

AN INTERDISCIPLINARY JOURNAL FOR HOLOCAUST EDUCATORS • A ROTHMAN FOUNDATION PUBLICATION

# PRISM

YESHIVA UNIVERSITY • AZRIELI GRADUATE SCHOOL OF JEWISH EDUCATION AND ADMINISTRATION



*Baba Dora's photograph  
Hung in my bedroom  
She was murdered  
On the street in Poland  
No words were spoken about that*

*When I asked, father grew sad  
He said I looked like her*

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#### ABOUT THE FRONT COVER

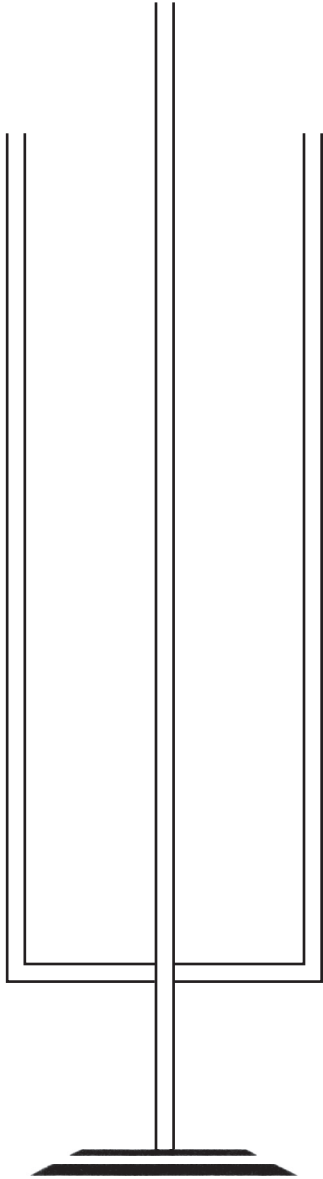
“This old and torn photograph of my father’s mother, Dora Rosenberg, hung in my bedroom from the time I was a child. Baba Dora is an enigma; no one really spoke about her, so I know little about her. I do know that the pin she wears is gold with black pearls and says ‘Dora’; I have it. I do know that ‘Stella’ was the photography studio where she and her family went to have their pictures taken to send to relatives. I do know that my father would say that I looked like her. At times, when Father looked at me, he seemed to look through or beyond me, and I always thought he was seeing his mother. I put my high school yearbook photo next to her picture because thoughts of her came to dominate my life. I feel that because I never got to know her or hear her experiences, I spent over a decade interviewing survivors.

“When I was 5, and Father was telling me bedtime stories about his childhood and looking at his mother’s picture, I would assure him I would go back to see his house in Zawiercie, Poland. When I grew up, I think Baba Dora pulled me there. The small talk I had heard was she had a clothing-soap factory. I imagined it a big building, but when I arrived at her home, I saw a little cottage in the back of the house, and the neighbors, who would not let me in, told me that was the factory.

“Her passport indicates that she came to New York, where her husband, Sam, an actor in the Yiddish theater, was living with their three children. She chose to go back home, perhaps for a visit, and never came back. My Zawiercie friends, Ariel and Yacov, told me that she was ‘shot on the street during the *Aktion* of ‘42.’ ‘Yes, yes,’ nodded Yacov. ‘I remember that day, very hot. On that day, they killed all the old people.’”

— BREINDEL LIEBA KASHER





In memory of  
**Henry I. Rothman ז"ל**  
and  
**Bertha G. Rothman ע"ה**  
**לחמו מלחמות ה'**

*"who lived and fought  
for Torah-true Judaism"*

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- Poetry submissions must be sent to **Dr. Charles Adès Fishman**, our poetry editor, at [carolus@optimum.net](mailto:carolus@optimum.net). Poetry should be single-spaced. Include your name and email address on each poem.
- Photos and artwork must be attached as separate JPEG or TIFF files and accompanied by permissions and captions. All digital image files need to be a minimum of 5x7 inches and 300-600 dpi. Essays accompanied by documentary photos and artwork are given special consideration.
- Length of manuscript may vary; we seek essays from 4 to 12 double-spaced pages, with a maximum of 3,500 words including references and end notes.
- Each issue, including all photos, will be available as a PDF on our web site, [www.yu.edu/prism](http://www.yu.edu/prism), so permissions must include rights for online as well as print publication.

CONTACT DR. KAREN SHAWN AT [SHAWN@YU.EDU](mailto:SHAWN@YU.EDU) WITH QUESTIONS, SUGGESTIONS, AND/OR QUERIES.

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# Contents

- 1 Introduction  
KAREN SHAWN
- 3 The Man in the  
Checkerboard Outfit  
(personal narrative)  
JUSTIN ROSS MUCHNICK
- 8 *Kristallnacht*  
(poetry)  
AARON FISCHER
- 9 Living Holocaust Legacies:  
Personal Story-Telling for  
the 21st Century  
(literature)  
KAREN I. TREIGER
- 14 My Father Tells Me How He  
Met My Mother  
(prose poetry)  
JOHN GUZLOWSKI
- 16 Objects as Agents of Memory:  
A Study of Nava Semel's  
"A Woman From Fayum"  
(literature)  
SMADAR FALK-PERETZ
- 22 My Mother's Photograph  
(poetry)  
ANNETTE BIALIK HARCHIK
- 23 The Holocaust in Slovakia:  
Jewish Letters to Jozef Tiso  
(1939–1944)  
(historical research)  
MADELINE VADKERTY
- 28 Look to the Sky  
(prose poetry)  
TOBA ABRAMCZYK
- 29 History, Memory, and  
Testimony: Holocaust-  
Survivor Aircrew Members  
in the Israeli Air Force  
(case study)  
LEA GANOR
- 36 Re(vision)  
(poetry)  
DEBORAH KAHAN KOLB
- 37 Malva Schaleck: A Resistant  
Artist in Terezin  
(art history)  
PNINA ROSENBERG
- 45 Of Feathers, Of Flight  
(poetry)  
ADELE KENNY
- 46 *Quand même*, Despite Everything:  
Researching Persecuted Artists  
(art history)  
RACHEL PERRY
- 54 Encounter with a  
Shoah survivor  
(poetry)  
LOU ELLA HICKMAN
- 55 Treblinka  
(poetry)  
KURT BORCHARD
- 56 Maastricht, January 2007  
(poetry)  
JANET R. KIRCHHEIMER
- 58 Visitors from America  
(poetry)  
DAVID RAY
- 60 "Of Course, We Don't Deny the  
Holocaust": Holocaust Distortion  
in Contemporary Croatia  
(current events)  
SVEN MILEKIĆ
- 66 Holocaust History and Memory  
as a Political Tool: Contemporary  
Disputes in Poland  
(current events)  
AGNIESZKA ZAJĄCZKOWSKA-DROŻDŻ
- 69 Family  
(poetry)  
ANNETTE BIALIK HARCHIK
- 70 Toward A Genealogy  
(poetry)  
JOHN AMEN
- 72 Holocaust Education in  
Europe: Snapshots From  
Austria, Romania, and Poland  
(pedagogy)  
JENNIFER LEMBERG,  
NADINE ULSEß-SCHURDA,  
OANA NESTIAN-SANDU,  
& KATARZYNA ŁAZIUK
- 77 Lost Language  
(poetry)  
GAIL NEWMAN
- 78 She Is Now Ready  
(poetry)  
MIKE FRENKEL
- 80 About the Contributors
- 81 Acknowledgments, Credits,  
and Permissions



## Introduction

This issue marks our 12th year of serving the field of Holocaust education.

Our unique, award-winning journal has been ordered by readers in more than 45 countries and in every American state. It has been viewed and downloaded from [www.yu.edu/azrieli/prism-journal](http://www.yu.edu/azrieli/prism-journal) many thousands of times, and it has been utilized at teacher education conferences and workshops across the United States. Thanks to our most generous benefactor, Henry Rothman, and the Henry, Bertha, and Edward Rothman Foundation, and with additional support from the Azrieli Graduate School of Jewish Education and Administration at Yeshiva University, the journal has for these 12 years been a gift to educators, students, historians, scholars, librarians, survivors, and all readers who seek to learn more about this most complex subject. We are grateful to and proud of the many authors we have published and the artists whose works we have featured.

As we look to the future and hope to continue to serve the field most effectively, we are considering changes in the size and scope of the journal. We continue to welcome submissions, of course, now in particular on Holocaust pedagogy, and on art and literature—narratives, diaries, memoirs, testimonies, short stories, poetry—and their possibilities and implications for teaching. Because this journal is published by Yeshiva University's Azrieli Graduate School of Jewish Education, we want to showcase the excellent and generally unsung work accomplished each day in the world's classrooms. We encourage you to submit Holocaust art, photography, poetry, stories, and testimonial narratives that you have taught, along with a brief discussion of how and why they succeeded—or did not succeed—in meeting your educational goals.

We believe, as Booker Prize-winning author Michael Ondaatje writes in *The Cat's Table*, that “what is interesting and important happens mostly in secret, in places where there is no power” (p. 75). We believe that profound truths of the Holocaust can be uncovered by educators whose teaching prompts questions, who inspire understanding of a piece of art drawn under duress, a photograph taken in secret, a memoir recalling a conversation between a Jewish mother and her family during that fraught time. We believe that good teaching must include the arts as well as writing of all kinds, words that humanize the statistics, that tell or illuminate the personal, individual story, and we hope this lens on pedagogy will encourage educators who teach history to incorporate and teach well these powerful genres, as their colleagues in the English language



arts and the humanities already do.

This issue offers art, poetry, and narratives that, we trust, will inspire educators to incorporate them into their Holocaust units and invite students to engage actively as they respond. For example, Justin Ross Muchnick, in a personal narrative, introduces us to Ziggy, a survivor he befriended when he was 12. Karen I. Treiger reflects on and reviews 10 books by second- and third-generation authors and others, all of whom explore survivors' stories through the filter of their

personal experiences. Smadar Falk-Peretz analyzes “A Woman From Fayum,” a provocative and complex second-generation narrative by the late Nava Semel, who was remembered by Smadar in our 2019 issue. Two poets, Lou Ella Hickman, who reflects on a chance meeting with a survivor, and Kurt Borchard, whose musings on how the world could continue as usual in the wake of the Holocaust, encourage our students—and us—to identify some of the many essential questions raised by its study. We are grateful to Charles Adès Fishman, our poetry editor, who has brought to these pages the works of these and our other poets: Aaron Fischer, John Guzowski, Annette Bialik Harchik, Toba Abramczyk, Deborah Kahan Kolb, Adele Kenny, Janet R. Kirchheimer, David Ray, John Amen, Mike Frenkel, and Gail Newman. All of these writers tell a story through their poetry, and each offering brings a fresh perspective to this fraught subject. These poems and essays are grist for the teaching mill, and we encourage our readers to teach one or more and to share their classroom outcomes in essays submitted for consideration by July 15, 2020, for our next issue.

Of course, also within art and history lie stories. *PRISM* art editor Pnina Rosenberg, who never fails to weave the facts behind a work of art into a teachable story, details the paintings and personality of the Terezin-imprisoned Malva Schalek. Rachel Perry's account of her Haifa University students' exploration of the works of “persecuted artists” is both a tale of active, engaged, projectbased student learning and a story of the art and the artists. Her essay adds to our understanding of both excellent educational practice and of the resilience of Jews who endured the Holocaust.

Fascinating letters written by desperate Jews in Slovakia to Jozef Tiso pleading for help, as documented in the essay by Madeline Vadkerty, bring to life the plight of these individuals, illustrating the value and results of careful and scholarly research. So, too, do the remarkable stories highlighted in Lea Ganor's account of survivors in the Israel Air Force. Lea shared some of these testimonies at

The Future of Holocaust Testimonies V, a conference organized by Professor Boaz Cohen in Akko in 2019, and after hearing these accounts, I invited her to write an expanded version of her presentation, which she did, to our delight. Also at that academic gathering, Agnieszka Zajączkowska-Drożdż shared her research on contemporary disputes over Holocaust history and memory in Poland and agreed to write about it for this issue. We are grateful to the authors, and we thank Professor Cohen for the excellent conference he convened.

