children to the historic past, and reading during the Holocaust helped imprisoned children to imagine a redemptive future. In both cases, literature functions as a kind of time machine, a narrative means of overcoming temporal limits and bending time to one's needs.

### A Well-read Time Machine

As criticism on science fiction proliferates and gains increasing purchase in academic discourse, scholars such as David Wittenberg have begun to argue for the validity of conceiving of literature as a sort of time machine. Wittenberg writes:

Since even the most elementary narratives, whether fictional or nonfictional, set out to modify or manipulate the order, duration, and significance of events in time – that is, since all narratives do something like “travel” through time or construct “alternate” worlds – one could arguably call narrative itself a “time machine,” which is to say, a mechanism for revising the arrangements of stories and histories. In this more expansive view, literature itself might be viewed as a subtype of time travel, rather than the other way around, and time traveling might be considered a fundamental condition of storytelling itself, even its very essence.<sup>41</sup>

That literary narrative affords a means of elastically traversing time is itself a proposition that stems from a work of literature, H. G. Wells's *The Time Machine* of 1895. It comes as no surprise, then, that Wells's landmark novel is one of only two texts named in both *Ark of Time* and *28 Days*.<sup>42</sup> In *28 Days*, Mira fantasizes, “If I'd had a time machine like the hero in the book by H.G. Wells, then I'd have gone back in time.”<sup>43</sup> In *Ark of Time*, Rafał reads Wells's novel alongside other classics of science fiction, such as Jules Verne's *Journey to the Centre of the Earth*. When a rescuer smuggles Rafał out of the ghetto, the boy describes his escape as a journey to a different epoch akin to that of the protagonist in Wells's novel:

41 David Wittenberg, *Time Travel: The Popular Philosophy of Narrative* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012), 1.

42 The other is Janusz Korczak's *Król Maciuś Pierwszy*.

43 Safier, *28 Days*, 202.

I imagined I was a Traveller in the Land of Time. I just arrived by a time machine in a mysterious, extraordinary future. Nobody must identify me as someone who came from here and now, so I had to pretend to be one of the natives.<sup>44</sup>

Like the world outside the ghetto, time is a domain with its own natives and newcomers. Wójcik-Dudek writes that Rafał adapts by composing his own narrative: "For the occasion of his escape from the ghetto, the boy invents his own 'fable'."<sup>45</sup> But this is imprecise. Rafał does not craft his own story but applies one he already knows. He sees his life as the embodiment of a book he has read. Once outside the ghetto, Rafał continues to perceive his situation in literary terms. He believes he is performing the role of a character in "a story for the Morlocks," the underclass in *Time Machine*.<sup>46</sup> Eventually, Rafał's favorite books merge: the spatial emphasis of *Journey to the Centre of the Earth* fuses with the temporal thrust of *Time Machine* in the climactic scene in which Rafał evades discovery by the Nazis by burrowing underground beneath the Warsaw Zoo where he discovers a time machine that dispatches him to the future. Wójcik-Dudek writes that this temporal *deus ex machina* not only brings a Victorian literary classic into the Warsaw Ghetto, but also delivers memory of the Holocaust into the present, where generations meet:

Rafał is still a young boy who jumps into the present by means of a magical time machine. This temporal arrangement may be more than just a simple device which is popularly used in fantasy literature to connect two parallel worlds through a tunnel of sorts [...]. Another, equally important condition is met by telling the story which enables the "visitors from the past" – the survivors – to recall the world which is no more but which, as time boundaries are obliterated, constructs an entirely different space – a space of dialogue between generations.<sup>47</sup>

Story enables Rafał's "conquering of time."<sup>48</sup> Insofar as Rafał can claim victory over time, however, his triumph comes through the time machine technology of books.

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44 Szczygielski, *Arka*, 95–96.

45 Wójcik-Dudek, *Reading*, 189.

46 Szczygielski, *Arka*, 87.

47 Wójcik-Dudek, *Reading*, 193.

48 *Ibid.*, 192.



Other works of children's literature about the Holocaust make comparable use of a time travel motif. For instance, Jane Yolen's *The Devil's Arithmetic*<sup>49</sup> places a contemporary Jewish-American girl into the crucible of the Holocaust through a magical time travel portal. But in Yolen's novel, the narrative present precedes the historical past, and the adolescent time-traveling character moves backward in time, in defiance of the future-oriented trajectory in Wells's text. Susan Stewart reads Yolen's novel through a time-shift narrative paradigm that calls attention to "how time and plot, both of which are connected, are constructed."<sup>50</sup> Nevertheless, Yolen's lack of a time machine or reference to such a device's literary provenance is significant. For a Wells-like time machine is not merely the instrument by which the well-read Rafal arrives in the present, but a metaphor for children's literature about the Holocaust in general. By foregrounding the role of reading time in narrating this history, works such as Safier's and Szczygielski's epitomize how literature both imagines the possibility of time travel and functions as a time machine in its own right.

If *The Time Machine* offers a fictional paradigm for using text to mix time, Holocaust fiction suggests the potential for using text to make time by opening a narrative window into the temporal worlds that can be fathomed only in literature. Safier and Szczygielski's youth novels of the Warsaw Ghetto in part ensue from the *The Time Machine* but introduce texts as time machine: a mechanism for generating narrative time as a chronotope of trauma confronted, recollected, and, sometimes, survived. "Stories are like that. They work differently for different people,"<sup>51</sup> says a character in *28 Days*. The same can be said of Holocaust narratives: they work differently for different people. Depending on the circumstances of when, why, and what one reads, literature can emerge as an essential component not only in representing the past, but in creating a new relationship between space and story, time and text.

### Reading Time in the Ghetto

Mira of *28 Days* says that she found a rare instance of serenity in the Warsaw Ghetto when she succeeded in "losing myself in the boxes and suitcases of

49 Jane Yolen, *The Devil's Arithmetic* (New York: Viking, 1988).

50 Susan Stewart, "Shifting Worlds: Constructing the Subject, Narrative, and History in Historical Time Shifts," in *Telling Children's Stories: Narrative Theory and Children's Literature*, ed. Michael Cadden (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2010), 231–250; 232.

51 Safier, *28 Days*, 320.

books.”<sup>52</sup> She later says that her sister “Hannah was lost in her story.”<sup>53</sup> What does it mean for a child to be lost in books or in reading? Furthermore, how might that sense of textual abandon contrast with the phenomenon of finding a child in a book, especially of recovering one of the countless forgotten child victims of the Holocaust who have been lost in time? A poignant anecdote in Rokhl Oyerbakh’s memoir of the Warsaw Ghetto sheds some light on such irreconcilable questions.

At the end of a chapter profiling several Warsaw Ghetto librarians, Oyerbakh describes the activities of the ghetto libraries, including the children’s library run by Basia Temkin-Berman, during the horrific period of the *Große Aktion* (Great Deportation) of summer 1942, when the ghetto was decimated in one of the worst massacres of the Holocaust. Nearly 300,000 Jews from the ghetto were sent to their deaths in less than two months. Books played an important role even during this apocalyptic time. Temkin-Berman continued loaning books to children whom she knew could not possibly return them. Oyerbakh writes:

Books from the children’s library played a crucial role even in the period of the deportations. In the first days of the *Aktion*, Basia told me after the war, there were children who did not surrender what was theirs. They would come to Leszno 67 to exchange books during borrowing hours, and even at that time – for the final time – the books served their readers [...]. The books borrowed on that day were never returned. Some of them were packed in the small bundles that each child was permitted for the trip “east”! Some of them ended – together with prayer books placed in rucksacks – strewn on the ground at Treblinka.

Even now I can still see before my eyes a boy during one of the roundups on Leszno. His father had been imprisoned for weeks. His mother, who had resolved of her own “volition” to give herself and her children up for deportation at the Umschlagplatz in order to find her relatives in Brisk, is busy collecting food for the road from us neighbors in the courtyard of Leszno 66. From every side sounds the strange cacophony of the roundup. But throughout it all, the twelve-year-old boy stands in a corner of the courtyard, completely immersed in the newly revealed worlds he has entered, not hearing and not seeing what is occurring before him. With all his senses, he reads a tattered little book with a red binding...<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 61.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 142.

<sup>54</sup> Oyerbakh, *Varshover*, 270–71.

Where is this boy whom Oyerbakh observes intently reading during the chaotic madness of a roundup? He is lost in a book, perhaps even lost in time. But Oyerbakh intimates that perhaps it would be more accurate to say that the boy entered a new world and another time. Not hearing and not seeing what was occurring at that moment in the ghetto, this historic and murdered child reader imaginatively traveled with his literary instincts to another, presumably less barbaric world. Even during his terrifying last hours in the ghetto, the boy delves into reading not to waste some of the last precious moments he had left on earth, but to gain access to another temporal realm, one that Oyerbakh glimpses in her vignette. Time for reading is time outside history. The book, perhaps borrowed from the library across Leszno Street, rather than the roundup engrosses all the child's senses, temporal and spatial. In this respect, he is like all devoted child readers. It is by losing themselves in reading that children find themselves. This is as true of child readers today as it was of child victims of the Holocaust who were lost to the abominations of that violent time. At all times, however, the child reader lives on – bound not in history, but in the pages of book.

## Abstract

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*Reading Time in Youth Novels about the Warsaw Ghetto*

Children's literature about the Holocaust stages a descent into traumatic history that transforms time into text. This article reads two youth novels about the Warsaw Ghetto to illustrate how the Holocaust functions as a chronotope of difficult memory in contemporary children's books. *Arka czasu* [The ark of time], a 2013 children's novel in Polish by Marcin Szczypiński, and *28 Tage lang* [28 days], a 2014 young adult novel in German by David Safier, depict storytelling and books as markers of temporality in juvenile narratives of the Holocaust. The article argues that reading time is a persistent topos in making the Holocaust relevant to young readers.

## Keywords

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Holocaust, children's literature, Warsaw Ghetto, libraries, narrative, chronotope

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Irena Barbara Kalla

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## The Unity of Subject and Object: Toys of the Holocaust Survivors as Memory Transmitters in Children's Literature

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TEKSTY DRUGIE 2024, NR 1, S. 306–324

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DOI: 10.18318/td.2024.en.1.17 | ORCID: 0000-0002-6032-9321

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In the non-anthropocentric humanities, objects are considered to “co-fashion human identities.”<sup>1</sup> This view is of particular relevance and produces special meanings in the study of things connected to the Holocaust as these things not only talk but also give testimony and transmit memory, because they boast life stories of their own which are interwoven with the dramatic life stories of people. Things accompanied people in hiding, on their way to ghettos, in transports to concentration camps and, sometimes, in their last moments, when facing death.<sup>2</sup> Stolen, changing hands and finally preserved at museums, things are not simply discrete objects that represent their respective owners but, especially when amassed in heaps of, for example, suitcases or shoes, they also metonymically represent the Holocaust as organized,

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1 Ewa Domańska, “Humanistyka nie-antropocentryczna a studia nad rzeczami,” *Kultura Współczesna* 3 (2008): 14.

2 George Eisen, *Children and Play in the Holocaust: Games Among the Shadows* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1990), 48; 67.

industrial-scale genocide. Objects associated with childhood, in particular toys, take a unique place among such things, because they commemorate one and a half million Jewish children who were killed in the Holocaust and the traumatic and lost childhood of the handful who survived. In the context of memory studies, Marianne Hirsch depicts “testimonial objects”<sup>3</sup> as vehicles for the memory of the Holocaust, and Bożena Shallcross highlights the intimate interrelatedness of people and things:

Many Holocaust narratives reveal an intensified state of subject-object unity that defies a Cartesian understanding of the divide between subject and object. Related to each other in a distinctly unifying manner, these fleeting moments inform the sense of episodic object-subject proximity as triggered by the threat of death or dispossession.<sup>4</sup>

In this article, I examine this characteristic amalgamation of subject and object in children's books in which the child protagonist is accompanied by a toy. Thereby, my aim is to explore these relationships, the representation of the agency of people and toys and the epistemic and commemorative value of these narratives.

Play and the Holocaust are radically discordant and clashing concepts, as elucidated by George Eisen: “children's play and the Holocaust confront the untrained observer with a perplexing contradiction. [...] Mass murder signifies the ultimate evil while play, at least in popular imagination, speaks of a measure of innocence and happiness.”<sup>5</sup> In his study of children's play during the Holocaust, Eisen relates what often come across as shocking instances of play, such as children tickling dead bodies when messing around in the ghetto.<sup>6</sup> Eisen pictures various kinds of play invented by children in ghettos, camps, hiding places and the like settings, where traditionally conceived toys were few and far between. This deprivation prompted children to use a range of objects as toys. When discussing play in Uri Orlev's work, Krzysztof Rybak dubs such toys “things to play with” and describes them as “phantom-like objects whose semantic field does not overlap with the denotation of the word

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3 Marianne Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 177–199.

4 Bożena Shallcross, *The Holocaust Object in Polish and Polish-Jewish Culture* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011), 11.

5 Eisen, *Children and Play in the Holocaust*, 5.

6 *Ibid.*, 79.

'toy'.<sup>7</sup> Pauline Dewan foregrounds the essential role of play as children's primary language for externalizing emotions and the subconscious,<sup>8</sup> and Daniel Feldman investigates wartime play to conclude that play "communicates latent childhood feelings of anxiety, defiance, or complex engagement with difficult circumstances forged by war."<sup>9</sup> In discussing the emotional and psychological relationship of the child and the toy during the Holocaust, Eisen explicates:

The tense moments in the ghettos, camps, and hiding were the true test of how much the uprooted children needed their toys for emotional security. As a direct result of the painful loss of family members and friends, human beings who were disappearing rapidly from their lives, children's psychic lives turned more inward or toward their favored toys. A psychological transference process took place when the children could provide and perceive they were receiving love from an inanimate object instead of a loved one. They could share their fear, sorrow, anguish, love, a whole range of human emotions, for the worn-out dolls and broken toys were good listeners.<sup>10</sup>

Given this, toys, which tended to be the only objects that reminded children of family and home, were emotionally becoming children's whole world. The fundamental function that toys performed in the lives of these children, forced, as they were, to leave their homes, part with their loved ones, go into hiding, flee and try to survive in ghettos and concentration camps, has also been highlighted in exhibitions, such as Yad Vashem's *No Child's Play: Children in the Holocaust: Creativity and Play* (which proved so popular that it was on from 1996 to 2015) and the *Stars Without a Heaven: Children in the Holocaust* Ready2print exhibition.<sup>11</sup> All these toys have their own history, which is

7 Krzysztof Rybak, "Rzeczy do zabawy. Zabawki w cieniu Zagłady w twórczości Uriego Orlewa," in *O czym mówią rzeczy? Świat przedmiotów w literaturze dziecięcej i młodzieżowej*, ed. Marta Niewieczera and Anna Mik (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo SBP), 99.

8 Pauline Dewan, "More Than Child's Play: The Scaffolding Role of Toys, Games, and Play in Children's Literature," *New Review of Children's Literature and Librarianship* 25 (2019): 5, accessed May 31, 2023, doi: 10.1080/13614541.2020.1774266.

9 Daniel Feldman, "Children's Play in the Shadow of War," *American Journal of Play* 11 (2019): 303, accessed May 31, 2023, <https://www.museumofplay.org/app/uploads/2022/01/11-3-Article-1.pdf>.

10 Eisen, *Children and Play in the Holocaust*, 74.

11 "Stars Without a Heaven: Children in the Holocaust," Ready2print exhibition of Yad Vashem. The World Holocaust Remembrance Center, accessed May 22, 2023, <https://www.yadvashem.org/ready2print/children-in-the-holocaust.html>.

interlaced with the history of human beings, and some narratives of this kind have inspired children's books.

In this article, I discuss three of such picture books about the Holocaust produced by Israeli, Flemish and Polish authors. My sample includes *Bear and Fred*<sup>12</sup> (2016) by Iris Argaman and Avi Ofer, *Een pop voor Hannah*<sup>13</sup> [A doll for Hannah] (2018) by Peggy Poppe and Ann de Bode, and *Mama zawsze wraca*<sup>14</sup> [Mum always comes back] (2020) by Agata Tuszyńska and Iwona Chmielewska. These books are very special not only because they are based on true events, but also because their young protagonists represent Holocaust survivors, and the toys featured in them represent their authentic playthings from that time, which today are put on display at the museums of Yad Vashem in Israel and Kazerne Dossin in Belgium. The discourse of children's literature and the discourse of the Holocaust's material culture intersect at this point and invite an examination of this interwovenness, as encouraged for example by Robin Bernstein: "Either to split or to lump children's literature and material culture, however, is to erase representational play as many children's lived connection between them."<sup>15</sup> In my argument, I will identify interconnections between the biographies of the protagonists and the biographies of play-things, whereby I will also establish how toys and their people are represented in the three picture books in order to determine what each of these books for a contemporary young readership tells them about the Holocaust. My theoretical framework draws on memory studies<sup>16</sup> and thing theory, in particular its second phase, in which the being of objects is valued equally to the being of subjects, and researchers argue for the agency of non-human materials, insisting that not only humans, but also objects, interact.<sup>17</sup>

12 Iris Argaman, Avi Ofer, *Bear and Fred. A World War II Story*, trans. Annette Appel (New York: Amazon Crossing Kids, 2020).