Sven Milekic adds to our understanding of Holocaust distortion in Croatia, and we thank *PRISM* board member Efraim Zuroff, a leader in exposing this insidious form of denial affecting Eastern Europe, for introducing us to Sven and his work. Three educators, Nadine Ulseß-Schurda, Oana Nestian-Sandu, and Katarzyna Łaziuk, report on how the Holocaust is taught in Austria, Romania, and Poland, respectively. Their overviews are introduced by Jennifer Lemberg, who works with these and hundreds of other teachers in her role as codirector of the Olga Lengyl Institute (TOLI), based in New York City.

Azrieli's Dean Rona Novick, as always, supports and encourages our work and gives us the freedom to experiment. Associate editor Rabbi Dr. Moshe Sokolow is an invaluable reader and sounding board. Louisa Wolf is indispensable to this publication in ways too numerous to mention. *PRISM* would not be possible at all without the superb skills and the gracious and patient attention to detail of copy editor David B. Greenberg and designer Emily Scherer Steinberg, and our gratitude to them is bound-less; without them, quite simply, there would be no journal.

Finally, to our devoted peer reviewers, our board members, and our most generous and stalwart benefactors, the Rothmans, we are indebted to you for your continued help, appreciation, and encouragement.

#### REFERENCE

Ondaatje, M. (2011). *The cat's table*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.

Karen Shawn



In this reflective reminiscence, Justin Ross Muchnick introduces us to Ziggy, “the man in the checkerboard outfit” who lives at Heritage Pointe, a Jewish old-age home—Ziggy, a survivor you won’t soon forget. Justin met Ziggy a decade ago as part of his mitzvah project.

*Justin Ross Muchnick*

## The Man in the Checkerboard Outfit

### 2010

I gaze at the brown-paneled door of Apartment 264, not quite knowing what to expect behind it. I am a year away from my bar mitzvah, the day that I become a man within my Jewish community, and I am here as part of that ascent into adulthood.

An important component of the bar mitzvah process, at least at my Reform synagogue, is the mitzvah project, an individually designed community service project that somehow reflects the personal interests of the soon-to-be Jewish adult. One friend of mine is serving food at a soup kitchen; another is collecting used sports equipment for a donation drive. As it happens, I spend my free time reading history books—biographies, military histories, anything that I can get my hands on—so I knew from the beginning that I wanted to find a project that would incorporate my particular passion for the past.

I stumbled upon Heritage Pointe, the local Jewish old-age home, while surfing the Web for ideas for my mitzvah project, and I called to ask about volunteering there. The woman on the other end of the line explained that she ran a program that matched teens and preteens with members of the retirement community “to brighten a resident’s day” through regular one-on-one meetings. This seemed like a perfect way to fulfill my mitzvah project requirement while learning about history from someone who lived through it, so I signed up immediately, with just one special request: by any chance, does Heritage Pointe have any Holocaust survivors with whom I could be paired?

And so I find myself in Heritage Pointe’s long, second-floor residential hallway, with a closed brown door standing between me and a man who endured one of humanity’s most terrible tragedies, who is a living testament to my people’s suffering and survival. As I bring my hand to the door to knock, I hesitate, realizing that I know absolutely nothing about this man other than his designation as a “survivor.” Will he take offense to my curiosity? Will our personalities mesh? Will we even be able to hold a conversation? I take a breath, then rap my knuckles against the door. My

voice wavers, but I call out, “Hello, Mr. Silbert.”

Mr. Silbert opens the door. He is wearing a homemade black pendant necklace stamped with the word “Ziggy” in gold letters. His paisley button-down shirt is cuffed at the sleeves and tucked into a pair of blue jeans. His comically oversized golden belt buckle, like something out of the wardrobe department of a Hollywood B Western, catches and reflects the light streaming in from the hallway. His puffy Reebok running shoes add at least an inch and a half to his slight frame.

My eyes move past the man himself to his modest living room, filled with collections, gadgets, and ephemera amassed through almost 90 years of life. Hundreds of books are arranged haphazardly on a bookcase—some stacked atop one another, some in rows, a few cantilevered over the edge—and about 30 more dominate a humble side-table that sags under the weight of thousands of pages of knowledge. As I step into the room, I see diminutive hand tools, including a miniature pair of pliers and a microscopic screwdriver, scattered around a half-complete model ship on a fold-out card table. A print of *Lincoln in Dalivision* hangs on the wall alongside photographs of Yad Vashem and a *Schindler’s List* movie poster. Behind the desk is a bulletin board filled with index cards of addresses and phone numbers, and the kitchenette is wallpapered with clippings from various newspapers and magazines—recent stories from the *LA Times*, *People*, the *Jewish Journal*, the *Washington Post*, and *Sports Illustrated*, and some old, yellowed ones from *Life*, *Time*, *Look*, and the like.

Mr. Silbert must feel a little uncomfortable with my taking stock of his eclectic décor, because he asks me to please sit down. I feel a little uncomfortable too, an interloper in a foreign world of clutter, separated by nearly two feet and nearly 80 years from the stranger who has curated it. But I sit down anyway, in a kitschy faux-rococo chair that he has pulled out for me, and I try to start a conversation.

## 2014

I burst open the door of Apartment 264 and parade into a room that I could navigate with my eyes closed. Ziggy's face lights up with a beaming smile, and he gets to his feet to wrap me in a warm embrace. He's wearing one of his trademark ensembles, a matching black-and-white plaid shirt-and-shorts combo that he appropriately calls the "checkerboard outfit."

"Any progress?" I tease, pointing to the card table with the clipper ship in its unchanged state of constructional limbo, and he replies with his customary quip, "Business as usual!"

He preempts another wisecrack about his perpetually incomplete ship with a funny cartoon that he has clipped out of this week's *New Yorker* for me. We share a hearty laugh, and then he asks me what I think of the current situation in Israel. He listens thoughtfully to my analysis before offering his own insight, weaving a quote from Quintilian, a reference to his childhood in a Polish shtetl, and an anecdote about his days as a Los Angeles hair stylist into his brilliant response.

Our conversation twists and turns. One minute we are talking about the latest sports news, and the next about an apparatus that Ziggy has invented to pick fruit off of the tall trees in the Heritage Pointe courtyard. It's surprisingly easy to forget that this good buddy I'm chatting with is the same man who hitchhiked through the Siberian tundra after bribing his way out of a Russian prison. It's easy to forget that this gregarious jokester who entertains mock-ferocious arguments about the best flavor of Yoplait yogurt with me was kept hidden for years by a courageous Christian family in the Polish countryside. It's easy to forget that this kindly gentleman taking such an interest in my stories about my siblings and friends lost so many of his own to the death camps, or that this sensitive soul who wept when we went to see *Les Misérables* together also shed tears as he surveyed the aftermath of an *Einsatzgruppe* mass killing and realized that, in his words, he had survived the bloodbath "by pure chance and for no good reason."

Sometimes, the facts of Ziggy's life are all-consuming—like at my bar mitzvah [Fig. 1], when I knew that the person who was handing me my *tallis* had, 70 years earlier, used his *tefillin* to tie himself into the uppermost branches of a tree to evade a Gestapo search party in the Carpathian foothills—but far more often, he is simply a close friend whom I love and admire.

Right now, a few conversational rabbit holes after I mentioned something that I learned about Josephus in my Latin class, Ziggy is teaching me about Maimonides. He's explaining the Maimonidean understanding of theodicy; I'm searching online for a translation of *The Guide for the*



**FIG. 1.** Ziggy and Justin at Justin's bar mitzvah, 2011. Courtesy of the author.

*Perplexed*, because I'm so out of depth in a discussion of medieval philosophy that my proficiency with Google is the only way I can make myself useful. Then, the smartest man that I know stops midsentence.

He bows his head. "I'm sorry, I'm embarrassed," he says, reminding me of that one last thing that it's easy to forget: that this savant, this genius with a 92-year-old brain that holds as much wisdom as the Rambam's, has lived his life thinking that he's not smart, weighed down by an inferiority complex stemming from the fact that he spent his formative years, the ones that most people with his intellectual proclivity spend in classrooms and lecture halls, wondering what fresh horrors the next day had in store for him. "Justin," says Ziggy, still looking down at the floor, "they took my education."

## 2017

I am escorted into Apartment 264 by a heavyset man with a Heritage Pointe nametag pinned to his polo shirt. He steps outside to give me some space, closing the door behind him. I am alone—for the first time, I realize—in a room that has not changed in the seven years that it has been a part of my life. In one dusty corner, that cheap wooden bookcase is still bowing under the weight of its miscellaneous contents: novels by Hemingway, paperback self-help



**FIG. 2.** Ziggy and Justin in Ziggy's apartment, in 2017, the year Ziggy passed away. Courtesy of the author.

books, histories of the Revolutionary War, Talmudic commentaries, an English–Latin dictionary. On the other side of the room, the unfinished model of that 19th-century clipper ship, its rigging tangled and its three masts jutting out at incongruous angles, is still sitting on the card table scattered with tools, brushes, magnifying lenses, and globules of dried epoxy. There's the *Lincoln in Dalivision* print and the *Schindler's List* poster on the wall, the newspaper clippings and magazine cutouts all over the kitchenette, the addresses and phone numbers for the computer repairman and Kaiser Permanente and the craft supplies store thumb-tacked to the bulletin board behind the desk. It's all still here, right where he left it. For now.

A week ago, I delivered a eulogy under a grey sky at a nondescript Jewish cemetery somewhere on the outskirts of LA. All I could think about while I gave the speech, which I wrote in a sleep-deprived daze the night before and practiced in my pajamas in front of my bedroom mirror at 4 in the morning, was how my tie was choking me and my dress shoes were giving me blisters. Afterwards, the rabbi and the mourners—barely enough for a minyan, mostly staff from Heritage Pointe—each came up to me and shook my hand and clapped me on the back and told me that I was a mensch. I took off my tie and shoes in the parking lot and drove home with the air conditioner on full blast.

As I survey the jumbled mess of books and tools and posters in Ziggy's apartment, for some reason I think of John Keats and how, upon his death in that little rented house beside the Spanish Steps, all of his belongings were incinerated, in compliance with public health laws regarding consumptives in 1820s Rome. I know, rationally, that Ziggy's stuff obviously won't suffer the same fate. People from Heritage Pointe will box it up, or they'll give it to Goodwill, or they'll throw it out. But, fixated on what Keat's death-bed companion, Joseph Severn, described as the “monstrous business” enacted on Keats's possessions, I am nonetheless overtaken by a demonic, hallucinatory vision, an apocalyptic flash of Ziggy's apartment in flames, his home melting and his books burning—some sort of feverish, domestic, personal holocaust for all that remains of a Holocaust survivor.

I careen around the room, gathering relics of Ziggy, saving them from the inferno that I have imagined: his volume of John Singer Sargent's catalogue raisonné, with its dog-eared page of *El Jaleo*; his souvenir pin from the 1984 Olympics, embossed with the insignia of the Games; his oversized belt buckle, emblazoned with the slogan “Masada Shall Not Fall Again”; his uncle's certificate of death, typewritten perfunctorily by a Nazi bureaucrat at Auschwitz.

My arms full and my heart palpitating, I stumble back out of the brown-paneled door of Apartment 264. I will never return. [Fig. 2]

## 2020

I often look at a photograph from 2014 that used to be my favorite image of Ziggy [Fig. 3, p. 6]. He's standing just inside of a doorway, not of his apartment but of the staff office down the hall, and he's wearing his checkerboard outfit. His matching plaid ensemble is accentuated by a pair of similarly colored tube socks; his “Ziggy” pendant is hanging from his neck, alongside a pair of reading glasses dangling from his shirt; his belt buckle—a plain one, not the Masada one—is characteristically oversized; his left foot is planted on the ground, and his right is perched on the seat of a chair, bending his 92-year-old leg into a 90-degree angle; his meaty hand is resting on his wrinkled kneecap; his grey-white hair is cascading down from both sides of his white newsboy cap; his head is cocked ever so slightly to the right; his eyes are wide open; his lips are pursed somewhere between a smile and a frown.

This photo was taken in a moment of levity. Ziggy was simultaneously playing the model and the fashion designer—striking a pose, joking about his idiosyncratic sartorial decisions, fully aware that he was wearing something that only he could pull off. For three years, that's exactly what I saw this photo as: just Ziggy being his charming, convivial,





**FIG. 3.** Ziggy in his checkerboard outfit, 2014. Courtesy of Heritage Pointe.

eccentric self. When he died, I turned to this particular picture hoping for comfort, hoping to be reminded of that zestful socializer who would burst open a door to show himself off. But suddenly, this was a portrait of someone who had periodically reminded me, “I can’t close my eyes without seeing what I lost.” All of those things that used to be so easy to forget had become the only things that I could remember. The man in the checkerboard outfit was the boy who was outrunning the Gestapo when he should have been debating with his teachers, the boy whose relatives were rounded up and crammed into boxcars and shepherded to their mass murders. The man in the checkerboard outfit was Picasso’s *The Charnel House* [Fig. 4].

This sprawling grisaille painting, which Picasso worked on while Ziggy was in hiding in a Polish farmhouse, is now nearly impossible for me to disassociate from that photograph of Ziggy in his greyscale garments. The rigid solidity of Ziggy’s pose has melted into Picasso’s distorted checkerboard of contorted limbs and disfigured heads; the penetrating gaze of the misshapen face in the painting’s bottom-right is repeated in Ziggy’s wide, piercing, but somehow hollow eyes. A *reish*-shaped form extends behind a writhing arm toward the center of the canvas, as though Ziggy’s right-angled right leg were rising up out of the pile of Picassoid corpses. And now Ziggy’s beloved outfit—especially his shorts, which I never had the heart to tell him were closer to spectral gradations of dark and light than to anything approaching an actual checkerboard—seems caked in a dusty film, rained upon by the curvilinear wisps at the top of *The Charnel House*, or the incinerated remains of Keats’s belongings in a furnace somewhere in the Eternal City, or the ashes of Ziggy’s family and so many others billowing over the snowy terrain of Poland . . .

I would like to think that I succeeded in the charge I initially took up in my mitzvah project a decade ago, that I helped to brighten Ziggy’s day. As long as he was alive, I had no trouble convincing myself that I did. But it’s harder to be sure nowadays, when all I have is a volume of John Singer Sargent’s catalogue raisonné and a souvenir pin from the 1984 Olympics and an oversized belt buckle and an uncle’s certificate of

death. I guess that’s why I always wind up coming back to the photograph of Ziggy in his checkerboard outfit, even though it’s not my favorite anymore, even though I usually see *The Charnel House*.

Because sometimes, if I look hard enough, I really can catch the slightest glimpse of a smile starting to form on his craggy, enigmatic countenance.



FIG. 4. The Charnel House. Paris, 1944–1945. Picasso, Pablo (1881–1973) ©2020 Estate of Pablo Picasso / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Oil and charcoal on canvas, 6' 6 5/8" × 8' 2 1/2" (199.8 × 250.1 cm). Mrs. Sam A. Lewisohn Bequest (by exchange), Mrs. Marya Bernard Fund in memory of her husband, Dr. Bernard Bernard, and anonymous funds. Digital Image © The Museum of Modern Art / Licensed by SCALA / Art Resource, NY.



"I started writing '*Kristallnacht*' on an anniversary of the event," Aaron Fischer writes. The Night of Broken Glass, the Night of Pogroms, marked the end of the first stage of the Holocaust.

*Aaron Fischer*

## *Kristallnacht*

After all the books had been burnt, the Jews  
still had glass, gleaming gilt-lettered sheets of it in shops  
  
and department stores, half-round Romanesque windows  
in the synagogues. After the scrolls had been ripped  
  
from the ark and unfurled in the gutter,  
and the rabbis forced to piss on the ivory-yellow  
  
parchment, there was still a mirror  
at a dressmaker's that a Jewess had soiled  
  
with her reflection, there were still windows  
Jews had gazed through — schools, state offices,  
  
banks. Sledgehammers. Axes. Paving stones  
pried up from the streets, until there was nothing Jewish  
  
left to shatter. But the Jews remained. The only cure for that  
was furnace and fire.



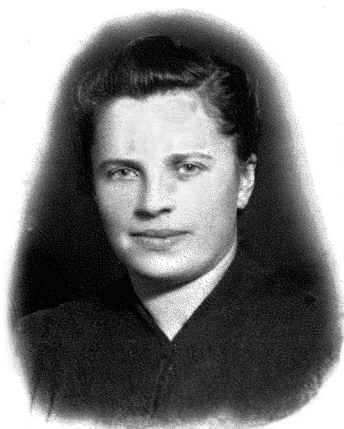
Karen I. Treiger details 10 Holocaust narratives, including her own, in which authors who did not go through the Holocaust “convert the telling of the Holocaust story into a personal odyssey.” In so doing, they “speak directly to the reader” and “bring new life to old memories. The storytelling is powerful, reinvigorating the genre of Holocaust literature, keeping the stories relevant and alive for the next generation.”

Karen I. Treiger

## Living Holocaust Legacies: Personal Storytelling for the 21st Century

*“These ashes of an era are not enclosed in some family mausoleum; they are suspended in the air, wafting on the breeze, moistened by sea mists, powdering our rooftops, stinging our eyes and assuming the guise of a flower petal, a comet or a dragonfly, anything light and fleeting. These anonymous souls belong not to me but to us all. Before they are erased forever, I felt it urgent to recover their traces, the footprints they left on life, the involuntary evidence of their time on earth.” (Jablonka, 2016, p. xiv)*

Once a day, my mother-in-law, Esther Goldberg, removed her apron and went out onto the balcony overlooking the Atlantic Ocean. It was sunny and



**Fig. 1.** Young Esther Goldberg after the Holocaust, ca. 1947. Courtesy of the Goldberg family.

warm, and the Miami Beach air encouraged her to linger. She would stand on her small balcony and light a cigarette—and cry. She would smoke and cry until the red embers turned black. Her ritual finished, she would wipe away her tears and come back inside the apartment to resume her worries over what to make for lunch or dinner and whether there would be enough food. Esther rarely spoke

of her years of suffering during the Holocaust, and she surely did not write about it. She couldn't. [Fig. 1]

My father-in-law, Sam, would share stories at our Passover seders of his escape from a German POW camp, his imprisonment and the Treblinka uprising, and his life in a pit in the Polish forest, but he never wrote about them. [Fig. 2]

Though the world is blessed to have thousands of memoirs written by Holocaust survivors, many survivors found speaking and writing about their experiences too painful. Many never even told their own children. This is no surprise: Can the horror be articulated? Why would survivors choose to endure the sorrow and trauma of retelling? Others didn't wish to burden their children or grandchildren, let alone complete strangers, with the heaviness of the truth. Better to let them all live their lives in ignorance and peace. Sometimes, for survivors, not telling seemed the better option.



**FIG. 2.** Young Sam Goldberg after the Holocaust, ca. 1947. Courtesy of the Goldberg family.

Others, however, did share with their children a few moments, some stories, or as much as they could retell before grief, fury, or despair silenced them. Perhaps the world can count on those children, the second generation, now grown, to record the stories of those parents. However, all too often, the trauma transmitted is ever-present even in the lives and thoughts of these adults. While some have recorded

their family stories, others have found it too hard to walk through the darkest years of their parents' lives, appalled by what they know and perhaps afraid of the secrets that may be revealed if they look any further.

Now, 75 years after the end of World War II, we find ourselves profoundly sorrowful as we say goodbye to the generation of survivors. As their souls move to the next world, we feel dread and remorse that we may never know most of their stories, which will be lost to history. What legacy will be left?

There is hope, though, even as this heroic generation passes. Their deaths have ignited a passion in many of their children and grandchildren, creating a wave of energy as these bearers of memory take the stories of the 1930s and 1940s and breathe life into them. They do not write the Holocaust memoirs of old—the straight-up retelling of the horrors and heroism of the survivor or the irreplaceable first-person testimony; they do not write the myriad Holocaust novels that fictionalize events. Rather, these authors have discovered old letters and hidden manuscripts in the dark recesses of an attic or a trunk, and stories tumble out after years of silence. Through these documents they examine their parents' and grandparents' experiences—gingerly, thoroughly, and with great respect.

This new way of telling is possible because of the emotional and temporal distance from the event. A middle-aged adult comes to terms with the imminent passing of his parent and finally seeks answers, or finds a cache of letters after his parent's passing; a grandchild searches out the secret stories of her grandparent; or a son-in-law or, like me, a daughter-in-law steps into the darkness to shine a light on the family history. Maybe it's someone not related at all: a historian, a graduate student, a teacher immersed in the history seeking to find the story. These narratives have arrived just in time to illuminate the next generation.

I married into a Holocaust family. Once ensconced, I learned the harrowing stories of my in-laws. For some 25 years, I felt that what I learned must become a book, but as a lawyer and mother, I had no time to take on such a project. Then my in-laws both passed away, and I was haunted by the thought that their stories had died with them. So, four years ago, I left my law practice and began to explore the history behind the stories I had learned. As I wrapped the twine of Sam and Esther's stories around my heart, the Holocaust took on new meaning for me. This immediacy is described by Daniel Mendelsohn (2006) in *The Lost: A Search for Six of Six Million*. "Yeah, it makes you realize that the Holocaust wasn't something that simply happened," Daniel's brother explains, "but is an event that's still happening" (p. 289). I began to feel just the same.

Daniel's brother and I are not alone. A world of people feel the pulse of the Holocaust in their 2020 lives. Some

have begun to examine their role as the last eyewitnesses to the witnesses, taking a spiritual journey into the darkness and into their own soul. We stare into the face of Nazi evil and grapple with the truth of what humans can do to each other. Those of us taking this plunge bring new life to old memories. The storytelling is powerful, reinvigorating the genre of Holocaust literature, keeping the stories relevant and alive for the next generation.

These authors, who are not themselves survivors, speak directly to the reader of their own journey as they seek to uncover the experiences of those who endured the Holocaust. In *The Lost*, Mendelsohn tells of his very personal quest to discover what happened to his great Uncle Shmiel and Aunt Ester Jager and their four daughters, Lorka, Frydka, Rucheke, and Brunia, who were murdered by the Nazis. Mendelsohn was obsessed with finding out how, when, and where they died. His journey took him across continents, where he discovered people he could never have imagined would be part of his life. He sought out those who knew his family, and he wove together the pieces of their lost lives. Those six Mendelsohn relatives are gone—murdered—but through his book, they are now part of the landscape of his life and the lives of his readers. After reading *The Lost*, I felt Mendelsohn's love for his family and his deep sadness and pain for the loss for these six of the six million. I also felt his triumph in achieving a resurrection of sorts, bringing these six back to life for a new generation.

Each quest has a different focus, a different twist. Victor Ripp (2017) examines the murder of his family by visiting 35 Holocaust memorials around the world. In *Hell's Traces: One Murdered, Two Families, Thirty-Five Holocaust Memorials*, Ripp focuses on the death of a 3-year-old, Aleksander Ripp, murdered in Auschwitz. "What had once happened was history," Ripp states, "but it was a history that, the memorial insisted, still intruded on the present" (p. 30). Yes, Holocaust memory insists on this, on intruding on our lives as we live it, each day, week, year.

These authors never tell the story of the 6 million. Rather, they tell of one, two, even six individuals. The number 6 million is now a cliché—too easy to throw around, too hard to fathom, too obscure to have meaning in our contemporary lives. "One six followed by a string of zeros. How did you feel something as flat as a number?" asks Noah Lederman (2017) in his memoir *A World Erased: A Grandson's Search for His Family's Holocaust Secrets*.