13 Peggy Poppe and Ann de Bode, *Een pop voor Hannah* (Wielsbeke: De Eenhoorn, 2018).

14 Agata Tuszyńska and Iwona Chmielewska, *Mama zawsze wraca* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Dwie Siostry, 2020).

15 Robin Bernstein, "Children's Books, Dolls, and the Performance of Race; or, The Possibility of Children's Literature," *PMLA* 126 (2011): 162 (emphasis original).

16 Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory*; Marianne Hirsch, "Surviving Images: Holocaust Photographs and the Work of Postmemory," *The Yale Journal of Criticism* 14 (2001): 5–37.

17 Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010); Bill Brown, "Thing Theory," *Critical Inquiry* 28 (2001); "A Questionnaire on Materialisms," ed. David Joselit et al., *October* 155 (2016): 3–110, accessed May 17, 2023, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43830081>.

### The Biographies of Toys and Humans

As artefacts to be seen at museums and as protagonists of picture books, the survivors' toys can be examined through a biographical lens, where "things possess a material identity and sometimes have multiple identities that change over time and across contexts; they live their own lives, which begin at point a and terminate at point b; something happens to them in this lifetime."<sup>18</sup> The very title of Tomi Ungerer's *Otto: The Biography of a Teddy Bear* (1999)<sup>19</sup>, a classic of children's literature on the Holocaust, provokes such a biographical approach, revealing that "it was the author's intention to construct a historical-cultural life history of things."<sup>20</sup> Katarzyna Slany, who has scrutinized *Otto* from the biographical perspective, concludes that Ungerer "overcomes the culturally sanctioned conceptualization of things as objects by having *Otto*'s life history develop in parallel to people's life histories."<sup>21</sup> I believe, however, that framing the fates of objects and people as concomitant is less about parallelisms and more about intertwining and reciprocities. The interactions that bear special relevance are those where a shift of perspective to a less anthropocentrically biased one can foster the perception of a thing as the Other that is, as Domańska insists,<sup>22</sup> an equal, albeit perhaps less strong and less active participant both in the dialogue of cultures and in the reality construction process. The emphasis on the "process" ties in with Bruno Latour's Actor-Network Theory (ANT), which foregrounds the importance of relations among actors.<sup>23</sup> Bringing together ANT and literary research, Rita Felski argues that the uniqueness of a work stems from its links to the social context.<sup>24</sup> Of course, links to the social context need not necessarily concern concrete facts that have actually taken place or real people who have lived but, presumably, the existence in the real world of actors – in this case, the Holocaust survivors and their toys – will buttress the protagonists in literary texts and substantially enhance the uniqueness of the books I discuss. This may also be a meaningful factor in the reception of these books by today's readers, adults and children alike, who currently appear to value the correspondence of

18 Domańska, "Humanistyka nie-antropocentryczna," 14.

19 Tomi Ungerer, *The Biography of a Teddy Bear* (Zurich: Diogenes Verlag, 1999).

20 Katarzyna Slany, "Zabawka jako medium pamięci o Holocauście na przykładzie picture booka *Otto*. Autobiografia pluszowego misia Tomiego Ungerera," *Ruch literacki* 49 (2018): 453.

21 Slany, "Zabawka jako medium pamięci," 455.

22 Domańska, "Humanistyka nie-antropocentryczna," 14.

23 Krzysztof Abriszewski, "Teoria Aktora-Sieci Bruno Latoura," *Teksty Drugie* 1–2 (2007): 121.

24 Rita Felski, "Latour and Literary Studies," *PMLA* 103 (2015): 740.



narrated events to facts as the most important criterion in the selection and appreciation of literary works.<sup>25</sup>

Therefore, let us have a look at the biographies of people and toys in the three picture books. Alfred Lessing, on whom the eponymous Fred in *Bear and Fred* is modelled, was born in the Hague (the Netherlands) to an assimilated Jewish family who moved to Delft soon afterwards. When the persecution of the Jews escalated in the Netherlands in 1942, the exacerbated purges prompted the family to split and hide separately. Going to his first hiding place, Fred was only able to take a rucksack and his beloved teddy bear, which from then on accompanied the boy throughout his wartime journey. Fred went through at least six hideouts, fell ill and was treated in a hospital for a few weeks. All the logistics was orchestrated by his mother. When she was arrested, the father and sons spent one more year in hiding together until the war was over. Fred's mother survived Auschwitz, Mauthausen, Sobibór and Bergen-Belsen, and joined her family in the Netherlands after a long treatment in Algeria. In 1947, the family emigrated to the US, where Fred started a new life, obtained a PhD in philosophy and became a marital therapist.<sup>26</sup> After the war, his teddy bear was also always with him as a witness of his lost childhood:

I kept my little bear until I went to college, then my mother kept it on the bookshelf and when I came back from college she gave it back to me. When you talk about the Holocaust, you should have a bear. When I talk about this, it's so hard because you grow up and you become an adult and you learn so much more and I want my bear with me to remind me that I was just a little kid. [...] My little bear was really the only thing I had. [...] I would talk to him and I would hold him very close and I would suck my thumb and rub his paw against my nose, it was all shiny after the war, and there isn't much fuzz left on him, but he stood for my mother, my family, it was very very precious during those years.<sup>27</sup>

In Lessing's view, the teddy bear is thus a thing whose history has grown into his life to the point of becoming, as it were, its part, while at the same time remaining a thing that has its own biography. This is conveyed through the manner in which Lessing addresses his teddy bear: "I didn't want to part from

25 Justyna Tabaszewska, "Na granicy faktu. Kategoria faction w badaniach nad współczesnymi biografiami," *Teksty Drugie* 1 (2019): 61–62.

26 Zekelman Holocaust Center, Lessing, Alfred (Fred). Oral History Department of Library Archive, accessed May 22, 2023, <https://www.holocaustcenter.org/visit/library-archive/oral-history-department/lessing-alfred-fred/>.

27 Lessing in Zekelman Holocaust Center.

him, but Bear and I decided he should go. When he reached Israel, a new chapter began in his life."<sup>28</sup> Fred Lessing's personality and the personality that he created for the toy have interpenetrated so thoroughly that the difference between the identities of the boy and the teddy bear has undergone a linguistic erasure. Concomitantly with perceiving the toy as a thing that has a subjectivity and a life of its own ("he's had a life beyond me"), Fred felt a very strong connection to the teddy bear: "He's always felt like a piece of me."<sup>29</sup>

In *Bear and Fred*, the boy and Bear are inseparable as well, and the narrative revolves around a series of salient episodes in the life of Fred Lessing and his teddy bear, such as an encounter with a dog that damaged the head of the toy, the leaving of home when the boy rushed back at the last moment to collect his favorite toy, his mother's endeavors to find new hiding places for Fred, a textually and visually rendered episode of Bear wiping the boy's tears off with his paw and a moment in the epilogue when Fred asks Bear whether he wants to go to the museum at Yad Vashem. Symptomatically, the narrative is conducted from the viewpoint of the toy, and Bear calls Fred's mother "Mama," which additionally underscores the relationship of the child and the toy. The illustrations are mainly arranged in grey and yellow hues: yellow marks the star of David sewn onto the clothes of other Jewish children, and the teddy-bear is, tellingly, yellow as well. This chromatic correspondence creates a link to Fred's Jewish identity, which is not externalized in the star of David on his attire since his mother believes that it is safer to conceal it. This notion sparks her quarrel with Fred's grandpa, their disagreement imaged in a double spread that pictures them sitting with their backs turned against each other: as Grandpa is sewing a yellow star of David to Fred's coat, Mama uses the other end of the same tangled thread to fasten a head onto the yellow teddy bear, and the fact that the head is made of a pocket of this very coat establishes an unmistakable visual connection between the child and the toy. The thread is thus another element in the book that brings out the interwovenness of the identities and lives of the toy and the human being with whom it interacts. The last page of the book contains Bear's letter to young readers, in which the narrator explicitly articulates the merger of Bear's and Fred's biographies into one narrative:

We grew up, but even when we are apart, we talk often, mostly about our feelings.  
We have a very strong and special connection. One knows exactly what the other

28 Lessing in Dafna Arad, "The Holocaust Told From the Perspective of a Teddy Bear," *The International March of the Living*, September 18, 2016, accessed May 7, 2023 <https://www.motl.org/the-holocaust-told-from-the-perspective-of-a-teddy-bear/> (emphasis mine).

29 Lessing in Zekelman Holocaust Center.

thinks and feels, as if we were one person. You know what? Maybe we are one person. Maybe we always were.<sup>30</sup>

*Een pop voor Hannah* [A doll for Hannah] is based on the life story of Charlotte Hamburger, the grandmother of Peggy Poppe, who penned the book. Arrested in April 1942, Hamburger made a rag doll for her four-year-old daughter Albertine (Tiny) when at prison, briefly before being transported to Kazerne Dossin in Mechelen and thence to the concentration camp in Auschwitz, where she was killed.<sup>31</sup> The doll she had made was smuggled out of the prison and found its way into Tiny's hands. Peggy Poppe, her daughter and the author of the book, also played with the doll as a child.<sup>32</sup> In this way, the fates of the doll tie in with the fates of three women, with Tiny's mother being at the same time the symbolic 'mother' of the doll. At the moment, the doll is on display at the museum of Kazerne Dossin in Mechelen.

In the book, the mother character is called Esther. She secretly makes a doll called Charlotte for her daughter, who is named Hannah in the text. The doll's name explicitly points to Charlotte Hamburger, who was separated from her daughter upon being imprisoned in 1942. The doll sports woolen plaits which are braided in exactly the same way as the plaits that Esther herself and her daughter are shown to be wearing in the illustrations. For Esther, hugging the doll and talking to it provides a surrogate of intimacy with her own child. While remaining a thing, the doll obtains the status of a subject as well. Like in other children's stories in which dolls appear, the doll in this picture book is cast in the role of a daughter, yet the difference is that she is not a "daughter" to the young protagonist, which is usually the case,<sup>33</sup> but to the adult mother. The effort of making the doll and the desire to pass it over to her daughter, despite the lethal risk this involves, are not only a therapy to the mother but also an attempt to create future prospects for the child, because, as observed by Jocelyn Van Tuyl, "having toys is related to having a future."<sup>34</sup>

30 Argaman, Avi Ofer, *Bear and Fred*, 39.

31 Kazerne Dossin Memorial Biografieën, Charlotte Hamburger, accessed May 7, 2023, <https://kazernedossin.memorial/biografie/charlotte-hamburger/>.

32 Peggy Poppe and Ann de Bode, *Een pop voor Hannah* (Wielsbeke: De Eenhoorn, 2018): 2.

33 Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (New York: Hill and Wang, 1972), 53; Jocelyn Van Tuyl, "Dolls in Holocaust Children's Literature: From Identification to Manipulation," *Children's Literature Association Quarterly* 40 (2015): 35; Margaret R. Higonnet, "War Toys: Breaking and Remaking in Great War Narratives," *The Lion and the Unicorn*, 31 (2007): 124.

34 Van Tuyl, "Dolls in Holocaust Children's Literature," 27.

When the doll is ready, Esther, so to speak, entrusts her testament to the toy by showering it with advice and reflection, which she cannot communicate directly to her daughter:

She tells the doll everything that she believes is important and would like Hannah to know. She tells her how to comb her hair, how to retain courage, how not to let anyone take her pride away, how to take care of herself and be a good student; she tells her about going on walks together and jumping into puddles after rain, about pancake parties, kissing, hugging and so many other things.<sup>35</sup>

Charlotte takes this legacy with her when, buried in a laundry basket, she is carried away by the prisoners' relatives. The doll represents Esther on one more occasion in the tale when, after a danger-strewn journey, she is found in a dustbin by the grandma, who recognises the fabric of Esther's petticoat in the doll's dress: "She sits down in a chair and starts weeping. She strokes Charlotte lovingly and fondles her torn dress and her broken arm."<sup>36</sup> The damage the doll sustained underway is also symbolic, because the dog that grabbed and mauled Charlotte was a German Shepherd, while "there are such dogs in the prison as well."<sup>37</sup> This suggests that the grandmother's tears are triggered both by the emotion aroused by Esther's act of courage and by the fear about what is ahead of her. Like in multiple narratives about the Holocaust,<sup>38</sup> the tarnished doll represents the loss of bodily autonomy and agency to which the victims were vulnerable. Young readers may fail to recognize this correlation because, as noted by Jordan,<sup>39</sup> they may not have sufficient historical or psychological knowledge. Notably, the literary doll specifies some details of what befell the toy and Charlotte Hamburger, filling in certain blind spots in her story.

Another doll in my paper, Zuzia [Susie] belongs to Zosia<sup>40</sup> Zajczyk, a girl hidden by her mother in a basement in the Warsaw ghetto who took the name

35 Poppe and De Bode, *Een pop voor Hannah*, 12.

36 *Ibid.*, 33.

37 *Ibid.*, 27.

38 Van Tuyl, "Dolls in Holocaust Children's Literature," 33.

39 Sarah D. Jordan, "Educating Without Overwhelming: Authorial Strategies in Children's Holocaust Literature," *Children's Literature in Education* 35 (2004): 205.

40 Zosia is an endearment of Zofia, a girl's given name corresponding to English Sophie. In the passage below, the names alternate depending on whether a young girl or an adult woman is meant. (Translator's note).

of Yael Rosner after the war.<sup>41</sup> Zuzia's biography is intertwined with the lives of the two women. Zosia and her mother survived the Holocaust and left Poland for Israel in 1950, where the mother died soon afterwards. The doll accompanied young Zosia on this journey and then adult Zofia throughout her life until the toy was given to Yad Vashem as an exhibit for the *No Child's Play* show. When in hiding, the doll functioned as a "transitional object," to use Donald Winnicott's term,<sup>42</sup> as she helped Zosia cope with being parted from her mother and better understand the situation.<sup>43</sup> *Mama zawsze wraca* [Mum always comes back], a picture book by Tuszyńska and Chmielewska, also tells a story of motherly love, with the mother bringing her daughter a doll and other playthings in order to give her child a future. The plotline is based on Yael's oral testimony. Her mother, Natalia Zajczyk, was a teacher before the war and as the war broke out, she became involved in smuggling children out of the Warsaw ghetto.<sup>44</sup> She would bring various things to her three-year-old daughter, who knew no life other than in a ghetto basement, to tell her about the world and furnish her with something to play with in the long hours when her mother was away:

Mum wanted me to be cheerful and to be able to play. I had a doll's head there, and one day mum brought a piece of cloth, blue with a flower print on it, and said: 'Why don't we make arms and a dress for your Zuzia?' She had no legs, but I could put my hand inside and play in this way.<sup>45</sup>

The floral pattern of the doll's dress inspired Chmielewska's design of the illustrations for the book, in which it recurs as a leitmotif. An embroidered flower also hints at the skill that the girl was taught by her mother in the basement and which earned her livelihood as an adult, since Yael had an embroidery studio in Jerusalem. The flower motif derived from the doll's dress

41 "Doll Smuggled out of the Warsaw Ghetto: 'Mothers Do Not Leave their Daughters.'" Yad Vashem, Featured Artifacts, accessed May 14, 2023 <https://www.yadvashem.org/artifacts/featured/zuzia.html>.

42 Daniel W. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality* (London: Tavistock, 1971).

43 Irit Abramski, *Three Dolls* ([Jerusalem]: Yad Vashem. International School for Holocaust Studies, 2007), 30.

44 Renata Kim, "'Nikt cię nie znajdzie' – obiecała Zosi mama, gdy ukryła ją w piwnicy w getcie," *Newsweek Polska*, April 18, 2022, accessed May 14, 2023, <https://www.newsweek.pl/polska/spoleczenstwo/historia-z-warszawskiego-getta-juz-wiem-ze-mama-nie-wroci/88bg8ng>.