The number was spoken and written so often that it grew into something emotionless and digestible, a textbook statistic served up like one historical corpse. We hardly even glance at death tolls from the Crusades and the Inquisitions. What will happen when the liberation of the camps reaches its century

anniversary? How will future generations react to six million and the Holocaust? (pp. 55–56)

How will future generations react to Holocaust stories? Recounting the narratives as Lederman, Mendelsohn, Ripp, and others are constructing them gives life to those who endured that time, whether they survived or were murdered. I've come to believe that the stories of those lives will resonate for the next generations of learners. For example, Louise Steinman (2013), a granddaughter of survivors, attended a week-long Bearing Witness Retreat at Auschwitz-Birkenau, which brought together people of many religions to meditate, share, cry, and experience one another's pain at this most painful place on earth. She then traveled frequently to different parts of Poland seeking both her grandparents' stories and reconciliation with Poles. In her book *The Crooked Mirror: A Memoir of Polish-Jewish Reconciliation* (2013), Steinman recounts that someone once asked her what kind of book about Poland she was writing. "Was it . . . Poland in the past? Contemporary Poland? I thought for a minute . . . The Poland in my head" (p. 211).

Artfully, the authors bring history into the present through the use of interviews, letters, old papers, transcripts, testimony, diaries, artwork, visits to the countries where the murders took place, films, exploration of the archives at Yad Vashem and the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, extensive use of the Internet and the website JewishGen, and all the Holocaust literature that came before us.

In *Treblinka Survivor: The Life and Death of Hershl Sperling*, Mark Smith (2010) begins his exploration by searching for a memoir penned by Hershl soon after liberation. Smith, who is not related to Sperling, ultimately finds the manuscript and makes it an appendix in his book. *Treblinka Survivor*, rather than telling the survivor's story, is the story of Smith's exploration of Hershl's life and his friendship with Hershl's son.

An old, dusty drawer full of letters revealed the secrets of Dr. Carl Wildman. The file drawer, disguised as correspondence with patients and found after his death, was overflowing with letters from Europe, mostly from Carl's girlfriend, Valy. Carl and Valy had been medical students together in Germany and were lovers. Carl got out of Germany in 1938. Valy was not so lucky; she remained behind with her mother.

[See also "The Altenberg Family Letters: A Story of Love in Translation," by Christopher Gwin, in the Spring 2018 issue of *PRISM*, pp. 22–28, and "The Letter That Changed Everything," by Joanie Holzer Schirm, in the Spring 2019 issue, pp. 66–69, for additional narratives of letters that hold keys to Holocaust testimony—Ed.]

Reading these letters, Carl's granddaughter Sara Wild-

man was possessed and tormented as she learned about her grandfather's secret life before the war, before America, before her grandmother. Valy, the woman he left behind, wrote of her love and her dream of being together with Carl. She also wrote of the deprivations, discrimination, and suffering of the war years—1939, 1940, 1941. Then the letters stop.

Sara resolved to discover all she could about Valy, her life, and her death. She traveled the globe searching for some elusive truth that she believed would answer her deepest questions. Through the pages of *Paper Love: Searching for the Girl My Grandfather Left Behind*, Wildman (2015) takes us on a journey through her pain as she moves from the elation of discovery to the depths of frustration and sadness. Through it all, she celebrates and appreciates her own life and the sacrifices her grandfather made for her.

Another author, Noah Lederman, was always interested in the Holocaust stories of his grandparents, but they did not share the details of those years with him. When he tried to get his them to speak, they would quickly change the subject. As the Lederman family sat *shiva* after the death of Noah's grandfather, some stories were revealed, but the time was not right for him to delve more deeply. After college, his travels and adventures landed him almost by chance in Poland, where he searched, asked, and asked some more. When he returned, he talked with his grandmother, who handed him a box of old photos. As they looked at them together, more stories emerged. He returned to Poland to dig even more deeply. In *A World Erased*, Lederman (2016) shares his obsession with discovering the experiences of his grandfather. We eavesdrop on his conversations with his grandmother and rejoice with him each time he secures another fact or story.

"Grandma," I paused. "What number was your barrack?"  
"Eighteen. Who could forget this?"

It was another fact. Another victory over the diminishing past. An additional truth against denial. (p. 211)

Then there was the box of old papers that Simon Goodman found after the death of his father, Bernard. Simon had always been curious about his grandparents' past in Germany. All he knew was that his grandparents were murdered in a concentration camp. His father had refused to tell more. The papers revealed the story of his family's prewar years. A wealthy German banking family named Guttman, they had financially humble origins as a rabbinic family in Bohemia, part of the Austrian empire. In 1872, Eugene Guttman started Dresdener Bank and created branch banking. By 1900, Dresdener Bank had become the largest banking network in Germany, and over the years the family amassed a huge art collection. In *The Orpheus Clock: The Search for My Family's Art Treasures*



*Stolen by the Nazis* (2015), we learn that their art and wealth were stolen by the Third Reich and that his grandparents were murdered—Fritz in Theresienstadt and Louise in Auschwitz. During his exploration and attempts (some successful) to reclaim family art, the author is forced to explore what it means to be Simon Goodman, of the Guttman banking dynasty, born in England, now living in Los Angeles, in the 21st century.

For Elizabeth Rynecki, it was a manuscript written by her Grandpa George, found after his death in the trunk of his car. In his manuscript, George writes:

Some say it will never happen again. Well, it's too easy. It did happen. They killed us openly without fear. Where and how did they have that much hatred towards us? It could happen again. We cannot and will not forget. We will carry it . . . forever. There are hundreds of books on the subject. Nevertheless, I am a Jew and I will write. I'll do it till the end of my days, if only for my granddaughter, Elizabeth, to know the truth, and not to be afraid of it. (p. 18)

The full weight of history dropped onto Elizabeth's shoulders. Her sense of responsibility towards her family and the Jewish people propelled her to a decade-long journey. She knew that her great-grandfather, Moshe Rynecki, was a prolific artist; his paintings covered every inch of wall space in her childhood home, with many more stacked in the closets. Rynecki lived and worked in prewar Warsaw. When the war began, he divided his 800 paintings into groups of 50 or 60 and hid some in his basement and the rest with other people to keep safe until the war was over. He was murdered in Majdanek; his daughter, Isia, was also killed. But his wife, Perla, and their son, Jerzy; daughter-in-law, Stasia; and young grandson, Alexander, all survived. Perla returned to their Warsaw home and recovered some 120 paintings from the basement, a bit torn and worn, but still there. The rest seemed lost forever.

Taking on the mission imparted by her grandfather's words, Elizabeth began to search for the lost art of her great-grandfather and through this project learned the details of her family's experience in Europe before and during the Holocaust—some good, but mostly bad. Along the way, she met relatives, found old letters that led her to new people and new stories, and of course visited Poland. She had to—we all have to. We must feel it, walk the same roads, smell the air, peer into this lost world, hoping that something remains to uncover the secrets of the past, to heal the wounds and put balm on the scars of the Jewish people.

Rynicki (2016) shares her years of searching in her book *Chasing Portraits: A Great-Granddaughter's Quest for Her Lost Art Legacy*. As the reader journeys with the author

in search of one painting, three, sometimes 50, we mourn her defeats and rejoice in her successes. Mostly we feel her passion—for the search, for the history, to tell this story through her eyes. These old paintings bring prewar and wartime life in Europe alive for the reader. Because the story is told through Elizabeth's eyes and as Elizabeth's story, we care not just about her great-grandparents and grandparents, but also about her.

Finally, a grandson's search led to *A History of the Grandparents I Never Had*, by French historian Ivan Jablonka (2016), who sets out to uncover the fate of his grandparents during the war. Arrested on February 25, 1943, they left their two children behind with friends. His research led him to archives, meetings with witnesses, trips to Poland, Israel, Argentina, and the United States. In the French National Archives, he located a record of his grandmother's interrogation upon her arrest. The record

contains all the standard data: name, date and place of birth, address, but one detail brings tears to my eyes: The officer has written "M.O.E" or "married, no children." This declaration provides incontrovertible proof that Suzanne and Marcel [the arrested couple's children], entrusted every night to the Poles, had been left behind on purpose in the apartment building at the time of arrest. Mere hours after leaving them, their mother affirmed that she was "married, no children." M.O.E. These three letters would covertly underpin my father's entire life, both the miracle of his survival and the wound that would remain forever unhealed: His mother abandoned him so that he might live, her love culminated in rejection, in negation. . . . How dangerous would a situation have to be for you to choose not to take your children with you to an unknown destination? (pp. 230–231)

After telling the story of his grandparents in a 334-page book, Jablonka writes that he is "left empty-handed," knowing "nothing of their deaths, and precious little about their lives" (p. 291). In telling his grandparents' stories, he explores his own life and the meaning of his existence. If his grandparents had not "abandoned" his father, he would not have been born. The death of his grandparents, he writes, "flows in [his] veins, not like poison but like life itself" (p. 291). Like Mendelsohn, he feels triumphant in bringing his grandparents back to the world of the living:

My research has reached an end, as did their lives. But this ending is also a deliverance, for they can now return to what they were always destined to be, to beings meant, irreducibly and beyond all measure, to live. (p. 290)



**FIG. 3.** Sam, Esther, and their daughter, Fay (Faiga), who was born in Poland in August of 1945. This photo was taken at Föhrenwald, a displaced persons' camp in Germany. Courtesy of the Goldberg family.

Finally, my journey: I had heard many of my in-laws' stories and read their interviews before I decided to write a book. [Fig. 3] As I read them again, more carefully, I discovered much more. Peeling the silences from the layers of words, I found some hard truths, surprising connections, and many holes. I called my sister-in-law, Fay, to tell her I was going to Poland to try to find the home of Helena Styś, Sam and Esther's "angel" who helped them survive in hiding. She did not know the address, but she said, "I have some old letters from Poland I found after my father died. Maybe they can help. But they're all in Polish."

"Send them over," I responded.

Through these Polish letters, translated by a friend, Joanna Millick, I was able to locate and meet the three surviving children of the Styś family who helped Sam and Esther during those dark years: Jan Styś, Eugeniusz Styś, and Janina Gołębiewska, by then in their 80s and 90s. We spent hours talking with them, filling in the blank spaces

of Sam and Esther's story, now told in *My Soul Is Filled With Joy: A Holocaust Story* (2018). The men showed us the barn where their father had built a fake haystack for the Jews to hide and took us out to the forest to show us the remnants of the pit that Sam and Esther had dug and in which they had lived for nearly a year. They described how they, as boys, would bring food to the hidden Jews and would sometimes go out to the woods to "see how they were doing out there." My in-laws' story is one of love and the will to live, and as I got to know the children of their saviors, it became real to me.

To live, yes, this is the goal—to allow those who were murdered, as well as those who survived, to be still alive. They whisper in our ears, telling us to live our lives to the fullest. Their stories run through our veins. These new books reboot the stories in a personal and immediate way, through the eyes of someone more remote, more distant, who did not live through the Holocaust. These additions to 75 years of Holocaust literature will diminish Holocaust "fatigue" as readers meet the children and grandchildren of survivors, along with others fascinated by this complex history, and come to understand more fully the ways in which this event shapes and shadows us all.

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Not exactly a love story, John Guzlowski's prose poem offers an intimate, poignant glimpse of a man and a woman at the brink of a new life with "no German guards, no soldiers" at a moment when "there had not been a good day for a long time." Ask your students to compare this meeting with that of their parents.

*John Guzlowski*

## *My Father Tells Me How He Met My Mother*

Some of us were dying and fell to our knees right there. Others kept walking and stumbling toward that gate. There was no one around, no German guards, no soldiers. They must have run away because they thought the Americans were near. There were no prisoners either that we could see in the barracks beyond the fence. We thought that maybe the ones who'd been there had been taken like us on a death march.

It was so quiet.

One of the men, a Frenchman, stepped up to the gate and shouted hello. That's all he said. He said it in German first and then French, but no one answered. It sounded funny in French, "*Bonjour, bonjour.*"

An army truck stood in front of one of the barracks, and I thought I saw some movement there. Even with only one good eye, I could see it. Someone moving near the back of the truck. I pointed this out to the Frenchman, and he saw it too. And we both shouted then, he in French and I in Polish. I shouted, "*Dzien dobry, dzien dobry.*" I felt foolish saying, "Good day." There had not been a good day for a long time.



A woman then came out of one of the barracks. Like us, she was dressed in rags, striped rags. She stumbled to the gate and stopped there. She looked at us, and we looked at her. No one said anything for a while. I could see she was weak. She held the gate so tightly with her hands so she wouldn't fall.

I couldn't speak. I had not seen a woman for months and had not talked to one for years. The Germans would kill you for talking to a woman.

Then she spoke, in Polish, slowly. She said, "*Co teraz?*" What now?

I didn't know what to say. My tongue was like a rock in my mouth.

She said it again, "*Co teraz?*" And I still didn't know what to say, or what would happen, or whether the world would end that day or not. I was hungry and spent, and I didn't know anything.

I looked at her and felt so weak, felt like I was going to fall and join my brothers dying behind me, and your mother pulled the gate open and said, "*Proszę wejdź.*" Please come in.

And I did.



"Objects," observes Smadar Falk-Peretz, "have the power to enchant with their special qualities and shapes." In this literary analysis, a close reading of Nava Semel's short story "A Woman From Fayum," Falk-Peretz scrutinizes a haunting photograph, an object that Semel employs as an agent of memory that mediates between a Holocaust survivor and her son. The story was recently republished in a new literary collection retitled *כובעים של זכוכית*, *Hats of Glass* (2019).

Smadar Falk-Peretz

## Objects as Agents of Memory: A Study of Nava Semel's "A Woman From Fayum"

Many works of literature use objects in particular ways, designating and representing them as significant accessories of memory. Objects such as photographs, works of art, and other personal artifacts that reflect both a personal memory and a connection to one's heritage become part of the world of the individual and his or her cultural experience. Artifacts in our lives carry concealed narratives and meanings within them; according to Miller (1994), they proclaim both their material and symbolic existence at the same time. As Rigeny (2017) argues, while traditional theory in cultural studies connected love for objects with the whims and the tastes of refined and fastidious connoisseurs, the new field of materialist criticism acknowledges objects themselves as agents of meaning. "New materialism" is "a term ascribed to a range of contemporary perspectives in arts, humanities, and social sciences that have in common a theoretical and practical 'turn to the matter'" (Fox & Alldred, 2018, p. 25).

Objects have the power to enchant with their special qualities and shapes. They capture moments of our lives and, if they last, perpetuate narrative—by the very fact of the continued existence of the object—even after the demise of the owner. Artifacts play an active role in the production of memory and its transition; they help connect one generation to the next. A resounding echo attaches to memory objects—items found or transferred as a part of a family heritage, thus prompting memories and generating actions among the individuals who own or are otherwise connected to them. This influence pertains primarily to artifacts transmitted as inheritance across generations, endowing the objects with an intergenerational, mediat-

ing significance. Such significance comes to the fore particularly in the literature of the second generation after the Holocaust.

In this essay, I undertake a close reading of Nava Semel's (1954–2017) short story "A Woman From Fayum," included in her collection *A Hat of Glass* (1985). The story centers on objects as agents of memory and as accessories mediating between survivors and their children. Semel, one of the first Israeli women writing for adults, adolescents, and children to voice the experience of the second generation, focuses on Holocaust memory from an intergenerational perspective. This story reflects on different aspects of a unique portrait of a dead Egyptian child, a portrait transferred from mother to son, thus serving as a memory object that carries with it uniquely personal meanings.

### CHARACTERISTIC FEATURES OF HOLOCAUST LITERATURE OF THE SECOND GENERATION

The notion of the second generation is founded upon a meaning deeper than the biographical fact of individuals' belonging to the category of children of Holocaust survivors. Sources indicate a general phenomenon of ongoing victimhood characteristic of the generation succeeding survivors; members of the second generation often suffer from the impact of the Holocaust though they did not experience it themselves (Milner, 2003, p. 19). Among second-generation writers are some whose literary work is nourished by their personal experience as "memorial candles" (those children of survivors who carry the parents' memory) as well as others who, without being descen-

dants of survivors, have chosen to address aspects of the experience of children of survivors (p. 32).

*A Hat of Glass* (1985), one of Semel's short story collections, is the first Hebrew work in prose whose characters belong to the second generation and, as such, maintain a set of relationships laden with memory of the past and the burden of the Holocaust. The very act of writing about this is a breakthrough in the dam of silence that typified the treatment of the Holocaust on both the personal and the national level in Israel. According to Milner (2003), the silence and repression of the trauma of the Holocaust are a natural outgrowth of the need for psychic survival for both the individual and the social whole. Many survivors opted for silence "as a defense strategy" in order to enable their continued existence. Semel recounts that

even on Holocaust Memorial Day, Mother would turn off the radio and the television and become enclosed within by walls. . . . It was not only in my family that the "pact of silence" between survivor parents and their children—"do not ask and we will not tell you"—was in effect. (Keren & Semel, 2014, p. 183)<sup>i</sup>

As Milner (2003) says, silence is the point of origin of literary works dealing with the experience of second-generation Holocaust trauma, with virtually no exceptions (p. 44). Milner contours the characters in these works as native Israeli figures living an existence from which the Holocaust remains distant; as far as anyone can tell, they lead normal lives (p. 44). The intensity of the trauma is passed on to the second generation via nonverbal—even unconsciously acknowledged—channels, with the details of the horror kept unrevealed and repressed. The repression comes to the fore both mimetically and metaphorically in the text (p. 53).

The impact of the trauma on the second generation is a recurrent theme in works written by Semel for a variety of audiences. The short story discussed here reflects the importance of a portrait transferred, in a complex journey, from mother to son, thus serving as a memory object and as a catalyst of emotional development and change in consciousness. The portrait speaks what cannot be expressed in words, constituting a link significantly expressive of the generations-long family story. Concurrent with the journey of the portrait is the journey of the narrator, Elisha, over the course of which the portrait serves as a receptacle for the conceptualization of personal and family memories that molds the narrator's personality and catalyzes the development of his existential outlook. During this journey, Elisha, a fictitious figure, the son of a survivor, reexperiences his painful childhood memories of forced silence, confronting and ultimately reconciling the unresolved feelings of disconnectedness from his family roots.

## OBJECTS FROM "THERE" AS AGENTS OF MEMORY IN SECOND-GENERATION WRITING

According to Kosh Zohar (2009), narratives of the second generation describe the complex totality of the processes of transferring family memory by verbal and nonverbal means, including through symbolic items such as letters, photographs, and other artifacts serving as bearers of memory (p. 104). Kosh Zohar argues that second-generation narration ascribes a powerful mediating ability to objects from "there," from Holocaust-era Europe, representing them as one of the crucial channels through which silenced memory transfers from the generation of the parents to that of the children (pp. 103–104).

Usually, the objects are ones that survivors salvaged from their previous world despite its destruction, or other remnants that connect to the past and to memory, authentic items from a world destroyed. These serve as testimony—both directly and symbolically—to the reality of the world that once was, and has become extinct. Milner (2003) has shown that many artifacts were hidden by survivor parents as part of their opting for silence and repression of memory. These objects are often buried deep within receptacles of various kinds. In most cases, the literary characters—members of the second generation—come upon them "by accident or intentionally, and experience fissure and collapse upon discovering the walls of silence surrounding the secrets of the past" (Kosh Zohar, 2009, p. 104). Milner points out that memory objects serve in these works as a "catalyst" for the exposure of the story of the survivors' past and for the descendants' confrontation with memory (p. 57).

Hirsch and Spitzer (2006) adopted Roland Barthes's (1980) notion of the *punctum*, according to which memory objects transferred through inheritance constitute points of memory, or points of encounter between the past and the present, between memory and post-memory, between personal remembering and cultural memory. Barthes associates the term "*punctum*" with certain objects that exert a penetrating influence, piercing the layers of forgetfulness and awakening memory. He distinguishes between two concepts associated with the awakening of memory by means of objects, photographs, and the like. One is the general space of memory provided by means of culture, a space that he dubs the *studium* (p. 30). In contrast, the *punctum* is activated by objects that elicit a sense of being stabbed or wounded; they relate to the individual in an emotionally meaningful way.

Following Barthes's distinctions, Hirsch and Spitzer focus on personal items transferred to them by their survivor mothers, such as a book of recipes and a miniature artists' book. The authors delve deep into these objects' role as items of testimony that conceal a unique Jewish feminine heritage. In the spirit of Hirsch and Spitzer, I



hope to show that "A Woman From Fayum" is literature in which a meaningful bond is established with memory of the Holocaust by means of personal items of the survivor mothers' generation. The central object in this narrative, an Egyptian portrait of a dead child from the city of Fayum, serves as a memory point. It also produces the punctum effect. This artifact is what brings intergenerational disconnectedness to the fore, and at the same time it surprisingly engenders a bond with family memory.

In Semel's "A Woman From Fayum," the narrator, Elisha, the son of a survivor originally from Salonika, tries to reconstruct the trajectory of a rare object of art, now lost. In an extremely symbolic and meaning-laden manner, the work's title conveys the nature of the ties between the characters and their survivor parents. It takes its name from the portrait of a deceased woman from the Egyptian city of Fayum; it is a portrait that Elisha seeks to add to his collection. This is an object unconnected with the Jewish tradition; rather, it is associated with ancient Egyptian burial practices. The story describes repression of traumatic memories and emotional disconnectedness, which characterize the relationship between the main character and his family. Elisha is portrayed as emotionally detached both from his wife and children and from his parents and his early childhood memories. His sole interest is collecting objects related to death. This interest derives from the silence his mother forced him to adopt at an early age as his only tactic for dealing with memories of the past.

#### **BONDS OF SILENCE AND SCARS OF REPRESSION IN "A WOMAN FROM FAYUM"**

"A Woman From Fayum" is structured as a story within a story. The narrative within unfolds within the confines of the outer story, with threads that involve memories of the second generation binding the two. In the frame story, Elisha, a compulsive collector, is bent on finding a rare collector's item: a painting of a woman, identified as one of the portraits from ancient Fayum. As part of the inner story, Elisha learns to understand the memory of his own past and the past of his mother, a survivor, as elements of his own being.

The majority of the portraits from Fayum were painted in Egypt under Roman rule between the 1st and the 3rd century CE. Their purpose was to commemorate the deceased. The paintings were made after the demise of their subjects and were attached to the coffins in the necropolis at a later time. Elisha travels as far as Alexandria to purchase the portrait, which he wants to keep with those already his—"three portraits of people from Fayum: two men and a boy" (Semel, 1985, p. 61). The first item in the collection, the portrait of the boy, forms the connecting thread between the outer story and the inner one. It also leads to the source of Elisha's obsessive collecting of various objects, such as

bells and figurines, connected to the commemoration of the dead (p. 61). Elisha inherits the portrait of the boy from his mother; it is the only object that she managed to salvage from her parents' home in Salonika. As such, the portrait, although not of her murdered family, is a testament to them.

The outstanding artistic quality of the Fayum portraits, according to John Berger (2005), is the intense liveliness radiating from the faces of the deceased. Contrasting with this are the characters in the story. The living are dead, while the dead are intensely alive. Elisha is described as a type of walking dead, completely disconnected from his family in the present, from his wife, his three children, and his parents. Only the portrait of the boy from Fayum connects him to the present and the past.

This disconnectedness began in Elisha's early childhood as he faced his mother's silence and her attempts to silence his interest in her past. The portrait of the boy from Fayum accordingly became the symbol of the mother's earlier life, as well as of Elisha's silenced and disconnected childhood. Elisha came upon the portrait accidentally; his mother had taken it down from a high storage closet while cleaning the house in preparation for Passover.

"Who is this boy?" Elisha asks his mother with childish curiosity, but in answer, she only grabs the painting from him.

"Careful, careful!" he cries, pitying the boy in the painting as if he were alive. "The boy might fall and get hurt."

His mother, though, wears a severe expression and says, "Do not touch this. It is not for you. It used to be your grandfather's" (p. 62). She thrusts the portrait back into the shadowy dark of the closet. When Elisha wonders why his mother hides the boy in the closet, in effect punishing him, she gives no answer. In fact, the boy being punished by the mother's silence is Elisha, her living son left in the murky dark of concealment and imposed silence, without answers. The mutual identity of the two boys is thus established. It finds direct expression in the story, especially when Elisha acknowledges that the boy in the portrait "has already implanted himself" in him (p. 62).