45 Tuszyńska and Chmielewska, *Mama zawsze wraca*, 9.

and mutating across Chmielewska's illustrations, with embroidery being one of its iterations, is one of the devices the book mobilizes to indicate how closely the biographies of Natalia, Zosia and Zuzia the doll are knit together. This interlacing is also foregrounded in illustrations, where Zosia is wearing a dress or a babushka with the same design as that on the doll's dress. The interwovenness of the lives of the three characters is additionally highlighted by the grouping of the three protagonists together in illustrations, with the doll looking like a child – one a bit younger and smaller than Zosia. The visual anthropomorphization is reinforced verbally, as the text tells the reader that Zuzia became a “daughter” to Zosia.

### The Agency of People and Things

Yael Rosner's oral testimony contains a passage in which the mother asked by her daughter why the doll has only a head answers: “She is just a doll; I can arrange for her to have everything.”<sup>46</sup> To the girl, being a mother meant being a person possessed of agency and capable of doing anything, a person who was up to anything to save her daughter and would never let her down. She became a mother to her doll, which the book phrases in a moving diction that echoes a child's naive perspective:

I was her mother. I felt great because I could be a mother rather than a child. I always thought that being a child wasn't such a great thing. It's cold, and there's nothing to wrap yourself in. And mum always knows where a blanket or a rag is, and where you can get a potato or a carrot. A carrot was something awesome. To be a mother is the best thing. Everybody out there is up to catch the child, to shoot the child, to take them away from their parents. I didn't want to be a child anymore; I just wanted to grow up. And to be adult. When I am mum, I'll have the right looks and all the trouble will be over.<sup>47</sup>

From the girl's point of view, a child is merely an object acted upon by adults and, like a doll, has no agency altogether. Being a mother to Zuzia the doll helped Zosia develop her own agency. At the same time, acting like a mother vis-à-vis Zuzia embodies “representational play”<sup>48</sup> in that it reveals the stress and distress experienced by Natalia who, in her desperate attempts to save her daughter, had to be as severe to her as Zosia was to Zuzia:

<sup>46</sup> Abramski, *Three Dolls*, 25.

<sup>47</sup> Tuszyńska and Chmielewska, *Mama zawsze wraca*, 9.

<sup>48</sup> Bernstein, “Children's Books, Dolls,” 162.

Then I would cry and say: "What a cry-baby you are; why are you crying, why are you weeping, you mustn't cry so hard, do you want the Germans to hear you? No one must know that there's a girl down here. Be quiet!" [...] That's what I always told her and how I comforted her.<sup>49</sup>

In Chmielewska's illustrations, the doll is endowed with agency as well: together with Zosia, she arranges letters into her name and when playing, she gesticulates, smiles and, as a three-faced doll, lulls Zosia to sleep in the folds of her dress. Van Tuyl explains that "in Holocaust literature, liminal, not-living dolls are juxtaposed with liminal, living children who are in constant danger of death."<sup>50</sup> In *Mama zawsze wraca* [Mum always comes back], this opposition is mitigated by investing some agency in the doll. Such a representation of play where a thing – a toy – has subjectivity and agency makes one think of stories in which toys come to life, and the power of the imagination is brought to bear by helping a child be a child under all circumstances, paradoxically including those when, in play, children become adult mothers to their dolls.

The agency of the doll in *Een pop voor Hannah* [A doll for Hannah] is veritably extraordinary. From the beginning of her journey in a laundry basket, the doll takes over the narrative, feels cold, pain, fear and fatigue and can recognize danger. She experiences reality with all the senses. She is not as strong an actor as humans are and must rely on their help in extreme situations, such as an encounter with a dog, but she eventually manages to find her way to Hannah. The girl sees her mother's semblance in the doll and at the same time becomes a mother to the toy, promising to look after it. The doll in its materiality represents thus the absent mother in the book. Van Tuyl states that "in survivor stories, dolls and toys may offer a way to grieve for the past and adapt to new life,"<sup>51</sup> an insight that is certainly borne out by Charlotte the doll, which helps Hannah handle the loss of her mother and find joy in play. Hannah herself is a secondary character in the book, as her role in the plot is rather limited and she possessed very little agency. She is more of an object acted upon by other – adult – protagonists, such as her mother, who endeavors to do something for her daughter, defying the dire circumstances, and the grandparents, who take care of the young girl. The child's passivity is aptly conveyed by an illustration in which Hannah is sitting motionless, having her hair braided.<sup>52</sup> It is only when playing with the doll that the girl

49 Tuszyńska and Chmielewska, *Mama zawsze wraca*, 26.

50 Van Tuyl, "Dolls in Holocaust Children's Literature," 27.

51 Ibid., 29.

52 Poppe and De Bode, *Een pop voor Hannah*, 7.

is able to acquire agency: "Hannah combs Charlotte's hair right. She braids it anew. 'Just like mum and me,' she says delighted."<sup>53</sup>

In *Bear and Fred*, the teddy bear functions as a "transitional object" that helps Fred find his footing when separated from his mother. This mirrors the function that the toy fulfilled in reality:

My daughter had a blanket she called Mynie, which served the same purpose my teddy bear did for me. An object from one's past is very important for children. This is the first object one chooses to connect with. My teddy bear couldn't talk but it had a truth and meaning that nothing else had.<sup>54</sup>

The close link between the identities of the teddy bear and Fred is vividly conveyed in the book. It is via this link that Fred, as a Jewish child in wartime, stripped of any real agency and in most cases being an object of adults' actions, gains agency through the toy. When Mama tells him that she has no other choice but to leave him, Bear reports: "At that moment, I understood – I had to take care of Fred!"<sup>55</sup> The toy not only conducts the narrative in the book, but also consoles Fred, making the world a bit less frightening:

Every night Fred would whisper that he misses his father, mother and brothers, that he's sad to be alone, that the world is scary and that he's lucky that I'm his best friend. Fred whispered those things, and while talking to me he stroked his face with my paw. Sometimes Fred shed small and warm tears and I wiped them away.<sup>56</sup>

By taking care of the teddy bear that takes care of Fred, Fred in fact takes care of himself. This dual role performed by Fred is captured in an image on the cover of the Hebrew edition of the book, which pictures three figures: Fred holding Bear and Bear embracing a miniature of Fred. This play with the teddy bear and one's own identity sheds a new light on the agency of Holocaust children: understanding but little of what was going around them, the children had to "grow up" quickly, just like Bear-the-narrator, and being still kids, they had to rely on help from toys in coping with loneliness, bereavement, precariously changing circumstances and various settings in which they

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 36.

<sup>54</sup> Lessing in Dafna Arad, "The Holocaust Told From the Perspective of a Teddy Bear," accessed May 7, 2023 <https://www.motl.org/the-holocaust-told-from-the-perspective-of-a-teddy-bear/>.

<sup>55</sup> Argaman and Ofer, *Bear and Fred*, 29.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 32.



found themselves while hiding. Toys gave them the “power of being needed.”<sup>57</sup> Their toys from those times became part of their identities and of that reality, and as the age of the witnesses is drawing to an end, toys spin narratives on their behalf.

### Toys and the Transmission of Memory

The possession of “luxury” objects, such as toys, at a time when so many Jewish children had lived and died in atrocious conditions was taboo among the survivors for a long time<sup>58</sup>. This attitude incrementally changed, and the quantity of the toys donated to Yad Vashem illumined their enormous relevance as objects inextricably bound with childhood, irrespective of the circumstances in which it unfolds: “In the cruel atmosphere of the Shoah, toys and games continued to exist even after other cultural behaviors and consumer objects had already disappeared.”<sup>59</sup> The toys gifted by the survivors to museums tell there the story of the youngest victims of the Holocaust to the following generations. As observed by Nitsa Dori, “learning about these objects and using them as a visual text, creates a connection to understanding the period – since these objects, the images appearing in them, and their traits, are part of the culture of the Jews of their times.”<sup>60</sup> Fred Lessing’s teddy bear has been called “The Mona Lisa of Yad Vashem” by Yehudit Inbar, an organizer of the *No Child’s Play* exhibition.<sup>61</sup> The teddy bear is small and dirty, has frayed fur and a patched head, and its eyes are sewn on with a red thread, but it is being exactly the way it is that it symbolizes the toys of all the children of the Holocaust, simultaneously commemorating their lost childhood and their young lost lives:

57 Nitsa Dori, “Children’s Toys and Games during the Shoah, as Reflected in Five Hebrew Books,” *Journal of Education and Training Studies* 8 (2020): 23.

58 Dori, “Children’s Toys and Games during the Shoah,” 20; Dafna Arad, “Toys That Tell the Story of the Holocaust’s Youngest Victims,” *Haaretz*, October 2, 2014, accessed May 7, 2023, <https://www.haaretz.com/jewish/2014-10-02/ty-article/premium/toys-tell-story-of-shoahs-kid-victims/0000017f-e4d0-d568-ad7f-f7fb8add0000>.

59 Ibid., 20.

60 Ibid., 19.

61 Yehudit Inbar, “The Mona Lisa of Yad Vashem: The Teddy Bear that Fred Lessing Took with Him to His Hiding Place in the Netherlands,” (n.d.) Yad Vashem – The World Holocaust Remembrance Center: Featured Artifacts, accessed May 5, 2023, <https://www.yadvashem.org/artifacts/featured/teddy-bear-fred-lessing.html>.

Fred's Bear expresses, in the deepest possible way, the essence of the world of children during the Shoah, who held onto a game or toy so they would not lose their memories. [...] Children's missing and lost objects during the Shoah symbolized everything that had been lost. Holding onto those objects and the meaning they carried for the uprooted children symbolized the memory connected with them. The objects themselves were the memory.<sup>62</sup>

The survivors' toys are thus vehicles for memory. However, today's young audiences may find the original, decades-old toys on display at museums not really attractive, and the emotional load they carry in reviving the memory of the Holocaust, in particular of its youngest victims, may be difficult for children to relate to. The picture books discussed in this paper represent an attempt to tell these stories anew in a form suited and appealing to a contemporary young readership. The very fact of composing them is in and of itself an act of memory transmission to the following generations. In the Prologue to *Bear and Fred*, Bear relates the moment of being received at Yad Vashem via a special shipment:

A kind woman gathers me up in her arms and hugs me. Teardrops trickle down her face. A large man stands off to the side and says, "I've been hauling that huge carton around in my truck for miles, and for what? Just a small and tattered teddy bear. First everyone was so excited, and now they're all crying. What on earth is going on here?"<sup>63</sup>

This episode can prepare young readers for a visit to the museum and seeing Fred Lessing's real toy there, an important role judging by the fact that if the delivery man is not impressed by the teddy bear as an object, his emotion is powerfully stirred by the responses of the people familiar with the biographies of Bear and the human being with whom he interacts. This cognitive function is also fulfilled by their story rendered in and through the picture book: shaped by text and image, the narrative introduces readers to the life stories of Fred and Bear, kindles emotions and crafts a link between the present and the past.

In *A Doll for Hannah*, Hannah sews with her grandmother's help a new dress for Charlotte and brushes and braids the doll's hair. Charlotte's old dress is "carefully put away" by the grandma.<sup>64</sup> On the symbolic level, playing with the

62 Dori, "Children's Toys and Games during the Shoah," 22.

63 Argaman and Ofer, *Bear and Fred*, 2.

64 Poppe and De Bode, *Een pop voor Hannah*, 36.

doll channels the transmission of history from generation to generation, with the preservation and storing of things – such as toys: a doll and its old dress made by the girl's mother in prison – being pivotal gestures. The old generation's care and commitment to safeguarding things are a salient guideline for memory transmission. The episode of making a new dress spotlights the need to "revive" memory, tend to it and give it a new form. On the one hand, the doll takes over the duties of Hannah's mother, and on the other, the girl herself assumes the responsibility of looking after the doll. In extratextual reality, Tiny kept her promise as she donated the doll to the museum and started the Fonds Albertine de Houwer [Albertine de Houwer Foundation],<sup>65</sup> in this way making sure that the memory of Charlotte Hamburger, her mother and a Holocaust victim, is perpetuated. On the level of materiality, the history of the doll on display at the Kazerne Dossin Museum is tightly knit with the histories of three women. It is in that real space that Charlotte Hamburger stayed, and it is to that space that she returns, not only as commemorated in a biography drawn up by the Museum, but also in the tale of *A Doll for Hannah*, which was presented at the Kazerne Dossin on 30 June 2018.<sup>66</sup> On the level of the text, the fates of the doll are also intertwined with the fates of three generations. Poppe's book makes one realize how the history of this object and the histories of Charlotte Hamburger, her daughter and her granddaughter interpenetrate. For their part, de Bode's illustrations, designed in sepia tints and bringing to mind old photographs, add authenticity to the plotline. Both the doll itself as a museum exhibit and the story of it are part of contemporary Holocaust narratives.

Some of the illustrations in *Mum Always Comes Back* are also stylized as old photographs or postcards, with elements of children's world of play incorporated into them. The line between the real and the imagined worlds is blurred, as rendered in the figures of the characters that, so to speak, partly come out of yellowed pages, in parallel to people who come out of Yael's tale years later. Other illustrations in the book offer an insight into the realities faced by the hiding girl, as they show a range of objects brought by her mother to the basement. The book is enringed by a white stripe with the embroidered pattern of a single flower from the dress of Zuzia the doll, which counterbalances the stigmatizing symbolism of the star of David on the armbands worn by the Jews. This device effectively provokes reconsidering the culturally entrenched Holocaust commemoration models and

65 Kazerne Dossin Memorial Biografieën, Charlotte Hamburger.

66 Kazerne Dossin Jaarverslag 2018, 2018 in *vogelvlucht*, accessed May 7, 2023, <http://annual-report.kazernedossin.memorial/archives/2018/index.html>.

embracing a new, more individualized and more tender approach. The new band protects Zosia's little big world enclosed in the book, encircling it with hope. Even if Tuszyńska's text unveils this world in a stylized account of an adult witness, the narrator has not lost yet the naive view of a sensitive child whose perception of the world beyond the basement entirely relied on her mother's stories and play with the objects she provided. This child-like viewpoint is also conveyed by some illustrations, notably by the double spread paired with the episode of hiding in the countryside, which shows a huge brown-and-gold dog with floppy ears and a friendly look in its eyes. A smiling, happy girl, wearing a headscarf with a flower print that mirrors Zuzia's dress, is leaning on the dog. The image conveys the duality intrinsic to the account offered by Zofia Zajczyk, who remembers what was good in the cruel reality she had inhabited as a child and fully realized what it had meant only as an adult. The text contains a multiplicity of historically realistic details: the imperative of hiding, forged gentile documents, the lack of food, etc. While these details have educational value in that they communicate the realities of the persecution of the Jews during the Second World War, they are often very drastic, as in the torture scene where the mother loses her eye and the cruelty of a villager who makes Zosia hide in a doghouse. Clearly, this is not an example of literature that uses "spare the child" strategies.<sup>67</sup> Quite the opposite, it employs confrontative solutions, which enhance the cognitive value of the narrative, especially when combined with the realization that Natalia, Zosia and her doll Zuzia had their counterparts in historical reality.

## Conclusion

The toys of Holocaust survivors are material objects that appear in children's literature in the second decade of the twenty-first century and deserve to be addressed against a broader backdrop of the end of the era of the witness. Faced with this horizon, the toys carry on the narrative on behalf of the survivors with whose lives their own biographies interlaced. The fact that the representations acquire a new significance with the impending end of the era of the witness has already been foregrounded by the researchers of Holocaust photography. Narratives framed from the perspective of things reveal the agency of the objects. If, as averred by Domańska, "the more we humanize the thing, the greater chance we stand of developing

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67 Hamida Bosmajian, *Sparing the Child: Grief and the Unspeakable in Youth Literature about Nazism and the Holocaust* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 22.

non-anthropocentric approaches in the future,"<sup>68</sup> the picture books discussed in this paper, in which the identities of toys are so thoroughly interlocked with the identities of humans, should be regarded as attempts to head in that direction. In the books by Israeli and Flemish authors, the agency of toys transpires in the fact that the narratives are spun by the toys, with the identities of the survivors and the toys brought together both on the verbal level of the text and in the illustrations. By taking care of the doll, Hannah takes care of the memory of her mother; Fred looks after Bear, and Bear looks after the boy. In the picture book by the Polish authors, the entwining of Zosia's and Zuzia's identities is most emphatically pictured in the book's images. The books that relate the biographies of authentic toys and the people associated with them are expressions of the care for the memory of the Holocaust. The toys and their representations in children's literature acquire agency in child-initiated play, and – in a reciprocal relation – the children (re)gain agency through their toys. This mode of presenting children's play which manifests an intergenerational investment in the perpetuation of memory invites us to revise our ideas of how the memory of the Holocaust can continue to be transmitted in contemporary culture, as the end of the era of the witness is looming. The books appear to call for renewing the manners and channels of memory transmission to adjust them to contemporary audiences. The representation of play in the three picture books shows that, even in wartime, children were children and needed to play. This aspect of childhood that coincided with the Second World War and the Holocaust is brought into relief by the toys with which children – both those who died in the war and the Holocaust survivors nearing the end of their lives today – played at the time. In literature, their toys are given a new appearance and a form that the following generation of children may find attractive and appealing. Comparing the book illustrations and the real toys makes it clear that the revamping of toys is indispensable in order to arouse interest in children whose knowledge of the Holocaust is insufficient to appreciate the emotional and commemorative value of the real toys without the aid of a fitting narrative furnished with illustrations. At the same time, the picture books effectively prepare young readers for an encounter with a more complex history of the Holocaust. The relevance of the three books discussed in this paper seems to stem chiefly from bringing together the Holocaust survivors' toys carefully preserved at museums and representational play in children's literature. This combination brings to the fore the ways in which contemporary culture can commemorate the

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68 Domańska, "Humanistyka nie-antropocentryczna," 15.

lost childhood of the children who survived the Holocaust and also those who perished then.

*Translated by Patrycja Poniatowska*

## Abstract

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*The Unity of Subject and Object: Toys of Holocaust Survivors as Memory Transmitters in Children's Literature*

In this article, I discuss three picture books about the Holocaust produced by Israeli, Flemish and Polish authors: *Bear and Fred* (2016), *Een pop voor Hannah* [A doll for Hannah] (2018), and *Mama zawsze wraca* [Mum always comes back] (2020). Their young protagonists represent Holocaust survivors, and the toys featured in these visual narratives represent their authentic playthings from that time, which today are put on display at the museums of Yad Vashem in Israel and Kazerne Dossin in Belgium. I examine the characteristic amalgamation of subject and object: the child protagonist and a toy. My aim is to explore these relationships, the representation of the agency of people and toys and the epistemic and commemorative value of these narratives. My theoretical framework draws on memory studies and thing theory, in which the being of objects is valued equally to the being of subjects and in which researchers argue for the agency of nonhuman materials, insisting that not only humans, but also objects, interact.

## Keywords

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Holocaust survivors, toys, doll play, teddy bear, testimonial objects, children's literature, picture books, nonhuman biography, agency

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Pnina Rosenberg

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## Anne Frank Is Dead and Is Living in New York

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TEKSTY DRUGIE 2024, NR 1, S. 325–342

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DOI: 10.18318/td.2024.en.1.18

It was too late to be alive now. I was a saint [...] Child Martyr and Holy Saint isn't a position I'm really qualified for any more.<sup>1</sup>

Nobody wants a live Anne Frank. They want a martyr [...] that goddamned smiling child.<sup>2</sup>

Following the publications of the 1947 Dutch and the 1950 German and French translations of the *Diary of a Young Girl*, Anne Frank's father Otto, wanted to introduce it to American readers as well, but had a hard time finding a publisher in the United States. The manuscript was rejected by several publishers, including Alfred Knopf, who wrote in his rejection letter of June 1950 that "it is not in any way a literary achievement, and would not add prestige to a publisher's list."<sup>3</sup> Finally, a relatively small edition was published by

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1 Philip Roth, *The Ghost Writer* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1979), 150; 154.

2 Shalom Auslander, *Hope: A Tragedy* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2012), 72.

3 Eric Colleary "How the *Diary of Anne Frank* First Made It to the U.S." *Time*, October 24, 2015, accessed April 10, 2023, <http://time.com/4081483/how-the-diary-of-anne-frank-first-made-it-to-the-u-s/>.

Doubleday on June 12, 1952 – Anne Frank's birthday. The publisher did not have high expectations. Nevertheless, an enthusiastic review by the American writer Meyer Levin in the *New York Times Book Review* (Sunday, June 15, 1952) led to dramatically increased sales and also laid the cornerstone for the transformation of the diarist into the uncontested iconic Holocaust symbol in the United States.

The successful book soon became a Broadway play (1955) and its adaptation into an Academy Award-winning film (1959)<sup>4</sup> further increased the *Diary's* popularity and its diarist has become "the poster child of the Holocaust."<sup>5</sup> Anne Frank's portrayal on Broadway was regarded as too universalized and too sanitized, while her Jewishness was too little emphasized; Holocaust deniers questioned the *Diary's* authenticity doubting whether it could have been written by a "young girl."<sup>6</sup>

Cynthia Ozick, in her essay entitled "Who Owns Anne Frank?," criticizes the projections of Anne Frank as a contemporary figure.<sup>7</sup> Ozick refers to such projections as "unholy speculation [...] [that – author's note] tampers with history, with reality, with deadly truth."<sup>8</sup> The presence of Anne Frank as a fictional living character in American-Jewish literature is not merely a reflection of the tremendous reception, to the point of idolatry, of Anne Frank and her diary. The abrupt ending of the *Diary*, the uncertainty surrounding the date of her death and burial place – which stands in sharp contrast to the sharing of her most intimate thoughts – frustrates the readers' curiosity, invoking a panoply of feelings such as anger, guilt, disappointment, even a sense of betrayal, denial, and fantasy. Ozick writes:

A story may not be said to be a story if the end is missing. And because the end is missing, the story of Anne Frank [...] has been bowdlerized, distorted, transmuted, traduced, reduced; it has been infantilized, Americanized, homogenized, sentimentalized, falsified, kitschified, and in fact, blatantly and arrogantly denied.<sup>9</sup>

4 Edna Nahshon, "Anne Frank from Page to Stage," in *Anne Frank Unbound: Media, Imagination, Memory*, ed. Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett and Jeffrey Shandler (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 2012), 59–92; Leshu Torchin, "Anne Frank's Moving Images," in *Anne Frank Unbound*, 93–134.

5 Sanford Pinsker, "Anne Frank and the 'What If' School of Fiction?," *Sewanee Review* 122 (2) (2014): 340–344; 341.

6 *Ibid.*, 341.

7 Cynthia Ozick, "Who Owns Anne Frank," *The New Yorker* 73 (1997): 75.

8 *Ibid.*, 76.

9 *Ibid.*, 77.



This paper deals with Philip Roth's *The Ghost Writer* and Shalom Auslander's *Hope: A Tragedy*,<sup>10</sup> two works that phantasize the "revival" of Anne Frank by summoning her as a fictional character. In *Freud and Klein on the Concept of Phantasy*,<sup>11</sup> Elizabeth Spillius Bott argues that Freud's notion of phantasy denotes a scene presented to the imagination that stages an unconscious desire. Although Freud characterized various types of phantasies, he thought that the basic trigger of phantasy formation is an unconscious wish that is blocked from fulfilment. Anne Frank is in fact dead. The phantasy is a disguised expression and partial fulfilment of the unconscious wish that she be alive. In Freud's theory phantasies that are formed in the conscious system or are allowed into it – that is, if they are daydreams – they are known not to be true. If they are formed in the system preconscious or if they are repressed into it, they will be descriptively unconscious but formed according to the everyday logic of the secondary process.<sup>12</sup>

Roth's and Auslander's novels fulfill their protagonists' phantasies by offering an alternative scenario in which Anne Frank survived Bergen-Belsen and is living in America. These novels pertain to the "What if?" school of fiction that explores imaginary alternative scenarios of "real" people and events.<sup>13</sup> The phantasmic summoning of Anne in both works not only suggests the prominence of Anne Frank and her *Diary* in the legacy of the Holocaust, but also attempts to probe the boundaries of the authors' hyphenated identity as Jewish-Americans.

### Philip Roth, *The Ghost Writer*

Roth's *The Ghost Writer* takes place in the year 1956. It was published in 1979, some two decades after the immeasurable breakthrough of Anne Frank's *Diary*, which had gained a mythic status within the Jewish-American public. The scholar Sara Horowitz points out that the novel "was among the earliest works to push against the Holocaust's centrality in Jewish American self-perception and the concomitant fear of anti-Semitism that governs Jewish American anxieties."<sup>14</sup>

10 Roth, *Ghost*; Auslander, *Hope*.

11 Elizabeth Bott Spillius, "Freud and Klein on the Concept of Phantasy," *International Journal of Psycho-Analysis* 82 (2) (2001): 361–373.

12 Ibid, 371.

13 Pinsker, "Anne Frank," 341.

14 Sara R. Horowitz, "Literary Afterlives of Anne Frank," in *Anne Frank Unbound*, 215–253; 234.

*The Ghost Writer*, the first of Roth's novels narrated by his alleged alter-ego Nathan Zuckerman who is, at this point, a young aspiring author who was invited to the home of the established Jewish author E. I. Lonoff (modeled on Bernard Malamud).<sup>15</sup>

Set in a snowy New England landscape and featuring Lonoff's wife, Hope, of an old established American family [...]. The landscape of the novel offers the sort of goyische living [...] it is within this bastion of gentile old money that Zuckerman finds Amy Bellette, Lonoff's young lover about whom Nathan writes a fiction within the fiction of her as Anne Frank, alive and sexy.<sup>16</sup>

Zuckerman learns that the "striking girl-woman"<sup>17</sup> Amy Bellette, Lonoff's former student and assumed current lover, engaged in organizing Lonoff's manuscripts, lived in England, asked Lonoff to assist her to settle in the States, and presented herself as: "a highly intelligent, creative, and charming sixteen-year-old who was now living with a not very intelligent, creative, or charming family in Bristol, England."<sup>18</sup> Zuckerman becomes enchanted, even obsessed, by the resourceful if not manipulative young woman.

Zuckerman's first meeting with Bellette follows a rift with his father over a story he wrote that "borrowed from our family history instances of what my exemplary father took to be the most shameful and disreputable transgressions of family decency and trust."<sup>19</sup> His father, who disapproved of revealing shameful information and argued that it would contribute to the already extant antisemitism in America, consulted an old Jewish judge, Leopold Wapter, to convince Nathan that his stories were problematic. The judge writes Nathan a lengthy letter, recommending him to see the Broadway play of *The Diary of Anne Frank* and closes with a questionnaire entitled "Ten Questions for Nathan Zuckerman." The questions, meant to lead Zuckerman to acknowledge that his story amounts to the defamation of Jews and might play into the hands of Nazis and antisemites, opens with: "If you had been living in Nazi Germany in the thirties, would you have written such a story?" and concludes: "Can you honestly say that there is anything in your short story that would not

15 Pinsker, "Anne Frank," 341.

16 Brett Ashley Kaplan, *Jewish Anxiety and the Novels of Philip Roth* (New York, London: Bloomsbury, 2015), 36–37.

17 Roth, *Ghost*, 16.

18 Ibid., 41.

19 Ibid., 81.

warm the heart of a Julius Streicher or a Joseph Goebbels?"<sup>20</sup> When Nathan's anxious mother phones him and asked about his reaction the letter, he tries to convince her that there is no relation between the persecution of Jews in Europe and Jewish life in America.

We are not the wretched of Belsen! We were not the victims of that crime! [...] Ma, you want to see physical violence done to the Jews of Newark, go to the office of the plastic surgeon where the girls get their noses fixed. That's where the Jewish blood flows in Essex County, that's where the blow is delivered— with a mallet!<sup>21</sup>

Zuckerman's black humor seems to be a reaffirmation of the safe and prosperous Jewish life in America. Yet the "ten questions," also reveal the extent to which the Holocaust, tinted with allusions to Anne Frank's tragic fate, is ever-present in the lives of American Jews.<sup>22</sup> In 1956, Zukerman's allusion to Belsen as a symbol of the Holocaust, and Judge Wapter's recommendation, attests that Anne Frank – who was "only dimly Jewish"<sup>23</sup> – her book and the play have already become a point of reference for American Jewry.

In Zuckerman's counterfactual scenario Amy Bellette is the postwar Anne Frank, who has survived but has resolved to remain "dead" in order to empower her *Diary* – the book and the play.

They wept for me, [...] they pitied me; they prayed for me; they begged my forgiveness. I was the incarnation of the millions of un-lived years robbed from the murdered Jews. It was too late to be alive now. I was a saint.<sup>24</sup>

Despite Amy/Anne's acknowledgement that her value rests in her remaining dead, yet she longs to claim an identity apart from the one created by popular culture's representation of the Holocaust and in particular its rendering of her life. "I'd like at last to be my own. Child Martyr and Holy Saint isn't a position I'm really qualified for any more."<sup>25</sup> Once retrieved, Anne is no longer a child

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 102; 103–104.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 106.

<sup>22</sup> Aimee Pozorski, "How to Tell a True Ghost Story: *The Ghost Writer* and the Case of Anne Frank," in *Philip Roth: New Perspective of an American Author*, ed. Derek Parker Royal (Westport, Conn.: Praeger Publishers, 2005), 89–103.

<sup>23</sup> Roth, *Ghost*, 144.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 150.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 154.

victim, but rather a *femme fatale* “longing for somebody else’s husband, begging him to leave his loyal wife to run off with a girl half his age.”<sup>26</sup>

Zuckerman realizes that the conflict with his parents over the short story he wrote implicates him in the defamation of the Jewish people as a whole. The phantasy about Anne Frank in turn enables him to reconcile with his family. Hence, Anne’s revival in Zuckerman’s phantasy can be seen as both the rewriting of the Holocaust and a way of patching together the ruptured family. Moreover, he knows that his phantasy about Anne will end his mother’s incessant nagging him to date a nice Jewish girl. Zuckerman addresses the invention of his imagination by her full name, Anne Frank, in order to show that he wishes to marry not clandestine Amy/Anne, but rather the true public iconic Anne Frank:

Oh, marry me, Anne Frank, exonerate me before my outraged elders of this idiotic indictment! Heedless of Jewish feeling? Indifferent to Jewish survival? Brutish about their well-being? Who dares to accuse of such unthinking crimes the husband of Anne Frank!<sup>27</sup>

When Nathan phantasizes’ introducing his wife Anne Frank/Amy Bellette, he visualizes how his father will recognize his misinterpretation of his son’s story and will express his forgiveness “*Well, this is she... Anne, says my father – the Anne? Oh, how I have misunderstood my son. How mistaken I have been!*”<sup>28</sup>

Amy/Anne’s sanctification “enables the fulfillment of her desire for her words to live on,”<sup>29</sup> thus enhancing her sainthood also in the phatasmic fictive novel. “One way or another, art challenges the connection between the generations, refuting or reinventing traditions and conventions.”<sup>30</sup>

Brett Ashley Kaplan argues in *Jewish Anxiety and the Novels of Philip Roth* that this counterfactual fantasy enables Roth to explore differing layers of innocence and abuse; Anne Frank, the ultimate symbol of the Suffering of the Innocent has been threatened by the sexuality intrinsic in the diary – famously “censored” by Otto Frank, her father and the *Diary* editor; this corruption is intensified by her further sexualizing and exploitation as being the only person capable of exonerating Nathan from other Jews abuse and hostility.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 154.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 170–171.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 159 (italics in original).

<sup>29</sup> Horowitz, “Literary,” 233.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 234.

<sup>31</sup> Kaplan, *Jewish*, 40.

Roth's engagement with Anne Frank's mythic stature in American public culture suggests, through the "What-if" scenario, that Anne survived the war but realized she was of greater value to the world as a martyr. As such, Roth's book anticipates Cynthia Ozick's demythologizing critique of the appropriation of Anne Frank and her revival as an iconic Holocaust symbol in the US.

### A Portrait of a Young Girl Diarist as an Old Woman

Some three decades after Roth's *The Ghost Writer* was published, Shalom Auslander, a young Jewish-American novelist published a counterfactual novel in which Anne Frank, whose worldwide fame and idolatry had reached new peaks, lives in the attic of a house owned by a Jewish family in upstate New York.