This scene has a number of symbolic aspects. The mother refuses to bring her story into the light; she buries the secrets of her past in the closet. Elisha humanizes the Fayum boy with his words, while the mother cannot handle his curiosity and the revival of her past. His curiosity, left unsatisfied, subsequently grows without restraint, directed to alternative sources, to ancient times, to stories from a strange land, distant from the family story that, as Elisha knows from childhood, "must not be touched" (p. 62). The only tie the son has to his past, in Kosh Zohar's view, is the memory object—the painting.

This turns objectification into Elisha's way of life. He

objectifies his family and represses his feelings toward those about him. His way of communicating with his children is also by means of the object. This comes to the fore at the intimate moment when he permits his little daughter to stroke the boy's portrait, now his, with her fingers (p. 63).

When Elisha's wife, Reuma, asks, "How did the boy end up at your grandfather's in Salonika?" (p. 62), he cannot answer, knowing nothing except the shred of information that once escaped from his mother's lips. She never explained why or from where she transported the portrait, nor what happened to her along the way. Following the first rejection in his childhood, Elisha wants to know nothing of his mother's life story. He is eager only for the story of the boy in the painting, of the object, because this is how he has become habituated to experiencing the human bond to memory of the past. Milner (2003) argues that the boy's portrait is

an archeological item of a culture that has "wandered" into the hiding place of another culture, where it was buried and turned into an archeological item for the descendants of that culture, considerable parts of which have been made extinct in an unanticipated manner. (p. 57)

When Elisha is 18, while his mother "listens to the memorial for survivors" (p. 71) on Holocaust Memorial Day, he turns the radio off, claiming that "this has nothing to do with us" (p. 71). His father deals him a powerful blow to the face in response, and Elisha locks himself up within his own silence. He erects impenetrable walls about himself. Even when the father tries to explain, to tell him his mother's story, to let him know that he, Elisha, was "there" as a small child and was sent by his mother to Palestine to be safe, he does not want to listen. He rejects his father's words, turning instead to gaze deep into the eyes of the painted boy. This is his method of repression. It is his way of eschewing pain and, at the same time, sustaining a certain bond with his past.

As the story proceeds, Elisha is inundated with fragments of memories of tastes and smells from "there," so that even though consciousness provides no recollection, his physical body remembers. He remembers the taste of chestnuts that his mother gave him, understanding that this memory belongs to his early childhood in Salonika before the war. He tries desperately to remember his mother's words and to reconstruct more shreds of the fleeting flashes of memory, to revive and relive it, but in vain: The conscious "groove is blocked right away" (Semel, 1985, p. 67).

Elisha, the name of the narrator, evokes the biblical prophet Elisha, disciple and continuator of the prophet Elijah. A special link connects the prophet to the story's

protagonist. While the former is depicted as a faithful heir to Elijah, following in his mentor's footsteps, the story's Elisha is largely defined in contrast to this. He seems to disown his real past, yet he seeks to cleave to it in his own way, using an object, the painting, as a mediator.

The prophet Elisha is known for the miracles he performed, occasionally using objects, such as splitting the waters of the Jordan with Elijah's mantle (II Kings 4:1-7) and performing the miracle of the jar of oil. In an especially well-known feat, Elisha restores to life a dead child, the son of the Shunamite woman who previously provided him a lodging space in her home (II Kings 2:8-37). The woman was barren; her only son was born thanks to Elisha's blessing, but then, a number of years later, the child died. The prophet Elisha stretches himself out horizontally over the dead boy, pressing his lips to the mouth of the boy and resuscitating him with his own breath, thus returning the boy to life.

Elisha in our story similarly concentrates his life force on creating a family consisting of Fayum portraits. In Kosh Zohar's (2009) opinion, through this family, Elisha attempts to associate himself with his mother's roots without exposure to the great pain of knowing the past (p. 107). Thus the connection with his mother's history is enabled through the metaphoric kinship with the portrait. In his search for the portrait of the woman from Fayum, Elisha follows the maternal voice that has been silenced and repressed, that yet echoes in his life.

According to John Berger (2015), the Fayum portraits speak to us especially today, in the 21st century. It has often been noted that the present century is one of migration, both forced and voluntary—a century of unending departure, a century pursued by memories of those who have left us. The grief for those who are gone, for completeness shattered, the unexpected suffering and the sense of absence and longing for what is not there are, according to Berger, a desperate attempt of sorts to piece together a broken vessel. It is in solitude, Berger emphasizes, that one seeks to join together the pieces, finding ways to paste them to each other and then carefully trying to make them reassume their former order. In my opinion, the Fayum portraits in Semel's story reflect the artistic attempt to eternalize the individual, an antithesis to the millions of Jewish faces gone without a trace, buried in mass graves without memorial or mark.

Elisha finds it very difficult to cope cognitively and emotionally with his family's story. However, his body remembers various sensory experiences, among them the strong blow given to him by his father when he, at 18, tried to reject the bond of memory to the Holocaust. While he does attempt to repress the fear of the Holocaust on a conscious level, his body recalls the tastes from "there" along with the smells and the blow he received, and these bring

him to the realization that there is no escape from memory. He understands that the past and the present are “one flesh” (p. 71) and comes to realize that it is better to connect to his childhood memories not by dedicating his whole life to collecting remnants of a far-removed culture, but by living in the present.

As the story approaches its conclusion, Elisha finds and purchases the portrait he has sought. While still in Alexandria, he dreams that it is locked in a case that he cannot open. He angrily casts the case into the water, but his arm lengthens like a rope to pull it out. The case breaks, Elisha sees his wife's dress floating on the water, and he searches for a body, wanting to say Kaddish, recited in memory of the dead.

The dream consists of reality mingled with imagination. It reflects the transformation in Elisha's consciousness as he understands that in his obsessive rush after the past, he has been neglecting the present. Waking, he discovers that the portrait has indeed been mutilated—the same portrait he acquired with such effort. The damage results in a new state of consciousness in Elisha's psyche as he realizes that he should give up worship of the dead in favor of holding on to inner memory that exists “even from the shards” (p. 76). He acknowledges: “The dead have sunk, and the living live” (p. 76).

Over the course of the story, Elisha experiences the process of mourning and adapts both his behavior and his perceptions accordingly. He internalizes his mother's traumatic losses, as well as those of her family who perished in the Holocaust: “I will never again taste the fruit of the chestnut from my mother's hand” (p. 76). According to Amir (2004),

As the lost object is increasingly internalized in the mourner's soul, it becomes easier for him to come to terms with its actual loss. The ability to give up the object's actual presence depends on the extent to which it is present within us. (p. 115)

As soon as the past surfaces, Elisha is able to see the compassionate face of the Egyptian woman complete among the torn fragments of the painting. He understands, for the first time, that perhaps specifically in “the moving face” rather than in a frozen one “will my Fayum portrait become visible” (Semel, 1985, p. 77). The message, to my mind, is that immortalization lies in cleaving to life. Following this insight, Elisha, too, alters his attitude to society, shifting the focus of his attention from objects to people as he yearningly muses, “Perhaps the people will be sweet to me, even a tiny little bit sweet” (p. 77).

To sum up, Semel's “A Woman From Fayum” is a journey in search of a mother's story concealed in a son's subconscious past. It would appear on the surface that the goal of

Elisha's journey is to secure the portrait of a dead woman belonging to an alien culture. Delving deeper, we see that this is a journey through the tangles of childhood memory.

Semel herself undertook a similar journey, both in reality and within the folds of the narrative she wove in the stories of *A Hat of Glass*. In the first story, whose title is shared by the collection as a whole, the central protagonist, a woman survivor, confesses with pain that “they say: it'll mend, it'll mend; they say: I will be mended. I am grateful for the sun and for the new light, but on the heads of the children my sorrow and my suffering will lie like a hat of glass” (1985, p. 23). By contrast, Semel's epilogue to *A Hat of Glass* is expressive of a different attitude, one of actively striving to confront the past and bear it within herself:

I touched the hat on my head. It had weighed down on me for years, and I had wanted to get rid of it. Now I put it on and went inside. I was afraid the monster might send its poisons within me, making me unable to stand up again, but it could not get the better of me. Anyone who breathes the air of freedom will have his soul protected from evil. I went back there for you, Mother, but primarily in order to understand myself, and now I am returning home. (p. 201)

Like “A Woman From Fayum,” the other stories in the collection testify to the complex struggles with the burden of the past undergone by members of the second generation, all reflecting how Semel grappled with her mother's past. Like Elisha, who is afraid of confronting his past, Semel admits to having misgivings, but unlike him, she walks into the heart of the murky darkness with fortitude, for the sake of her mother and herself.

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#### END NOTE

i Unattributed translations are the author's own.



"This poem," writes Annette Bialik Harchik, "is a response to a photo taken six years after the Holocaust ended. My mother had been imprisoned in the Łódź Ghetto and Auschwitz and then sent on a death march before she was liberated from Dachau. She never recovered."

Annette Bialik Harchik

## *My Mother's Photograph*

Soft black hair  
gently frames  
a fragile face.  
Sunken sockets.  
Eyes stare, vacant.  
Fine thin bone remnants  
of a young beauty,  
a woman just recently come  
into her own.  
Behind her stone facade  
lie numbed  
humor,  
intelligence,  
warm love,  
feelings reserved  
only  
for that tender childhood  
of a vanquished era.  
Eyes stare out —  
a face freeze —  
now a mask  
that must navigate  
fear — horror — rage.  
The eyes have seen it all  
and refuse to move  
from the intense grip  
of the dead.

The eyes stare beyond:  
stunned by sorrow,  
scarred from hatred,  
seared in pain.  
Deep brown eyes  
look out  
from a gaunt face,  
framed by the softness  
of my mother's thick black hair.





Madeline Vadkerty introduces us to three Jews who wrote for help during the Holocaust to Jozef Tiso, president of Slovakia, but to no avail. “Little did the authors know,” writes Vadkerty, “that their murder was looming on the horizon.” Their letters, and some 20,000 more like them, offer a new and unique “lens for understanding the Holocaust and Jewish persecution.”

*Madeline Vadkerty*

## The Holocaust in Slovakia: Jewish Letters to Jozef Tiso (1939–1944)

A 56-year-old shoemaker in Bratislava asks Jozef Tiso, president of the wartime Slovak state, for permission to work somewhere, anywhere, so he doesn’t “go down the wrong path and become an object of shame before the entire world as a Jew.” A 31-year-old man from Spišská Nová Ves asks to be allowed to keep his radio after having been “operated on both legs and hardly ever able to leave home.” A Jewish couple from Piešťany request that funds confiscated from their bank account be returned to them because “this is all that there is left for our old age, and without it we will experience the most extreme poverty.”

In this essay, we will meet the people who penned these words to Jozef Tiso (Tiso), the charismatic Catholic priest who became president of Slovakia, a Nazi puppet state, on March 19, 1938. Little did the authors know that their murder was looming on the horizon. People with various motivations wrote to Tiso about the Jewish question throughout his entire presidency, appealing to him as both a secular and a religious authority. The letters come from all over the country, from men and women, from children as young as 5 years old to a senior citizen of 89. These are just a few examples of the riveting correspondence that “ordinary people”—Jews and non-Jews—wrote to Tiso about the “Jewish question” in Slovakia between 1939 and 1944. There may be as many as 20,000 such letters in the files of the Office of the President of the Republic (*Kancelária Prezidenta Republiky*; KPR) at the Slovak National Archive (SNA) in Bratislava (Kamenec, 2013, p. 128). They are now being researched systematically for the first time, having been filed away and forgotten for more than 75 years. They offer us a unique, up close and personal lens for understanding the Holocaust and Jewish persecution in Slovakia before and during World War II.

The Jewish question was touted as a national priority

by the new country, and harsh, far-reaching anti-Jewish measures came swiftly. The government started by creating a legal framework to determine exactly who was a Jew in Government Decree 63/1939, issued on April 18, 1940. Only 4% of Slovakia’s Jewish lawyers and doctors would be permitted to continue to practice their professions, a decision designed to have them reflect their proportion in the population. In 1940 and 1941, Jewish businesses were either liquidated or transferred to non-Jewish hands in a process known as Aryanization. On September 9, 1941, a far-reaching, 270-paragraph decree called the Jewish Code (*Židovský kodex*; Decree 198/1941) stripped Jews of their civil and human rights. Countless decrees and regulations isolated and humiliated the Jewish population of Slovakia, including the requirement that Jews above the age of six wear a visible yellow Star of David on their clothing. In fear and desperation, some Jews converted to Christianity or tried to distance themselves from their Jewishness, but such efforts were in vain. People tried somehow to get through their days, thinking that things couldn’t possibly become any worse. Eventually, however, they did. Jews would lose their citizenship and every piece of property they owned—all carried out legally under the new laws.