There, on the [attic's – P. R.] floor behind the boxes, lay the huddled blanket-wrapped body of an elderly woman [...]. He stretched his arm toward the old woman [...] [as – P. R.] he reached out one more time [...] that ancient bony hand, as if rising unbidden from the grave swatted angrily [...]. Who are you? Kugel asked [...] I am Anne Frank, she grumbled [...] Kugel thought he'd never seen anyone so old.<sup>32</sup>

This is the first encounter of Solomon Kugel (whose name references both wise King Solomon of the Bible and a traditional Ashkenazi Jewish dish) with the yet unidentified old woman, whose noisy and annoying "Tap. Tap-tap-tap,"<sup>33</sup> coming from the attic, bothers him. The Kugels (Solomon, a salesman in a recycling solutions company, his wife Bree, and their ailing three-year-old son Jonah) desire "a new start"<sup>34</sup> and so search "for a home unburdened by the past."<sup>35</sup> They purchase a farmhouse in Stockton, in upstate New York, where a local arsonist is on the loose, but which otherwise is "famous for nothing."<sup>36</sup> Ironically the house was previously owned by the elderly German-American Mr. Messerschmidt (whose name recalls the German fighter aircraft of Second World War). The house's forced-air heating system, which "carrie[s] sounds [...] from every room [...] in the house" and functions as "a ghostly

32 Auslander, *Hope*, 26; 28; 29 (emphasis added).

33 Ibid., 9.

34 Ibid., 15.

35 Ibid., 14.

36 Ibid., 14.

intercom system,"<sup>37</sup> transmits the tapping noises from the attic. The Kugels, Solomon's mother, a lodger, and the "old women" (who turns out to be Anne Frank), all live in the house.

Kugel's mother, who was born in postwar Brooklyn and whose family has been living in the United States for generations, identifies herself as a Holocaust survivor whose own mother died at Auschwitz. Mother, the only character with a generic name, is obsessed by her fabricated past and perceives herself as a martyr. In her attempts to rectify the familial history she is "adopting" – or rather appropriating – Holocaust victims as her relatives:

She had a large book [...] *The Holocaust*, and she showed [young Solomon – P. R.] the photographs inside: of a mass grave, starved prisoners, piles of naked corpses. That's your uncle, she would say.  
That's your grandfather's sister.  
That's your cousin's father.<sup>38</sup>

This obsession creates comic situations as when Mother explains to her son that a certain lampshade was once Kugel's Zeide (grandfather in Yiddish):

This is Zeide? he asked.  
Mother nodded, composed herself.  
You see what they do to us? she said.  
There's no peace. Wherever we go, wherever we hide. Terror and more terror and more terror [...].  
It says Made in Taiwan, Kugel said.  
Well, they're not going to write Made in Buchenwald, are they? she snapped.  
No, said Kugel.<sup>39</sup>

As this passage indicates, Kugel's Mother who "suffers from massive Holocaust envy [...] adopted the behaviors of traumatized survivors, [and had – P. R.] accordingly rewritten her life story."<sup>40</sup> In order to authenticate her pedigree she prepares an album and amidst family photographs she inserts newspapers clippings and photographs from the Holocaust, "until

37 Ibid., 36–37.

38 Ibid., 77 (italics in original).

39 Ibid., 77–78.

40 Susanne Rohr, "Trauma and Taboo: The Holocaust in Recent American Fiction," in *Wor(l)ds of Trauma. Canadian and German Perspectives*, ed. Wolfgang Klooss (Münster, New York: Waxmann, 2017), 185–197; 192.

these terrifying images of history's tragic victims equaled, and soon outnumbered, the photographs of actual Kugels."<sup>41</sup> Mother, who moved from her Brooklyn apartment, has not unpacked her baggage, except for a large gilt-framed picture of prominent U.S. constitutional and criminal law expert, Alan Dershowitz, "which she hung, as she always had, on the wall above her bed."<sup>42</sup> For Mother, Dershowitz is "the ultimate protector" who would defend her; eventually, he does save the aging Anne Frank from the Kugel's burning attic.<sup>43</sup>

Kugel's discovery that the elderly woman is the famous Holocaust diarist is marked by dark comedy. He complains that "while there is never a good time to find Anne Frank in your attic; this was a particularly bad time,"<sup>44</sup> and wishes to get rid of her before Mother notices her. Yet he hesitates whether or not to denounce her to the police, mainly for fear of Mother's probable sardonic reaction: "My son, she would say [...]. What's the matter, you didn't have Dr. Mengele's number? He doesn't make house calls? You want Elie Wiesel's address? Maybe you can turn him in, too?"<sup>45</sup> This comic-sarcastic text dialogues with *The Ghost Writer's* tenth question of Judge Wapner to Zukerman concerning his story's presumed effect on Julius Streicher and Joseph Goebbels. Despite not believing that the old woman is indeed Anne Frank, skeptical Kugel realizes that there is "definitely something Anne Frankish about her"<sup>46</sup> so he pursues his inquest: "*Anne* [...]. Why does everyone think you died in Auschwitz?" to which she replies: "Bergen Belsen [...]. It's a lot easier to stay alive in this world [...] if everyone thinks you're dead."<sup>47</sup> This statement is based on her experience when she was eighteen and still in Europe, she learned from a newspaper about the popularity of her published *Diary*. Frank went to Amsterdam to meet the publisher, who presumed that she was yet another imposter who wanted a share of the royalties. Yet once she mentioned her father's censorship of the *Diary*, the editor realized she was not a fraud and said:

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<sup>41</sup> Auslander, *Hope*, 128.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

<sup>43</sup> Roberta Rosenberg, "'Diasporadic Humor' and Jewish-American Identity," *Shofar* 33 (3) (2015): 110–138; 130.

<sup>44</sup> Auslander, *Hope*, 41.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 67.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 69 (italics in original).

[...] nobody wants alive Anne Frank. They want a martyr [...] [he – P. R.] went to his desk [...] held a copy of that goddamned diary, with that goddamned smiling child on that goddamned cover, and said: They do not want you. They want *her*.

[...] I told him I was working on a novel [...]. Do you know what Mr. Editor did then? [...] He laughed. Stay dead, he repeated, stay dead. I am a writer, Mr. Kugel! I am not a child! I am not some goddamned diarist! I am a writer! Thirty-two million copies, Mr. Kugel [...] I will leave this attic when I finish this book, and not one moment sooner!<sup>48</sup>

Thus Auslander is giving a concise account on the metamorphosis the *Diary* underwent from the initial Dutch publication to its numerous versions, and criticizes the Anne Frank cult industry, which for commercial and financial reasons prefers Saint Anne to the “real” person who, in his counterfactual fiction survived adolescence passed in hiding and became an old woman. The Anne Frank industry prefers *h e r* to be the dead girl winner of the gold medal and champion of the “Misery Olympics.”<sup>49</sup> “I’m Miss Holocaust 1945. The prize is a crown of thorns and eternal victimhood. Jesus was a Jew, Mr. Kugel, but I am the Jewish Jesus.”<sup>50</sup>

Auslander’s Anne, who is a vehicle for ironic and comic critique, recounts to Kugel her arrival in the United States and her relegation to attic after attic. In contrast to her popular image as a martyred girl and promising young writer who recounts in her diary her faith in humankind, the elderly Anne Frank levies a sardonic critique against Kugel, his mother, and others like them, who buy into popular reductive narratives of the Holocaust. If at first, Kugel’s realization that Anne Frank is actually alive and living among them excites him and his family, ultimately, it tears them apart and literally burns their house down.

Following the discovery of Anne’s presence in the attic she unfolds an account of her postwar nomadic life exploiting gentile and Jews’ sense of guilt. After the war Anne looted an attic in a former Nazi son’s house; yet once she was discovered the owners who “hated themselves, you see, and so they took pity of me” supplied her with food and clothing.<sup>51</sup>

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 72–73 (italics in original).

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 92.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 322.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 295.



Years later, when they moved to America, they arranged for my own safe passage [...] [and – P.R.] to a new family, a new attic, and so I went, here and there, house to house, family to family, a Polish family at first [...] then an elderly Austrian couple... until finally I came here, thirty or forty years or so ago, where the Messerschmidts took over my care. I have been the blessed beneficiary of sixty years of humanity's guilt and remorse.<sup>52</sup>

Thus by purchasing the Messerschmidts' house the Kugels inherited Anne and inevitably became her current "hiders." Mother, who urges Solomon to let Anne stay, undergoes significant changes: "she seemed rejuvenated, revived, energized."<sup>53</sup>

Daily deliveries of "boxes of matzos and jars of borscht [...] books on death camps or how to be your best editor,"<sup>54</sup> all of which Anne considers indispensable for her writing, arrive. In order to avoid strangers and neighbors' suspicions, Mother suggests buying Anne an e-book reader so "she could download anything she wants."<sup>55</sup> Anne Frank thus becomes the "objective correlative of the mother's fear and anxiety, and the personification and justification of her paranoia and as such [...] needs to keep her alive and in the 'attic' of their imagination."<sup>56</sup> Yet, tension arises among Anne's "helpers." While both Mother and Kugel are obsessed with protecting Anne Frank, Bree moves out with Jonah after Kugel's refusal to evict the old woman from the attic, originally meant to be Bree's study room. For her part, Anne, who does not reveal any gratitude to the Kugels, mercilessly criticizes them: "I do not know what's worse, Mr. Kugel [...] your mother's auto-hagiography or the people like you who permit it to be written."<sup>57</sup>

Mother and Solomon's relationship with Anne deteriorates. Kugel admits not reading the *Diary* because "I'm sick and tired of that Holocaust shit."<sup>58</sup> Mother in turn becomes hostile: she blames Anne for wrecking the family: "you let this woman come between your wife and your child – and still defend her? This [...] phony, this, this [...] Nazi!" and criticizes Anne's adult

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52 Ibid., 295 (emphasis added).

53 Ibid., 227.

54 Ibid., 232.

55 Ibid., 232.

56 Rosenberg, "Diasporadic," 128.

57 Auslander, *Hope*, 252.

58 Ibid., 296.

autobiography: "Anne Frank would never write those things. Anne Frank would never *think* those things."<sup>59</sup>

Furious and hostile, Mother burns the stack of pages which set the attic ablaze: "The pages were swirling around the room, spreading fire and ash. Nearby the scrapbook and boxes of family photos has also caught fire and their ashes were also beginning to spread."<sup>60</sup> Kugel manages to evacuate Mother, but it is Alan Dershowitz, who "is carrying Anne Frank in his arms [...] through the window"<sup>61</sup> and functions as a kind of *deus ex machina*, that is, a figure of divine intervention, a miraculous savior. Rescued Anne mocks Kugel's failed attempts to save himself: "You would have never made it, Mr. Kugel! [...] You would never have lasted five minutes in Auschwitz! I'm a survivor, Mr. Kugel."<sup>62</sup> Kugel himself was caught in the flames and died in the attic.

From the outset we learn that Kugel's allegedly peaceful refuge is threatened by an arsonist, who is eventually caught by the local police, and is none other than Wilbur Messerschmidt Jr. (son of Anne's former lodger-carer), a volunteer fireman. Though the Kugels' house is not damaged by the younger Messerschmidt, it is eventually set ablaze by Mother. Ironically, Anne Frank and her manuscript are at fault. Although Kugels' successful attempt to prevent the publication of the "fictitious new memoir"<sup>63</sup> cost them dearly, nevertheless by scarifying themselves they managed to keep the (American) legacy of *The Diary of a Young Girl* intact. In keeping with the prevalence and growth of the Anne Frank myth in Jewish-American Holocaust remembrance culture in the twenty-first century, the novel portrays Kugel's ephemeral existence as opposed to Anne Frank's perpetual mythic transcendence: "[Kugel's – P. R.] life is destroyed when his house goes up in flames [...] [whereas – P. R.] Anne Frank survives, of course, and makes her way to the next attic."<sup>64</sup>

Auslander's Anne is growing older while duplicating her life in the Amsterdam attic, always secluded from the hostile world and helped by non-Jews until the Kugels got in her way. The Kugels doubted her identity mainly because of their own fabricated identity as Holocaust survivors; they could not accept the reincarnation of the mythic Young Girl as an old gray-haired woman who

59 Ibid., 337; 336.

60 Ibid., 342.

61 Ibid., 344; 345.

62 Ibid., 344.

63 Rosenberg, "Diasporadic," 130.

64 Rohr, "Trauma," 194.

uses a laptop for typing her memoirs instead of a pen and a checkered album. The image of the iconic Anne seems incommensurable with its contemporary phantasmic reincarnation. Anne, who is aware of her iconic counterpart, the dead Young Girl whose published diary became a worldwide bestseller, is also aware of her *Catch 22* syndrome: "I want to be Anne Frank without the Holocaust, but I use the Holocaust to subsist, to get what I need: shelter, food a place to work."<sup>65</sup>

Anne, like the mythological Phoenix, is reborn and gains new life by arising from the ashes, thus reflecting the *Diary's* own cyclic revival(s). Iconic Anne comes to life because of her *Diary* and her widespread image, as well as the attic's surroundings, including the horse chestnut tree, which have become universal and American myths. The original ailing tree, which grew near the hiding place in Amsterdam, collapsed in 2010 and cuttings from it were re-planted in U.S. parks, museums and Holocaust remembrance centers, serving as (Saint) Anne's metonymic relics.<sup>66</sup>

Clifton Spargo's suggestion that Roth's "invention of Anne Frank [...]" recalls several layers of cultural memory through which Anne Frank has been made a property of the American popular imagination,<sup>67</sup> can also be applied to Auslander's *Hope: A Tragedy*. Auslander, through his novel's phantasy, critiques how the iconic Anne, and more broadly American popular culture's reductive engagement with the Holocaust, holds devastating consequences for Jewish-American life.

### Anne Frank: Popularized Icon / Popular American Culture

Alvin Rosenfeld's seminal article "Popularization and Memory: The Case of Anne Frank"<sup>68</sup> seeks answers to Anne Frank's "*return* from her place among *the anonymous dead* at Bergen-Belsen and assume a posthumous existence within popular culture of such unusual force and magnitude."<sup>69</sup> As the author follows the *Diary's* first publications (late 1940s and early 1950s) he compares its

65 Auslander, *Hope*, 295.

66 Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, "Epilogue: A Life of Its Own – The Anne Frank Tree," in *Anne Frank Unbound*, 324–338; 334–336.

67 Clifton R. Spargo, "To Invent as Presumptuously as Real Life: Parody and the Cultural Memory of Anne Frank in Roth's *The Ghost Writer*," *Representations* 76 (1) (2001): 88–119; 89.

68 Alvin H. Rosenfeld, "Popularization and Memory: The Case of Anne Frank," in *Lessons and Legacies: The Meaning of the Holocaust in the Changing World*, ed. Peter Hayes (Louisville, KY: Evanston, 1991), 243–278 (emphasis added).

69 Ibid., 245.

rather modest reception in postwar shattered Europe vs. its huge success in the United States, enhanced by its 1955 Broadway play adaptation by Frances Goodrich and Albert Hackett, who

took some large liberties with the text of the diary and, by playing down or simply suppressing outright the darker, more foreboding entries and highlighting more affirmative ones, they shaped an image of Anne Frank that varied more than a little from the girl's self-image in the diary.<sup>70</sup>

Hence it is not surprising that critics found that the play "brought about the *reincarnation* of Anne Frank – as though she'd *never been dead*."<sup>71</sup>

Thus the American public was exposed, from the early days, to Anne Frank as a vivacious attractive 'young girl' who believes 'that in spite of everything people are really good at heart.' This pseudo-optimistic image was nourished and cultivated by an efficient advertising/public relations machinery that eventually turned Anne Frank into a "commodity" in the popular culture.<sup>72</sup>

In view of the Diary's adaptation into the Pulitzer-prize winning play (soon made into a film [1959]), this reveals Philip Roth's Anne Frank/Amy Bellette – and even more, Auslander's cynical, exploitative, and vicious old woman – as a subversive and revisionist response to the sentimentalized, sugar-coated "young girl" image engraved in the American collective memory. Rosenfeld argues that the "symbol of martyred innocence"<sup>73</sup> was "produced in America along conventional American lines [...] and the [...] American version of Anne Frank quickly took hold elsewhere."<sup>74</sup>

### **Conclusion: Anne Frank and the Jewish-American Myth: 1950s / Twenty-First-Century**

The phantasmically revived Anne proves a crucial figure for the protagonists of both literary works examined in this paper. In *The Ghost Writer*, Zuckerman

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 252.

<sup>71</sup> *The New York Post*, October 8, 1955, quoted in Rosenfeld, "Popularization," 252 (note 14) (emphasis added).

<sup>72</sup> On popular culture/popular fiction see: Matthew Schneider-Mayerson. "Popular Fiction Studies: The Advantages of a New Field," *Studies in Popular Culture* 33 (1) (2010): 21–35 (mainly 22–24).

<sup>73</sup> Rosenfeld, "Popularization", 260.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 261.

imagines himself as her ghost writer in an attempt to absolve himself from the allegations of antisemitism made by his family and Judge Wapner. Through Zuckerman, Roth uses Anne Frank as a projection of the fears and hopes common to many Jews. The idolatry of Anne Frank and the creation of a happy ending for the *Diary* and for her particular case reflect the feeling of guilt that is deeply ingrained in Jewish culture and tradition.<sup>75</sup>

Auslander's Anne is an aging, cynical woman who is not too shy to boast of her *Diary*'s worldwide success, even as she criticizes it, claiming that she is a real author and not an essayist or a diarist. Though she is a far cry from Roth's femme fatale, she manages due to her sheer egocentrism to break up Kugel's family, the only Jewish-American "helpers."

Both Solomon Kugel, Auslander's comic-tragic protagonist, and Roth's Nathan Zuckerman encounter Anne Frank in New York state, yet there is a crucial difference between the two Annes. Roth's 1979 story refers to the Young Girl as immortalized by the *Diary*'s 1950 English (American) translation and the Broadway play. Auslander's novel, written a generation later (2012), presents the Jewish-German diarist after the passage of time: in the twenty-first century she has become an old, cranky, and troublesome woman. Auslander's oxymoronic aging Young Girl seems to be the third generation's critical response to Anne's increasingly sanctified and idolized image, a saint-hood promoted and encouraged by the commemorative industry. This machinery prefers perpetual recycling of uncontested cliché-like symbols rather than confronting the singular multifaceted and vibrant young woman who struggled to maintain her youthful joviality, to nourish her intellectual aspirations, and to solidify her feminine identity as a coming-of-age young woman in modern and cruel times. Hence people like Kugel's Mother who assume a false identity, and are self-appointed Holocaust victim-saints, cannot accept a different and alternative narrative, which has not been tested, approved, popularized, and canonized.

Roth and Auslander share with other Jewish-American authors the theme of guilt. In Simon Dein's article "The Origins of Jewish Guilt" he observes that according to Freud, guilt plays a fundamental role in the psyche and that it mainly works unconsciously and it emanates from a violation of a law, such as the murder of the primal father. This guilt, transmitted across generations, drives Jews to religion to mitigate their emotions.<sup>76</sup>

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75 Simon Dein. "The Origins of Jewish Guilt: Psychological, Theological, and Cultural Perspectives," *Journal of Spirituality in Mental Health* 15 (2) (2013): 123–137.

76 Dein, "Origins," 126–127.

In his article *The Holocaust's Life as a Ghost*,<sup>77</sup> the sociologist Zygmunt Bauman pointed out the concept of 'the survivor's guilt' that denotes psychical ailment ascribed to the survivors' pondering on why and how they survived while others perished.<sup>78</sup> Survivor complex is a psychological wound that comes about through constant trauma. At the core of survivor's guilt is self-blame operating as a defensive omnipotent phantasy. Bauman describes our world as a haunted house where the ghosts, namely, the social repercussions of the Holocaust, still haunt individuals and collectivities. Some of these ghosts reflect this survivor's guilt.<sup>79</sup> For Jewish Americans, guilt is invoked when Jews seem overly assimilated and let go of the perception of constant threat. So in Roth's novel Zuckerman writes a realistic yet unflattering vignette of his family, which has allegedly become untethered and estranged from Jewish history and tradition. In Auslander's novel, in turn, Anne Frank's insight captures this in a nutshell: "because you are Jewish [...] you feel guilty for *not* suffering atrocities."<sup>80</sup>

The parodic-satiric revival of Anne Frank by means of creating a counterfactual reality in Roth's and Auslander's novels takes place in two different timelines. "Roth traces the [...] extravagant fiction to the particulars of the 1950s American cultural memory of Anne Frank as it was shaped by the Broadway and Hollywood representations of her story."<sup>81</sup> Auslander's 2012 novel pursues the theme of the mythification and idolization of the Young Girl, alongside the issue of "Shoah business" – one of whose hallmarks is false appropriation of identity as Holocaust survivors. On one hand Auslander's novel can be regarded as an expansion of and ironic "homage" to that of Roth, as can be seen for instance when Lonoff's wife's name, Hope (in *The Ghost Writer*) became Auslander's book title; or the similar antisemitic allegations accusing Nathan Zuckerman and Solomon Kugel. Judge Wapner questions Zuckerman whether his novel is not a virulent Nazi propaganda piece that might "warm the heart of a Julius Streicher or a Joseph Goebbels,"<sup>82</sup> while Kugel suspects that Mother might regard his eviction of Anne Frank as a murderous delivery to Dr. Mengele. Yet,

77 Zygmunt Bauman, "The Holocaust's Life as a Ghost," in *Social Theory after the Holocaust*, ed. Robert Fine and Charles Turner (Liverpool: University of Liverpool Press, 2000), 7–18.

78 Bauman, "The Holocaust," 8.

79 Ibid., 12–13.

80 Auslander, *Hope*, 64 (italic in original).

81 Spargo, "To Invent," 89.

82 Roth, *Ghost*, 104.

Auslander adds a new dimension while introducing Mother, who suffered from what Geoffrey Hartman termed “memory-envy”<sup>83</sup> – adopting a false identity as a Holocaust survivor. What is more intriguing is Salomon Kugel’s “acceptance” of and collaboration with Mother’s charade, is the fact that from his adolescence he was already aware of Mother’s false allegations – during his sixth-grade visit to a museum his history teacher, Mrs. Rosengarten, corrected his “identification” of one of the Holocaust victims as his own mother: “That’s not your mother [...]. Your mother’s my age, Solomon [...]. She was not even born when the photograph was taken. And she was born in Brooklyn.”<sup>84</sup> The acceptance of the contradicted information may allude to the son’s fascination with the fabricated Holocaust past which is part of the Holocaust industry built on instrumental misappropriation of history.<sup>85</sup> Shoah Business also resonates in Tova Reich’s book *My Holocaust*,<sup>86</sup> which seems as one of the muses of *Hope: A Tragedy*. Susanne Rohr points out in “Trauma and Taboo: The Holocaust in Recent American Fiction” that Reich’s and Auslander’s books represent meaningful stages of development of the genre that the philosopher Slavoj Žižek has termed “Holocaust comedy” or “camp comedy,” a genre that dares to marry humor and the Holocaust.<sup>87</sup> Reich’s book humorously criticizes the Jewish-American commercial instrumentalization of the Holocaust as primarily manifested at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington D.C. The protagonist, Maurice Messer, is the chairman of the museum, as well as the owner of Holocaust Connections, Inc., a successful firm that sells approval certificates to companies that are Holocaust Correct. With its critical portrayal of Messer and his entourage, the witty text of *My Holocaust* serves as an:

unremitting attack [...] on Holocaust-Business [...] an elaborate and professionally structured company where everyone, in their own self-interest, wants to secure their share of the profit [...] largely sustained by the clever (self-) marketing of the suffering of the victims of the Holocaust.<sup>88</sup>

83 Geoffrey Hartman, *The Longest Shadow* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1995), 111.

84 Auslander, *Hope*, 80.

85 Norman Finkelstein, *The Holocaust Industry* (New York: Verso, 2000), 61.

86 Tova Reich, *My Holocaust* (New York: HarperCollins, 2007).

87 Rohr, “Trauma,” 185.

88 Ibid., 191.

The novels of Roth and Auslander reflect Peter Novick's arguments concerning the reasons that the Holocaust memory became an essential part of the American Jewry. While Roth portrays a Jewish community a few years after the war, whose identity is threatened by secularization and assimilation (the Lonoffs are a mixed marriage) and thus Holocaust memory became a defining center of American Judaism on the verge of disappearance of traditional forms of community.<sup>89</sup> Auslander's *Hope: A Tragedy*, reflects American Jewry much later in a society preoccupied with victimization. Thus, in an age of identity politics, when being a victim is a mark of distinction, the Holocaust gives Jews a perverse preeminence, setting them apart as the secular equivalent of the "chosen people."<sup>90</sup>

## Abstract

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*Anne Frank Is Dead and Is Living in New York*

Cynthia Ozick speculates whether it would have been better if Anne Frank's *Diary* would have remained lost, thus preventing the creation of the diarist's canonization as a saint in Jewish-American culture. Similar criticism can be traced in the "What-if" novels *The Ghost Writer* by Philip Roth (1979) and Shalom Auslander's *Hope: A Tragedy* (2012), that revive Frank and place her in America. Although Roth's diarist is an attractive young brunette and Auslander's is a gray-haired elderly woman, both conclude that for the benefit of their American public and Frank's major role in the "Shoah business" she had better stay dead.

## Keywords

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Jewish-American Literature, Holocaust, Anne Frank, "What-if" fiction

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89 Peter Novick, *The Holocaust in American Life* (Boston: Mariner Books, 1999), 7.

90 Ibid., 198.



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## Trapped Between Hitler and Stalin: Nazi Bogeymen and Implicated Subjects in Canadian Children's Historical Fiction

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TEKSTY DRUGIE 2024, NR 1, S. 343–359

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**A**lthough most Russians have supported the Russo-Ukrainian War, many Western media outlets such as “The Guardian,” “Newsweek,” and “The Atlantic” nevertheless have called it “Putin’s war.”<sup>1</sup> By using the expression “Putin’s War,” some Western journalists have minimized the implication of soldiers and civilians in war crimes committed in Ukraine, including forced deportations of children. However, as is the case with the popular depictions of the Second World War and the Holocaust,

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1 See Masha Gessen, “Ukrainian Refugees in Russia,” *The New Yorker*, August 21, 2023, 36–43. While Putin’s official approval in May of 2023 stood at 83% – higher than before the war – *The Moscow Times* maintains that the war is supported by 60% of Russians. However, it notes that the support is significantly higher in some regions. See Alexei Gusev, “Why Support for Putin’s War Is Rife in Russia’s Worst-Hit Regions,” *The Moscow Times*, June 10, 2023, accessed June 11, 2023 <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2023/06/10/why-support-for-putins-war-is-rife-in-russias-worst-hit-regions-a81426>. See also Eugene Rumer, “How Putin’s War Became Russia’s War,” *Foreign Affairs*, 9 June, 2023, accessed June, 10, 2023 <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/russian-federation/how-putins-war-became-russias-war>.

this positioning is a problematic oversimplification that overlooks the complexity of collaborators and implicated subjects.

The Holocaust has become a major theme in North American children's and young adult literature. While representing war atrocities in texts for children is challenging for many reasons, "there seems to be consensus now that children's literature is the most rather than the least appropriate forum for trauma work."<sup>2</sup> Most popular Anglophone books set during the Second World War in what Timothy Snyder has termed the bloodlands<sup>3</sup> – that is the territory of present-day Eastern and Central Europe – can be divided into two categories. The dominant one features texts presenting a simplified version of history: the Nazis and their collaborators, blindly following Hitler, emerge as dehumanized monsters who murder Jews in concentration camps. Typically, the Jewish child protagonist survives to share their story and bear witness to the Holocaust – sometimes saved by a Righteous Among Nations or liberated by Allied soldiers. Usually in such books there is no mention of Soviet atrocities and the Nazis "tend to be neither round nor dynamic, and are almost always observed rather than internally focalized"; thus, as Lydia Kokkola argues, such characters "are humans in disguise; they are Bogeymen."<sup>4</sup> The Soviets are absent and the Nazis are dehumanized, so there is "almost no attempt to encourage child readers to understand the position of the perpetrators."<sup>5</sup> This is a problematic positioning because, as Snyder notes, "to find other people to be inhuman, is to take a step toward, not away from, the Nazi position. To find other people incomprehensible is to abandon the search for understanding, and thus to abandon history."<sup>6</sup>

However, there is a different type of Holocaust and Second World War-themed children's books offering a more nuanced version of history. The characters in such texts, often ones who experience Nazi and Soviet atrocities, exceed the categories of the victim, the perpetrator, and the witness. In addition to evil Nazi Bogeymen, innocent Jewish victims/survivors, and sometimes gentile Righteous Among Nations, such narratives also feature an array of characters of various nationalities trapped between Hitler and

2 Kenneth B. Kidd, *Freud in Oz: At the Intersections of Psychoanalysis and Children's Literature* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 181.

3 See Timothy Snyder, *Bloodlands: Europe Between Hitler and Stalin* (New York: Basic Books, 2022).

4 Lydia Kokkola, *Representing the Holocaust in Children's Literature* (London: Routledge, 2003), 134.

5 *Ibid.*, 134.

6 See Snyder, *Bloodlands*, 400.

Stalin who emerge as what Michael Rothberg has termed implicated subjects. Such characters “are neither victims nor perpetrators nor passive bystanders” and “occupy positions aligned with power and privilege without being themselves direct agents of harm”<sup>7</sup>. Therefore, they “contribute to, inhabit, inherit or benefit from – in short, are implicated in – regimes of violence and domination, but do not originate or control such regimes.”<sup>8</sup>

Marsha Forchuk Skrypuch and Gabriele Goldstone, acclaimed Canadian authors of historical fiction, challenge the simplistic trope of the Nazi Bogyman and demonstrate the implication of their Ukrainian,<sup>9</sup> Polish, Russian, and German/Volksdeutsche characters who experience Hitler’s and Stalin’s occupation in the bloodlands. This article studies the portrayal of Nazi and German characters in Goldstone’s *Tainted Amber* (2021),<sup>10</sup> a young adult novel set in East Prussia right before the war, and Skrypuch’s middle-grade book *Don’t Tell the Enemy* (2018 – US title *Don’t Tell the Nazis*, 2019),<sup>11</sup> set in Nazi-occupied western Ukraine. As Snyder notes, in order to remember and understand we should “see the victims, but also the persecutors and the neighbors, from every possible angle.”<sup>12</sup> Skrypuch and Goldstone humanize the Nazis and implicated Germans and point to the role of propaganda in the spread of anti-Semitism. Because their books include descriptions of atrocities and individual acts of kindness, both authors demonstrate the complexity of implication. Thus, they may help young North American readers better understand history’s gray zones, which are crucial in preventing the Second World War and the Holocaust from becoming a distant memory.

### The Kulak’s Daughter in Pre-war East Prussia

Germans living in Volhynia and the Volga region were among the most severely targeted groups during Stalin’s collectivization and de-kulakization,

7 Michael Rothberg, “Trauma and the Implicated Subject,” in *The Routledge Companion to Trauma and Literature*, ed. Colin Davis and Hanna Meretoja (London: Routledge, 2020), 201.

8 Ibid., 201 (emphasis original).

9 See Mateusz Świątlicki, *Next-Generation Memory and Ukrainian Canadian Children’s Historical Fiction: The Seeds of Memory* (London: Routledge 2023), 168–188.

10 Gabriele Goldstone, *Tainted Amber* (Vancouver: Ronsdale, 2021).

11 Marsha Forchuk Skrypuch, *Don’t Tell the Enemy* (Toronto: Scholastic Canada, 2018).

12 Snyder, *Bloodlands*, 408.

“shorthand for the ‘elimination of the kulaks as a class.’”<sup>13</sup> The Soviet officials considered all Ukrainian ethnic Germans kulaks – wealthy landowners – so they were deprived of their belongings, abused, and deported to distant parts of the Soviet Union three times more frequently than their Ukrainian neighbors.<sup>14</sup> The scale of Soviet oppression directed towards Volksdeutsche was unknown before Germany invaded the Soviet Union in June 1941 and “discovered survivors living under the most wretched conditions.”<sup>15</sup>

Goldstone’s four first-person novels – *The Kulak’s Daughter*<sup>16</sup> (2009 – reissued as *Red Stone*, 2015), *Broken Stone*<sup>17</sup> (2015), *Tainted Amber* (2021), and *Crow Stone*<sup>18</sup> (2022) – are focalized by Katya Halter, a Russian German girl from Fedorofka near Zhytomyr, Ukraine.<sup>19</sup> In the first book, set right before the Holodomor, the Great Famine of 1932–1933, Katya, a ten-year-old daughter of a windmill owner, loses her father to Stalin’s de-kulakization and is exiled to Siberia with her family. While her mother and youngest brother die there, the protagonist manages to survive and take care of her brother Albert and two sisters, Marthe and Sophie. *Broken Stone* shows Katya’s post-exile life in collectivized Ukraine and then in East Prussia – today part of Russia, Poland, and Lithuania – where together with her siblings, she escapes Stalin’s oppression and is reunited with her lost father’s family. After experiencing abuse from her Aunt Elfriede and discrimination caused by her Russian heritage, in *Tainted Amber*, seventeen-year-old Katya, an aspiring writer fascinated with Thomas Mann, a Nobel Prize-winning author banned by Hitler, is working as a servant at a horse-breeding estate owned by the wealthy Richter family. Set in 1937–1938, that is right before Hitler’s annexation of Austria and the beginning of the Second World War, *Tainted Amber* illustrates the gradual spread of Nazism and anti-Semitism and the various reactions of Germans. Finally, in *Crow Stone*, Goldstone’s protagonist is arrested by the Red Army at the end of the war and is once again exiled to the Soviet Union, where she is

13 Anne Applebaum, *Red Famine: Stalin’s War on Ukraine* (London: Penguin Books, 2017), 124.

14 Ibid., 126.

15 Valdis O. Lumans, *Himmler’s Auxiliaries: The Volksdeutsche Mittelstelle and the German National Minorities of Europe, 1933–1945* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993), 129.