Paragraph 255 of the Jewish Code gave Tiso the power to exempt Jews from “anti-Jewish racial legislation that was the strictest in Europe” (*Ludové noviny*, 1941).<sup>1</sup> The regime had promised that “the Jewish issue will be solved humanely, without doing violence to Christian principles” (Hilberg, 2003, p. 782). However, the files prove that there was no mercy: Between March 25 and October 20, 1942, a total of 58,000 Jewish men, women, and children were loaded into cattle cars and deported. The tragic nature of their daily suffering is laid bare in the letters that Jews sent to Tiso.



It is the profound humanity of these letters that captures our attention. Desperation, fear, anger, greed, and naiveté are all on display in the correspondence. We see the suffering of Slovakia's Jews in real time—in most cases, when the idea of the gas chambers was inconceivable. They did not realize that society as they knew it was unraveling before their very eyes and that they were being swept up in what would come to be called the Holocaust.

Jews were at a disadvantage in a new state that was seeking to define itself as Christian. They had to find their place in the new order and show their patriotism. How was this new, supposedly Christian state able to rationalize the violation of basic Judeo-Christian principles? Tiso seemingly had no problem reconciling his Christianity and the maltreatment of Slovakia's Jews. On August 10, 1940, he stated, "In many letters, Jews [ask] me if what we are doing is Christian. This gives me pause, and I thought to myself, 'You want to teach me about Christianity? . . . I as a Christian say, "First myself, then you" (Ward, 2013, p. 214).

Reading the letters, contemplating who the authors were, and learning about their plight helps us honor the victims. It reminds us that the Holocaust was not something that just happened one day. Rather, it was the result of a systematic process of persecution that began with harsh antisemitic rhetoric and acts of discrimination and eventually culminated in genocide. As more and more people embrace intolerant views and antisemitism today, this poignant correspondence, samples of which are translated below by the author, offers the world an important lesson about the deadly potential of antisemitism, institutionalized hatred, and extreme nationalism, one human being at a time.

#### **"I AM TOTALLY IMPOVERISHED": GABRIEL P.**

Bratislava, March 8, 1941

*Your Excellency, Your Honor, President of the Slovak Republic, Dr. Jozef Tiso, The undersigned, Gabriel P., master shoemaker, born in Vienna in 1885, resident of Holič, Slovakia, completed my studies in Vienna in 1906 and carried out my military service without incident as a corporal in the 72nd Regiment. I implore you to reinstate my shoemaking tradesman's license, which was recently liquidated because I am Jewish.*

*I became an independent businessman in Bratislava in 1909, and I have conducted my shoemaking business conscientiously ever since, with only the help of my two hands, completely alone. I earn my daily bread by the sweat of my brow. In carrying out my work, I developed such skill and expertise that I won a silver medal and honorary certificate at the International Danube Trade Show in 1925. I have never been involved in any organizations or politics and have never been accused of any wrongdoing. All I ever did was try to carry out my demanding work to the satisfaction of my customers from early morning until late into the evening.*

*In my struggle for a daily piece of bread, I am now completely impoverished with absolutely no savings or property! I do not live a Jewish lifestyle and never have, meaning that I don't observe Saturdays and I don't understand anything about Judaism; I only believe in the one merciful God. My lifestyle up until now can be verified by my former commander Peter S., from Bratislava, and my landlord, Jan S., from whom I rent a workshop. And now, at the old age of 56, I am totally impoverished, with no means or help, and have been completely destroyed. I am unemployed and desolate from poverty and hunger. I am completely unsure about what to do.*

*And so, as a Jew, I don't want to go down a bad path and become shameful in the eyes of the world. I ask you humbly, Your Excellency, to return my shoemaking tradesman's license to me, or perhaps even give me permission to be a shoemaker's apprentice, so through your grace I can find employment somewhere and live out the rest of my life as a proper and conscientious citizen.*

*I take the liberty of thanking you most sincerely.*

Gabriel had his own shoemaking business in Bratislava, the capital of Slovakia, for 32 years. He built up his expertise and reputation over the course of his career, receiving an award at the 1925 Danube International Trade Fair. His was a one-person company. Making and repairing shoes was all he had ever known—it defined him. As he faced an uncertain future, hunger, and utter poverty, he wrote to Tiso in desperation, hoping that he could at least be permitted to work somewhere, even if it meant doing something much less prestigious than what he had done before.

As the Slovak state began to exclude Jews from economic life, Jewish businesses were targeted for Aryanization and liquidation. Though there were many regulations and decrees devised to deprive Jews of their livelihoods, two main phases created the legal basis for Aryanization. The first Aryanization law (Decree 113/1940) was passed by the Snem on April 25, 1940. It defined the term "Jewish business" (*Židovský podnik*), ordered that each be labeled as Jewish, and outlined the administrative processes involved. It authorized "voluntary Aryanization," total or partial, in which Jews and Aryanizers could come to an agreement and the original Jewish owner could retain a minority stake in the business. However, this law was in effect only for three months and affected approximately 50 businesses. The Germans wanted to speed up Aryanization and make it more far-reaching, so the Central Economic Office (*Ústredný hospodarský úrad; ÚHÚ*) was established on September 16, 1940, with the goal of "depriv[ing] 90,000 Slovak Jews of their income and property in order to create a Jewish problem that could be solved only through their removal from the country."<sup>iii</sup>

The second Aryanization law (Decree 303/1940) came out the next month. The majority of Jewish businesses, numbering more than 2,200, were Aryanized on the basis of this law. No partial Aryanizations were allowed.

Gabriel's business was slated for liquidation in early 1941. Between 10,000 and 12,000 small businesses were dissolved, with the state receiving all the proceeds. In Gabriel's case, a decision (*Rozhodnutie*) was sent by the Central Economic Office on January 27, 1941, informing him that he must cease operations within eight days of the official announcement of his liquidation. The announcement was made on February 22. On August 30, Gabriel's business was stricken from the register of businesses.<sup>iv</sup>

Gabriel received no response to the letter he sent to Tiso. How he survived over the next 15 months is unknown. He most likely turned for help to the Jewish Center (*Ústredňa Židov; ÚŽ*), to which every Jew in the country was required to belong. The role of this agency, part of the Central Economic Office, was to transmit Slovak government regulations to Slovakia's Jewish citizens. It also provided meals and housing for those who had nowhere else to go when they lost or were evicted from their homes.

Gabriel was murdered in Auschwitz in May 1942.

#### "I AM WEAK AND ILL": MORIC T., PIEŠŤANY

Moric T. was a 71-year-old Jewish man, blind and in poor health. As a result of Decree 186/1941, of August 20, 1941, the government seized half of his bank account, an amount of 1,520.40 crowns. Moric wrote on September 17, 1941, to the Central Economic Office for redress:

*The loss of 1,520.40 (from my bank account) was the last money I had for my old age. I am weak and ill . . . in addition to being completely blind. I have exhausted my last means, which were supposed to cover my medical expenses. This small bank account is all that my 69-year-old wife and I have to live from . . . and the loss of half of my small account means that we are now utterly destitute. I can never work again.*

On November 20, 1941, ÚHÚ responded tersely: "Your request of September 17, 1941, regarding the reinstatement of 50% of the funds in your bank account, removed as a result of Decree 186/1941, is groundless and I therefore deny it."

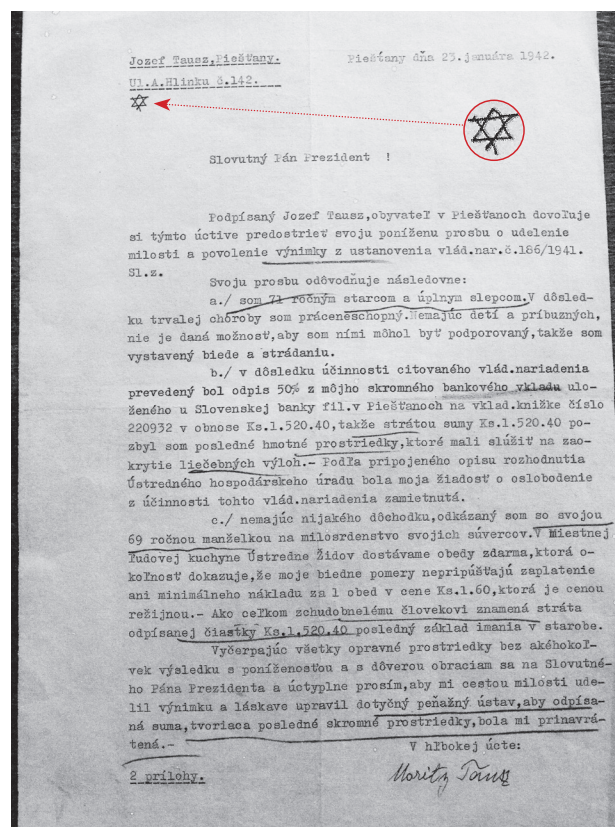
For 40 years, Moric and his wife had lived in Vienna, Austria, but they had maintained their Slovak citizenship and residence status. They were in Piešťany for Moric's medical treatment when the border with Austria closed because of the annexation of Austria to Germany (the Anschluss) on March 12, 1938. Since then, the couple had remained in this spa town, renowned for its treatment of eye diseases. Luckily, the Jewish Center provided lunches. Otherwise, they would have starved.

On January 23, 1942, Moric wrote to Tiso about getting his confiscated money back:

*I, the undersigned, resident of Piešťany, take the liberty of respectfully*

*making a humble request for mercy and to receive an exception. . . . I lived from 1899 to 1939, for 40 years, continuously, in Vienna and did not earn a single penny in Slovakia [a reference to not taking money away from Slovaks, something Jews were accused of in propaganda]. Having exhausted all avenues with no success whatsoever, I turn humbly and trustingly to you to request your mercy and kindly correct the aforementioned [problem with my] financial account, so that the stated sum, which represents my last financial means, be returned to me. I have no pension and am dependent on the kindness of my coreligionists. The local kitchen of the Jewish Center gives us free lunches . . . my lack of means makes it impossible for me to pay even the tiny sum of 1.60 crowns needed for one lunch.*

The letter bears a Jewish star drawn in the upper left-hand corner, in accordance with the Jewish Code [Fig. 1]. Jews were required to draw a Star of David on their correspondence, something even the Germans had not dictated. In May of 1942, Moric and his wife were deported. They were given a list of items they were permitted to take with them: one hat, one cap, two or three sets of clothes, two coats, three pairs of underwear, two towels, two pairs of shoes, one blanket, three pairs of stockings, cleaning supplies, a piece of soap, a cup, eating utensils, a toothbrush, six handkerchiefs, and sufficient food for three days.



**FIG. 1.** Letter with the Star of David. Courtesy of the author. This measure made Jews very visible, facilitating their identification as enemies of the Slovak state and making them vulnerable to additional scrutiny and abuse by authorities and society.

Matches, cigarettes, watches, money, and valuables were forbidden.<sup>v</sup> At the train station, Moric and his wife would have turned in the key to their apartment. Later, the local tax office would come into their former home and take everything. All items were sold cheaply at public auctions.

Moric and his wife's first destination was the Žilina Concentration Camp (*Koncentračne stredisko Žilina*), a collection center where Jews were gathered prior to deportation. The camp consisted of six or seven filthy barracks that all shared one faucet. Forced to submit to personal searches upon arrival, most of the Jews lost their belongings to the guards. (The director of the camp confessed in court after the war that of the 75 guards who worked there, he had to dismiss 66 because of their brutal treatment of prisoners. *Mesto Žilina*, n.d.) Here, Moric and his wife were forced to sign documents "willingly" giving any remaining property they had to the state and "willingly" giving up their Slovak citizenship.