16 Gabriele Goldstone, *The Kulak’s Daughter* (Austin: Blooming Tree Press: 2009).

17 Gabriele Goldstone, *Broken Stone* (Winnipeg: Rebelight Publishing Inc. 2015).

18 Gabriele Goldstone, *Crow Stone* (Vancouver: Ronsdale 2022).

19 See Świetlicki, *Next-Generation*, 143–149.

interned until 1947. While Katya never supported Hitler, her German heritage is enough for the Soviets to position her as a Nazi.

Rachel Dean-Ruzicka argues that the creation of “one-dimensional evil Nazi characters” can be explained by the fact that by positioning the Nazis as the Others, present-day readers can instantly reject them: “if ‘they’ are evil, then ‘we’ must not be.”<sup>20</sup> Thus, depicting Germans in children’s Holocaust fiction as more than Nazi Bogeymen is crucial in showing that “the past is not self-evident.”<sup>21</sup> After all, as Snyder notes, “To dismiss the Nazis or the Soviets as beyond human concern or historical understanding is to fall into their moral trap. The safer route is to realize that their motives for mass killing, however revolting to us, made sense to them.”<sup>22</sup> In *Tainted Amber*, Goldstone attempts to do so by depicting the Third Reich as a “hornet’s nest” inhabited by “National Socialists – the Nazis,” an organization Katya regularly compares to the Bolsheviks led by Stalin, and Germans who are either enchanted with Hitler or disagree with him in silence, too afraid to voice their disapproval.<sup>23</sup>

Katya, traumatized by her experience under Stalin in Soviet Ukraine and Siberia, initially tries to disregard the spreading Nazi ideology and build a life in East Prussia. However, she soon begins to understand the deadly consequences of Nazism and the 1935 Nuremberg racial laws when they start affecting her personally. Hitler’s “portrait watches [her – M. Ś.] work” and everyday greetings change to Heil Hitler, which Katya says only once because “the words [felt – M. Ś.] like pebbles in [her – M. Ś.] throat.”<sup>24</sup> Her heroes, including Mann, whose books she reads hidden inside of Hitler’s *Mein Kampf*, are banned. The names of streets in East Prussia change to commemorate Nazi heroes, and anti-Semitic signs excluding Jews from Aryan spaces begin to appear in public spaces. Nazism infiltrates all spheres of life, including customs and traditions. Christmas can no longer be celebrated as the birth of Jesus, which reminds Katya of the Soviet ban on religion and the last Christmas she secretly observed with her brother Albert right before their exile to Siberia. Because all stars “belong to Communists and Jews,”<sup>25</sup> they cannot be used as decorations. Instead, the Christmas market in Königsberg, which

20 Rachel Dean-Ruzicka, *Tolerance Discourse and Young Adult Holocaust Literature: Engaging Difference and Identity* (London: Routledge, 2017), 122.

21 Ibid., 119.

22 Snyder, *Bloodlands*, 400.

23 Goldstone, *Tainted Amber*, 62.

24 Ibid., 155.

25 Ibid., 201.

Katya attends with her younger sisters Sofie and Marthe, who are “obedient little Nazi girls,” and Aunt Hannelore, reminds her of “a Nazi market” with “swastika-shaped cookie cutter[s]” and “miniature airplanes and balls painted with swastikas”<sup>26</sup> on the tree. Even the lyrics of *Silent Night* are nazified: “... all is bright/Only the Chancellor steadfast on fight/ Watches o’er Germany by day and by night...”<sup>27</sup> Although Katya is shocked to see the changes and notices the alarming similarities between Stalin’s and Hitler’s propaganda, her sisters accept them with no hesitation. “It’s not surprising that the Hitler Youth is so successful. Children are little copycats,”<sup>28</sup> notes the protagonist thinking about the anti-kulak lessons she was taught by her Soviet teacher.

Katya refuses to join The Faith and Beauty group, “a vanity club for women who want to primp themselves into ‘proper’ Nazi housewives”; after some hesitation, which leaves her “disgusted,” she also dismisses the opportunity to have her writing published in a Nazi women’s magazine.<sup>29</sup> The conversations Katya has with her family members further position her as an outsider who rejects Nazism and her family members as implicated subjects “filled with hope looking upon the swastika.”<sup>30</sup> While Katya recognizes the dangers of Nazism and anti-Semitism, her sisters and Aunt accept the new ideology and celebrate the success of Hitler’s welfare policies: “This government does a lot for young families [...]. A spa vacation to recover from a childbirth? How generous,”<sup>31</sup> notes Katya’s sympathetic Aunt Hannelore. At the Christmas market, she declares that she has “nothing against the Jews” and has “no contact of any kind with the Jews” not because of her anti-Semitism, but because they “don’t have much in common.”<sup>32</sup> Marthe, Katya’s ten-year-old sister, is more vocal in her hatred toward Jews and adds that the leader of The League of German Girls taught her that “Jews are an inferior race.”<sup>33</sup> This anti-Semitic remark is juxtaposed with Katya’s words: “We’re all the same. Germans, Jews, Germans from Russia, Russians [...] gypsies.”<sup>34</sup> In reply, Katya hears that

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26 Ibid., 202; 204.

27 Ibid., 205.

28 Ibid., 201.

29 Ibid., 127; 181.

30 Ibid., 140.

31 Ibid., 195–196.

32 Ibid., 210.

33 Ibid., 210.

34 Ibid., 210.

she should never “criticize the Fuhrer’s ideas.”<sup>35</sup> Marthe’s repetition of Nazi propaganda makes Katya think of “the USSR, except that back then [they – M. Ś.] weren’t supposed to criticize Comrade Stalin.”<sup>36</sup> Notably, Katya tries to excuse her “gullible” younger sisters “infected” with Nazism, believing that they are too young to remember that a few years earlier Stalin positioned their own kulak family as inferior.<sup>37</sup> However, Katya’s sisters’ willingness to embrace Nazism may also stem from their position as Volksdeutsche, Germans from Soviet Ukraine who are anti-communist and desperately want to fit in and belong.<sup>38</sup> Thus, the possibility of joining The League of German Girls allows them to prove their Germanness.

Katya rejects Nazism not only because of her haunting memories of Stalinism<sup>39</sup> but also due to the fact that her best friend is Jewish. Minna Epstein is a “confident, beautiful and reckless” girl who “has two Jewish grandparents and two Aryan grandparents, so under the Nuremberg laws of 1935, she’s a *Mischling*.”<sup>40</sup> She flirts with Helmut, the Richers’ handsome oldest son, who “carries an air of superiority about him” and wants to become an SS soldier.<sup>41</sup> Marina Warner argues that among “the most profound and puzzling features of the Bogeyman is his seductive power: he can charm at the same time as he repulses.”<sup>42</sup> Although Helmut charms Minna, Katya does not trust him, as he reminds her of another Bogeyman, Uncle Leo, a Bolshevik official who denounced her father. Thus, she warns Minna and asks her to proceed with caution. Before becoming a ruthless Nazi following Hitler’s slogan “*ein Volk, ein Reich, ein Fuhrer*” [one people, one empire, one leader] <sup>43</sup> Helmut emerges as an

35 Ibid., 210.

36 Ibid., 211.

37 Ibid., 213–214.

38 Lumans, *Himmler’s Auxiliaries*, 39. Moreover, Martha points to the attractiveness Nazism held for many German children, which is rarely discussed in children’s literature: “It’s so much fun. In the summer, we went camping and hiking. We travelled to the lake district in Masuren. [...] we stayed in log cabins right by a lake, and we built fires on the shoreline and stayed up late studying the stars, and now we’re learning to embroider and crochet, and we have some special Christmas projects.” Goldstone, *Tainted*, 191.

39 As Snyder argues, “People who experienced both Nazi and Stalinist power, almost everyone in the bloodlands, had every reason to compare the two systems,” *Bloodlands*, 408.

40 Goldstone, *Tainted*, 5; 29.

41 Ibid., 11; 5.

42 Quoted in Kokkola, *Representing*, 167.

43 Goldstone, *Tainted*, 250.

opportunist and a sexual predator. Soon after a trip to the seaside, where the girls go on with Helmut and his shy brother David, Minna, an aspiring actress, decides to leave the increasingly anti-Semitic East Prussia for Vienna. Before moving out, she gifts Katya an old desk to help her become a writer. When at the end of the novel Minna finally sends the protagonist the key to one of the drawers she could not open, Katya finds “a stunning piece of tear-shaped amber” with a “preserved ant caught inside”<sup>44</sup> and a letter from Helmut to Minna. Only then does Katya realize that Helmut, an aspiring SS soldier, raped Minna and forced her to get an abortion: “*See this insect, this life that has no future? You understand what must be done, don't you? This insect was in the wrong place at the wrong time. Beautiful but tragic.*”<sup>45</sup>

While Goldstone positions Helmut as a Nazi Bogeyman, other characters, including Katya's sympathetic younger brother Albert and Minna's former boyfriend Georg also enlist. Moreover, Helmut is juxtaposed with his younger brother David, Katya's love interest, who becomes a Nazi to prove his masculinity. In addition to Minna, Helmut also impregnates Gretchen, a teenage maid, but he refuses to raise the child as his own. Unequivocally supportive of Hitler, Gretchen decides to give birth at “a Lebensborn home, a place for unmarried mothers to have their so-called perfect children out of the public eye.”<sup>46</sup> Unlike Helmut, who rejects his own child and forces Minna to get an abortion, David would like to become a father and “teach [his – M. Š.] children how to ride horses.”<sup>47</sup> However, he is deprived of this opportunity because of the Nazi eugenics. As an epileptic, David is forcefully sterilized in accordance with the 1935 Law for the Prevention of Hereditarily Diseased Offspring. Because in the Third Reich imperfection – like Jews – is not allowed, the authorities call David a “genetically inferior [...] life unworthy of life” that cannot “produce a worthy German.”<sup>48</sup> Right before the sterilization, David gets drunk and wants to force Katya to have sex, which he sees as his last chance to become a father. Upon Helmut's suggestion, and despite Frau Richter's<sup>49</sup> disapproval, David's name, which “sounds too Jewish” is changed

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 244.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 245.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 248.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 118.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 169.

<sup>49</sup> As Rothberg notes, “most people deny, look away from, or simply accept the benefits of evil in both its extreme and everyday forms.” Rothberg, *Implicated*, 20. In *Tainted Amber*, such a character is Frau Richter, the mother of Helmut and David, a sympathetic woman



to Klaus, a “solid German name.”<sup>50</sup> When he comes back after the procedure, “his eyes are dull, like a sick horse.”<sup>51</sup> Katya’s beloved David, who loves horses, tries to fit in by becoming “Klaus, the brash, Helmut-like alter ego [...] who’s trying to fit in with his brother’s Nazi cohorts.”<sup>52</sup> Thus, even though he does not believe in Hitler, he accepts Nazism as a protective strategy, his only opportunity to demonstrate that he is “worthy of life.” In the opening chapter of *Crow Stone*, set in 1944, David/Klaus dies while proving his worth on the east front.

### Implicated Volksdeutsche in Nazi-occupied Ukraine

Marsha Forchuk Skrypuch, who wrote a blurb for the back cover of *Tainted Amber*, is currently the most popular Canadian author of middle-grade historical fiction. Since 1996, she has introduced various suppressed topics to Anglophone children’s literature, including the Armenian Genocide, the First World War internment of Ukrainians in Canada, and the Holodomor.<sup>53</sup> In the six books forming her commercially and critically-successful Second World War trilogies,<sup>54</sup> Skrypuch demonstrates the scale of Soviet oppression and the power of Nazi propaganda. Like Goldstone, Skrypuch condemns anti-Semitism and points to Soviet and Nazi atrocities. However, she focuses on the war experiences of ethnic Ukrainians.

Ukraine was central in Hitler’s Lebensraum project and the Hunger Plan. Germans were supposed to “deport, kill, assimilate, or enslave the native

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who gives Katya Mann’s books, likes Minna, and disapproves of Nazism. Still, she follows all Nazi rules and knows about Helmut’s actions. Her position can be explained by the limited opportunities women had in the Third Reich and the fear of being targeted by the Nazis because epilepsy runs in her family. Moreover, because her mother came from the “Masuren Lakes district, a beautiful area where Germans, Soviets and Poles all bicker for ownership,” she fears that the Nazis may question her Aryan status. Thus, despite her beliefs, Frau Richter officially embraces Nazism as a protective strategy. Goldstone, *Tainted*, 229–230.

50 Ibid., 71.

51 Ibid., 153.

52 Ibid., 220.

53 See Świetlicki, *Next-Generation*, 19–21.

54 The first trilogy consists of *Stolen Child* (2010 – US title *Stolen Girl*, 2019), *Making Bombs for Hitler* (2012), and *Underground Soldier* (2014 – US title *The Below*, 2018); the second one is formed by *Don’t Tell the Enemy* (2018 – US title *Don’t Tell the Nazis*, 2019); *Trapped in Hitler’s Web* (2020), and *Traitors Among Us* (2021). Notably, Skrypuch’s first book focused on the Second World War and the implicated position of Ukrainian Nazi collaborators was a novel titled *Hope’s War* (2001).

populations, and bring order and prosperity to a humbled frontier” by murdering “between thirty-one and forty-five million people, mostly Slavs,” including “sixty-five percent of the west Ukrainians.”<sup>55</sup> The Slavic population was to be replaced by ethnic Germans who were to build “utopian farming communities that would produce a bounty of food for Europe” in “a vast frontier empire ruled by Germans, bereft of Jews, and scantily peopled by Slavs reduced to slavery.”<sup>56</sup> Although the Wehrmacht failed to implement Hitler’s Hunger Plan, “Germans starved Soviet citizens anyway, less from political dominion than political desperation.”<sup>57</sup>

*Don’t Tell the Enemy* is loosely based on the story of Kateryna Sikorka and her daughter Krystia, who hid their Jewish neighbors in Nazi-occupied Ukraine and were named Righteous Among the Nations by Yad Vashem. The novel, set in Viteretz, a town based on Pidhaitsi, is the first volume in Skrypuch’s second trilogy and showcases the fate of Ukrainians who, after two years of Soviet occupation, in 1941 initially welcomed the Nazis as liberators. As Anne Applebaum notes, “anyone who hoped for a better life under German occupation had their expectations swiftly dashed.”<sup>58</sup> After the initial optimism caused by the arrival of the Nazis, Krystia, the twelve-year-old narrator and protagonist of *Don’t Tell the Enemy*, begins to see more and more similarities between the Nazis and the Soviets, who oppressed Viteretz for the last two years. Contrary to some hopeful adults, she almost immediately realizes that the Nazis are “not the cultured Germans who believed in democracy and brought freedom.”<sup>59</sup>

The first Germans who come to Viteretz are Nazi soldiers and some Volksdeutsche from Bukovyna, but they are soon joined by “true Nazi believers” from the Reich.<sup>60</sup> Krystia notices that the Nazis like making lists and dividing people into categories while paying particular attention to their heritage. Although at first she struggles to understand the Nazi beliefs, Krystia eventually realizes that they believe there are different categories of people – the

55 Snyder, *Bloodlands*, 160.

56 Ibid., 160; 394.

57 Ibid., 169.

58 Applebaum, *Red Famine*, 328.

59 Skrypuch, *Don’t Tell The Enemy*, 59.

60 Ibid., 67. Notably, in the novel’s author’s note Skrypuch highlights that “German and Nazi are not interchangeable: German and Volksdeutsche refer to ethnicity, not political beliefs. Some Germans and Volksdeutsche who opposed the Nazis became victims too. Others were executed or sent to slave labor camps by the Soviets.” Skrypuch, *Don’t Tell*, 183.

superior Aryans and inferior subhuman like Slavs and Jews. This reflects the Nazi "conviction that all of humankind belonged to one of two racial categories, the *Herrenvolk*, the ruling people, and the *Untermensch*, or 'subhumans'."<sup>61</sup> Together with her mother and younger sister Maria, Krystia has to work as a servant at the Nazi Commandant's house, where she observes the first Nazi execution of Jews and is told by the Commandant's wife: "You Slavs are all alike. You can't think further than your own shallow needs."<sup>62</sup> While Krystia's family works for the Nazis, they have no choice to say no. Moreover, it provides them with an opportunity to learn more about the political situation, including the surprising fact that "the Soviets and Britain were now on the *same* side of the war, fighting the Nazis together."<sup>63</sup> Krystia struggles to understand the reasons behind this cooperation: "Surely the British knew that the murderous Soviets were not much different than the Nazis? Couldn't the British fight them both?"<sup>64</sup> Thus, it can be argued that Skrypuch attempts to challenge the simplistic version of history with which many North American readers may be familiar. While Jews in Viteretz are put in a ghetto and Slavs starve, Krystia is surprised when she witnesses the commandant's wife and her friends "talk[ing] about silly things like dresses and cake recipes. Didn't they know that we were in the middle of a war?"<sup>65</sup> she asks.

In *Don't Tell the Enemy*, Skrypuch focuses on the cooperation of Ukrainians and Jews, but she also showcases the difficult situation of all inhabitants of Ukraine caused by Hitler's plans. Notably, after the harvests all produce is confiscated by the Nazis, which reminds Krystia of the actions of the Soviet regime. Krystia's family begins to starve, yet Frau Hermann, the Commandant's wife, does not care, "except for the fact that [the Slavs] might steal food from her."<sup>66</sup> Consequently, Slavs can no longer work in the kitchen, but have to "carry trays of food, though, and it nearly drove [Krystia – M. Ś.] mad seeing meat and cheese and buns, and smelling them all."<sup>67</sup> Frau Hermann eventually fires Krystia and her mother because "the sight of [their – M. Ś.] gaunt faces ruined her appetite"; therefore, as the protagonist says, "by late

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61 Lumans, *Himmler's Auxiliaries*, 20.

62 Skrypuch, *Don't Tell*, 52.

63 *Ibid.*, 70.

64 *Ibid.*, 70.

65 *Ibid.*, 73.

66 *Ibid.*, 89.

67 *Ibid.*, 89–90.

February, [they – M. Ś.] were like walking skeletons.”<sup>68</sup> Importantly, the protagonist does not compare her situation to that of her Jewish friends. As Mr. Segal, Krystia’s Jewish neighbor says: “We’re all living under the Hunger Plan, but you know they have worse intentions towards us Jews [...]. Your family might live through this occupation, but if even a fraction of the rumours are true, we need to get Jews out of here.”<sup>69</sup> While Ukrainian and Poles are starving, the situation of Jews is even worse, for they have no farm animals. Initially, they can buy overpriced food from Volksdeutsche and are helped by Gentiles. Eventually, all Jews of Viteretz are put in a ghetto, and many die of starvation or freeze to death in winter. Nazis confiscate food from the local farmers because, at that time, Nazi soldiers in the Soviet Union were told that in order to get food, they “have to starve the surrounding population.”<sup>70</sup>

While Goldstone’s *Tainted Amber* depicts the experience of Katya, a Volksdeutsche who moved to The Reich before the war, Skrypuch’s *Don’t Tell the Enemy* features ethnic German secondary characters who are forced to move to Nazi-occupied Ukraine and actively or passively participate in the Holocaust.<sup>71</sup> Thus, the novel showcases not only Nazi Bogeymen trope in the form of the Commandant – based on *Kriminalpolizei* Willy Hermann – and his ruthless wife, but also the implication of the Volksdeutsche, who were supposed to take over the properties of Jews and Ukrainians and play the role of “the human building blocks for the new order.”<sup>72</sup> Volksdeutsche Mittelstelle, “a Nazi party organ founded in 1935 to centralize and coordinate all organizations and activities in the Reich dealing with the Volksdeutsche” confiscated Jewish and Slavic houses, “personal belongings, from furniture to socks and shoes,” and clothes, which “became available as the deportations and the final solution commenced.”<sup>73</sup> Thus, as Snyder notes, “German children wore the socks of Jewish children shot in Minsk, German men the watches of Jewish men shot at Babi Yar, German women the fur coats of Jewish women shot at Malý Trastsianets.”<sup>74</sup>

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 130–131.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 91.

<sup>70</sup> Snyder, *Bloodlands*, 170.

<sup>71</sup> Świetlicki, *Next-Generation*, 188–204.

<sup>72</sup> Lumans, *Himmler’s Auxiliaries*, 13.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 202.

<sup>74</sup> Snyder, *Bloodlands*, 396.

Even though some Volksdeutsche in *Don't Tell the Enemy* emerge as victims of Stalin and Hitler, they also benefit from the Nazi policies. Herr Zimmer is a sympathetic Volksdeutsche who shows Krystia kindness but takes over her father's old workshop. Krystia is surprised when Zimmer says that he does not support the Nazis and shares his story of Soviet repression: "The Soviets took over my shop and our house during the time of the Nazi-Soviet Pact. We were deported to the Reich. My soon was drafted into the German army, and I was selected to live here. I pray every day that my son survives the war. But even more, I pray that my son does not become a Nazi."<sup>75</sup> Another sympathetic character is Frau Lange, who is pregnant and moves into the house of Doctor Mina, a Jewish doctor for whom Krystia's mother used to work, and buys milk from Krystia. The protagonist notices that her new neighbor likes surrounding herself with pretty things, which makes her wonder: "where it had come from. Were the old owners now in a slave camp or ghetto? [...] How could they seem so normal, even almost nice, yet live like vultures – benefiting from the destruction of others?"<sup>76</sup>

Rothberg notes that implication is multidirectional because "it does not remain limited to one set of entanglements but encompasses a range of powers and interests that frame our actions."<sup>77</sup> Frau Gertrude Schneider and her daughter Marga are the most important Volksdeutsche characters in *Don't Tell the Enemy* who reveal the complexity of implication and the fact that in the bloodlands "it is hard to find political collaboration with the Germans that is not related to a previous experience of Soviet rule."<sup>78</sup> When Krystia sees them for the first time, they are exhausted, dirty, and can barely walk. Desperate and hungry, Frau Schneider asks the protagonist for some milk for her daughter. Krystia feeds them and is thanked for this act of kindness. The poor German woman and her daughter speak Ukrainian because they are refugees from Bukovyna, who were also victimized by the Soviet regime: "The Soviets put my father in a slave-labour camp in Siberia [...]. Mama and I were rescued by the Germans. This whole area is now part of the Reich, so there will be a lot more of us Volksdeutsche settling here," says Marga.<sup>79</sup>

<sup>75</sup> Skrypuch, *Don't Tell*, 104–105.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 151.

<sup>77</sup> Michael Rothberg, *The Implicated Subject: Beyond Victims and Perpetrators* (Redford: Stanford University Press, 2019), 145.

<sup>78</sup> Snyder, *Bloodlands*, 397.

<sup>79</sup> Skrypuch, *Don't Tell*, 39.

After the war, the officials of Volksdeutsche Mittelstelle claimed that they “had nothing to do with the final solution, concentration camps, deportations, and the like”; moreover, they “emphasized their lack of anti-Semitism and even cited instances of individual efforts to save Jews.”<sup>80</sup> However, “claims of total innocence in these matters and assertions of ignorance about atrocities are incredible,” as most Volksdeutsche directly or indirectly benefited from Hitler’s policies.<sup>81</sup> The Schneiders become Krystia’s neighbors because Aunt Iryna is forced to leave her house. When the Nazi official tells Aunt Iryna that apart from her personal belongings “everything else is to remain in the house,” Krystia realizes that “he didn’t specifically say to leave the cow and the chickens.”<sup>82</sup> Marga, who quickly joins The League of German Girls, accuses Krystia of stealing their cow and chickens and threatens “to tell the Commandant [...] your whole family is going to be in big trouble.”<sup>83</sup> Krystia is afraid of Marga’s threat, but her mother suggests going to the Schneiders and once again showing them kindness by giving sharing some milk and eggs. When Krystia goes to their house a day after witnessing Frau Schneider sorting the personal belongings of the Jews killed by the Nazi Commandant, she sees “Marga [wearing – M. Ś.] the baker’s white trousers and shirt,” and “Frau Schneider [...] the dogcatcher’s grey shirt and brown trousers.”<sup>84</sup> This sight makes Krystia think of vultures. Krystia explains Aunt Iryna’s situation to Frau Schneider, who understands and gives the protagonist tinned pork because “the Volksdeutsche Liaison Office [Volksdeutsche Mittelstelle – M. Ś.] acts like a welfare agency, supplying [them – M. Ś.] with all that [they – M. Ś.] need”; she also asks Marga and Krystia to shake hands, saying “we’re in the midst of war, but all the more reason for human kindness.”<sup>85</sup> Krystia struggles with understanding the paradox of showing kindness and wearing the clothes of the dead: “it was not a kind woman I had seen the day before, coldly sorting through the clothing of murdered Jews.”<sup>86</sup> Despite singular acts of kindness, “evidence reveals that in certain situations VoMi and the people working under its

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80 Lumans, *Himmler’s Auxiliaries*, 202.

81 *Ibid.*, 202.

82 Skrypuch, *Don’t Tell*, 37.

83 *Ibid.*, 57.

84 *Ibid.*, 63.

85 *Ibid.*, 65.

86 *Ibid.*, 65.

authority either assisted in anti-Jewish measures or exploited the plight of Jews to benefit the Volksdeutsche."<sup>87</sup>

Although it "is tempting to say that a Nazi murderer is beyond the pale of understanding," trying to understand the perpetrators can prevent us from failing to recognize our own implication.<sup>88</sup> Marga in *Don't Tell the Enemy* wants to fit in and prove that she is worth being in The League of German Girls, but she follows her mother's advice and does not tell the Commandant about the missing cow. However, she is the one who unwillingly denounces Krystia's family. The day after Krystia's mother is hanged for hiding Jews, the protagonist sees Marga with a bruised face, wearing a dress that belonged to Krystia's Jewish classmate, and confronts her: "Why did you tell the Commandant that we were hiding Jews?"<sup>89</sup> Marga's answer is surprising, for she starts crying and says: "You were pumping much more water. They beat me and still I didn't tell them. But they were going to kill Mutter if I didn't say something..."<sup>90</sup> Instead of condemning the Volksdeutsche girl who had lost her father, the protagonist only thinks: "What would I have done to save my own mother from death?"<sup>91</sup> Thus, Marga emerges not as a one-dimensional perpetrator but an implicated subject.

## Conclusion

"History is a hunt for truth, understanding, and responsibility, not a scroll of sacrifice, blame, and meaning," writes Snyder in *Bloodlands*.<sup>92</sup> However, until recently the focus of Anglophone children's and Young Adult authors of Holocaust fiction was predominately on depicting the Jewish sacrifice and the Nazi blame. Still, as Rothberg observes, a narrative "based on clear-cut visions of victims and perpetrators of innocence and guilt evacuates the political sphere of complexity and reduces it to a morality tale."<sup>93</sup> In addition to such oversimplified texts, numerous new books, usually ones presenting previously underrepresented perspectives, are also regularly published. After

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<sup>87</sup> Ibid., 202.

<sup>88</sup> Snyder, *Bloodlands*, 400.

<sup>89</sup> Skrypuć, *Don't Tell*, 172.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid., 172.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid., 172.

<sup>92</sup> Snyder, *Bloodlands*, 408.

<sup>93</sup> Rothberg, *Implicated*, 139.

all, as Hamida Bosmajian notes in her influential book *Sparing the Child: Grief and the Unspeakable in Youth Literature about Nazism and the Holocaust* (2002), “no one narrative for young reader is sufficient in knowledge or understanding of Nazism and the Holocaust.”<sup>94</sup> Among the most interesting novels introducing new voices to historical fiction are those by Canadian authors whose parents or grandparents were born in present-day Ukraine, such as Gabriele Goldstone and Marsha Forchuk Skrypuch. Books like *Tainted Amber* and *Don’t Tell the Enemy* can familiarize young readers with the complex history of the distant bloodlands and encourage them to look for truth, understanding, and responsibility. Goldstone and Skrypuch point to the role of propaganda, ideology, and opportunism in the spread of Nazism, anti-Semitism, and Stalinism. Thus, amongst Nazi Bogeymen and innocent victims, both novels feature implicated characters entangled between Hitler and Stalin.

Notably, as Rothberg argues, “the concept of the gray zone can transcend the Holocaust and take on broader reach related to the exploration of implication and implicated subjects.”<sup>95</sup> Historical novels by Goldstone and Skrypuch can help Anglophone young readers better understand not only the entangled history of the bloodlands but also the present-day Russo-Ukrainian War and the implicated position of Russians and Putin’s international supporters.<sup>96</sup> Although many Westerners have actively supported Ukraine, others have failed to recognize the transcultural character of the Russo-Ukrainian War, its global consequences, and its links to the complex history of the Second World War. Positioning “German crimes [as] metaphysical and Soviet ones [as] meaningless was politically convenient for Vladimir Putin’s regime, which did its best to export the idea”<sup>97</sup>. In his justification of the ongoing Russo-Ukrainian War, which he calls a “special military operation” conducted to “denazify”<sup>98</sup> Ukraine, Vladimir Putin has repeatedly referred

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94 Hamida Bosmajian, *Sparing the Child: Grief and the Unspeakable in Youth Literature about Nazism and the Holocaust* (London: Routledge, 2002), xx.

95 Rothberg, *Implicated*, 39.

96 See Serhii Plokhy, *The Russo-Ukrainian War: The Return of History* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2023).

97 Snyder, *Bloodlands*, 408.

98 Putin has frequently called Ukrainians Nazis and referred to the Second World War collaboration between Ukrainian nationalists and the Nazis in Western Ukraine. See Świetlicki 168–177. However, “many Ukrainians saw the Russian invaders as the true Nazis” because, as Serhii Plokhy observes, “the Russian occupation of Ukrainian cities and villages was reminiscent of scenes of the Nazi occupation of Ukraine in World War II.” See Plokhy, *Russo-Ukrainian*, 166.



to the myth of the Great Patriotic War – as the Second World War is known in Russia. This myth does not include Stalin's collaboration with Hitler between 1939 and 1941 and the 1939 double invasion of Poland – which at that time included parts of present-day western Ukraine. According to the official historical discourse in Russia, the Red Army only liberated Europe and defeated Nazism, positioned as the greatest and inexplicable evil. The Nazi-Soviet collaboration, anti-Semitic pogroms, and ethnic cleansings of Poles and Ukrainians are not part of the official history. Thus, the lack of historical knowledge, combined with state propaganda, makes it difficult for many present-day Russians, who are used to thinking of themselves as the victors or the victims, to recognize their own entangled history of implication.

## Abstract

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*Trapped Between Hitler and Stalin: Nazi Bogeymen and Implicated Subjects in Canadian Children's Historical Fiction*

This article studies the portrayal of Nazi and German characters in Gabriele Goldstone's *Tainted Amber* (2021), a Young Adult novel set in East Prussia right before the war, and Marsha Forchuk Skrypuch's middle-grade book *Don't Tell the Enemy* (2018), set in Nazi-occupied western Ukraine. The article demonstrates that Skrypuch and Goldstone point to the role of propaganda, ideology, and opportunism in the spread of Nazism, anti-Semitism, and Stalinism. Amongst stereotypical Nazi Bogeymen and innocent victims, both novels feature characters entangled between Hitler and Stalin that emerge as what Michael Rothberg termed implicated subjects.

## Keywords

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Volksdeutsche, children's literature, bloodlands, Canada, Ukraine, implicated subject





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*other special issues*

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*Holocaust in Literary and Cultural Studies*

*Anthropology in Literary Studies*

*Postcolonial or Postdependence Studies?*

*Nonfiction, Reportage, Testimony*

*The Humanities and Posthumanism*

*Visual Literacy*

*Memory and Place*

*Literature and Society*

*Migrant Literature*

*Convention and Revolution*

*Polish Memory*

*The New Humanities*