On May 12, 1942, they were loaded onto a cattle car with 1,040 Jews destined for Chełm, Poland. Preparations for deportations would usually begin in the morning. Policemen flanked the trains so that no one would have access to the prisoners. Forty people were loaded into each car. Supervisors would beat the Jews and cut the straps on their bags as the Jews got onto the trains, separating them from any luggage they had left and allowing them to take only a small bag into the train, which departed in the afternoon. While people were loaded into the trains, many wailed and cried and resisted getting inside, but the guards would beat them, forcing them with sticks to go inside (*Žilina*, n.d.).

On May 11 and 12, 1942, a transport of 2,000 Slovak Jews arrived in Chełm from Žilina and Humenné. When they disembarked, any remaining belongings the Slovak Jews had left were confiscated, making them totally dependent on a welfare system for the impoverished that had been set up by the Jewish council in Chełm. No longer was Chełm the place of Jewish folklore and fables that it had been for centuries, a town made famous for its self-deprecating and uniquely Yiddish humor. The Jewish ghetto was established in October 1940 by the Nazis. Like other ghettos, it was extremely crowded and lacked basic electrical and sanitary infrastructure. The food rations were insufficient. Many Jews became ill and died or were shot right in the ghetto.

Six months after Moric wrote to Tiso, KPR sent a letter to the district office in Piešťany to investigate his request, asking for information about his family, property, and earnings, how long he had lived on a permanent basis in Piešťany and in Slovakia, his citizenship, and whether he had told the truth in his correspondence. Upon completing the investigation, the district office was to summon the applicant, ask him to state his and his wife's religion, and indicate whether he still needed the requested funds. An

August 14, 1942, letter written at the district office stated: "Moric T. was transported to Concentration Camp Žilina. I am returning this file to your office, since this case is no longer relevant." Moric and his wife were no longer alive. Whether they died in the ghetto itself or they were taken to Sobibor and murdered there is not known.

#### **"MY REQUEST...TO LISTEN TO THE RADIO": TIBOR B.**

October 12, 1941, Spišská Nová Ves

Your Honor Mr. President!

*Permit me to kindly—as a faithful, loyal, and devoted citizen of the state and its president—Your Honor Mr. President, on the occasion of your approaching and celebrated birthday, in the most humble and devoted way, I most sincerely congratulate you.*

*May the almighty God preserve you for many, many years in complete and continuous physical and spiritual health so that you can serve your high function vigorously and build this country to the delight of its citizens.*

*On this occasion, I take the liberty of presenting to you, Your Honor Mr. President, my earnest, fervent, and modest request that you be so kind and merciful as to grant to me through—kindness—to exceptionally, mercifully be permitted to listen to the radio and have a radio in my home. In the sweet and firm hope and belief that Your Honor Mr. President will be so kind and generous as to graciously acknowledge this major request and also kindly help me so that it can be graciously fulfilled, and for such willingness and kindness I give you my warmest and sincerest gratitude in advance!!—*

*The reason for my fervent wish is that several years ago I was operated on both legs, and now I cannot leave home much. I am forced to spend most of my time at home in my apartment and this is why it would be such a gracious act and such a benefit for me if I could, given my circumstances, out of compassion /!/? be specially exempted from such a ban!!*

*I live only with my mother, who is already old / living on a teacher's pension / quietly and in considerable retreat from the outside world. We are loyal, politically reliable, devoted citizens of this country. We have never been punished for even the smallest inappropriate infraction, etc.*

*I also solemnly swear that in case your kind permission is given to be allowed to listen to the radio, I would naturally limit myself to listening exclusively to those domestic broad-cast stations that are authorized by the government, and those of allied countries, especially music broadcasts!!—*

*I believe that your fatherly and generous heart knows the heights of its immortal worthiness and is able to offer understanding and help to those who are small and weak who trustfully run to its protective wings. And I feel very fortunate to be there because I know that I will not be forsaken in my request! Reiterating my earnest plea, I hope, rather, firmly believe that this request will be kindly, benevolently, and graciously granted in a favorable way, and in this hope I express my full and most humble respect.<sup>vi</sup>*

Tibor lived in Spišská Nová Ves, a town in the eastern



part of the country located approximately 220 miles from Bratislava. The town dates back to 1268, and Jews were permitted to settle there starting in the mid-1800s. By early 1942, there were 14,667 inhabitants in the town, of which 830 were Jewish. Economically, it was a thriving area. Located in a mining region, Spišská Nová Ves was an important industrial center.

Tibor was 31 years old when he wrote to Tiso. He lived in an apartment on the city's main square with Regina, his 71-year-old mother. He was unable to walk and hoped that his special circumstances would make it possible for him to keep his radio, forbidden to Jews. Seven months after writing to Tiso, Tibor, his mother, and 1,052 other Jews from Spišská Nová Ves and other towns in the region were transported from Slovakia on May 29, 1942, headed to the Izbica transit camp in Poland, 35 miles from Lublin. Tibor was listed as an invalid and his mother as a housewife on the transport list.

In Izbica, they faced overcrowding, hunger, and appalling hygienic conditions. On June 8, 1942, an *Aktion* took place in Izbica, and the Jews rounded up were most likely sent to the Belzec extermination camp or possibly Sobibor.

On August 17, 1942, the KPR wrote to the district office in Ružomberok asking for a copy of Tibor's birth certificate and a processing fee of 5 crowns. On August 28, 1942, the district office wrote to the KPR that he had been deported and was "supposedly somewhere in the former Poland." The letter was filed away.

By then, he had been murdered. In whichever death camp Tibor and his mother were, he, given his handicap, would have been shot immediately upon arrival, and his mother sent to the gas chamber.

## LETTERS AS TESTIMONY

As we read these letters, we see how Jews experienced official antisemitism directly in their personal lives. Gabriel P.'s whole identity was tied up in his life's work as a shoemaker. The new situation left him confused and frightened, unsure about his place in a state that no longer wanted him. Moric T. had no idea that he was financing his own deportation and was convinced that the confiscation of half of his bank account could be reversed once the state realized that he and his wife were older people living in abject poverty, which was actually the state's objective. Tibor B. wanted to have some connection to the outside world, when isolating the country's Jewish population was also part of the escalating persecution of the Jews. The letter writers did not think that they would be murdered merely for having been born as Jews. The letters illuminate individual agony suffered by these desperate Jews, the lack of response highlights the callousness of those to whom they wrote, and the indifference and inaction that followed these cries for help testify to the silence that helped to doom the Jews of Slovakia.

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"Family was everything to my father, his number one priority," writes Toba Abramczyk. "I never realized how much he missed his parents, brothers, and sisters, murdered in the Holocaust, until I had my first child." Then she understood her father's constant insistence, detailed in this prose poem, that she and her siblings "look to the sky."

*Toba Abramczyk*

## *Look to the Sky*

When I was a small child, my dad used to take me over to the window and ask me to look to the sky. He would take my brother and sister and ask them to do the same thing. This happened all the time—whether it was a barbecue or a family occasion, he would take us out and say "Look to the sky."

When I got married, he took me outside. It was the hottest day of the year, but he wanted me to go out and look to the sky.

When I had my first child, he said, "I am not good with babies. Don't let me hold her, my hands can't carry her." His hands were bent and swollen from hard labor and from butchering meat for years and years. The day she was born, there were about 10 family members in Recovery, all waiting for a turn to hold my daughter. All I could see was her little body bobbing up and down from person to person. There was so much noise and laughter, but through all this hoopla, I could see my father, who did hold his first grandchild, tears streaming down his cheeks. He was singing softly to her. I had never heard my father sing; perhaps this was a lullaby his mother sang to him. He walked her to the window and said, "Look to the sky."

I got it, I finally got it. I started to cry. I was sobbing so hard, everyone around me thought I was breaking down, but my mom understood. She took my hand and smiled. All these years—all the times we "looked to the sky," he was showing our faces to his family, lost in the Shoah—his mother, father, sisters, brothers—and now he showed them his granddaughter, his legacy.



"This essay," writes Lea Ganor, "is based on my post-doctoral work in Haifa University's Herzl Institute on 'From Rebirth to the Skies.' In this project, conducted between March 2013 and June 2016, I interviewed 35 Israeli Air Force pilots, child survivors born in Europe between 1927 and 1942. Many linked their decision to become pilots to their experiences in the Holocaust. As Baruch F., 77, asked, 'If I managed to go from a yellow Star of David on my chest to a blue Star of David on my wings, then . . . what more does a person need?'"

*Lea Ganor*

## History, Memory, and Testimony: Holocaust–Survivor Aircrew Members in the Israeli Air Force

In the early decades after statehood, pilots in Israel were considered models of Zionist sabra heroism, an image that was reinforced after the 1956 war, the first in which jet planes participated and in which the Israeli Air Force (IAF) played a crucial role. Ezer Weizman, the Air Force commander in the late 1950s (and later president of Israel), as a way to encourage enlistment, coined the phrase "the best go the skies." Only 50 years later did we learn that almost half of the best who went to the skies were survivors.

In the mid-1950s, the approximately 300 aircrew members who served at key points of decision-making within the IAF included 136 Holocaust survivors—45% of the total group. In addition, of the 285 aircrew members who took part in the 1956 Sinai war, 96 (33%) were survivors. Yet during their service, most of them remained silent, burying their personal Holocaust experiences out of a desire to be like their Israeli-born colleagues; almost none of their fellow pilots knew their stories. Only many years later, when they were in their late 70s and 80s, did these survivor–pilots begin to share their memories of their Holocaust childhood and its aftermath. As Shaya Harsit, agreeing to be interviewed at the age of 79, explained,

I kept my personal story close to my chest, like cards. I didn't share it with anyone. . . . It's known that I'm not the only one who kept quiet. This entire amazing group kept quiet, some more than others. Everyone felt foreign to the Israeli way of life, and everyone made a great effort to forget the past, to be like their friends, and to blend into Israeli-ness. Some succeeded.

The men I interviewed, who had experienced the horrors of the Holocaust as children, faced many challenges afterwards, both as survivors and as Israeli citizens, including the stress and difficulties of being absorbed into Israeli society as new immigrants. Yet all of them volunteered for the IAF and served during the 1950s and 1960s. Their anecdotes, told below in fragments from both our individual and our group interviews, reveal little-known aspects of these remarkable survivors who chose to serve in the most challenging and prestigious branch of Israeli service.

To understand their transformation from exiled children and Holocaust refugees, the antithesis of the image of the sabra fighter, into members of the leading elite in the Air Force and the State of Israel, I analyzed the major themes that emerged in the memories they shared during our interviews, examining them in their historical, social, and cultural contexts. This analysis is based on their testimonies and on the Israeli national story, both of which reflect the Holocaust and the personal and national rebirth of each of the interviewees. Like a jigsaw puzzle, the different pieces of their stories come together to produce a whole picture, one that portrays a complex, multi-faceted account of the phenomenon.

The methodological discussion considers a number of questions: What was the fate of these children during and following the Holocaust? How did their experiences during the Holocaust influence their desire, once they were citizens of Israel, to enlist specifically in the IAF? What was their motivation to volunteer for pilots' training? What were the factors that contributed to their integration

and success, both in the IAF and in Israeli society?

Their testimony, of course, taken so many years after the events themselves, raises the question of the reliability of their memories of experiences of decades earlier. This study, however, is not aimed at researching the historical truth of the Holocaust; rather, it is an effort to focus on the memories and views of the survivors as they pertain to their lives as members of the IAF.

I conducted these interviews accompanied by my fear of the potential of opening age-old wounds in these men; my concern that perhaps it would be better to leave the past in the past never left me. In some cases, unfortunately, my fears proved correct. For example, I interviewed a pilot who told me that when he was only 10 years old, he was forced to do the horrific task of removing the dead bodies from the trains in Yassi, Romania. This was the first time he had spoken about this. When I talked with him some days after, to find out how he was doing, he told me that the interview had affected him profoundly and he had been unable to sleep. He asked me, politely but firmly, to leave him out of the interview process and not to contact him again. In most cases, though, fortunately, the men thanked me for helping them to open themselves to their past. In fact, several reported that the process prompted them to tell their stories to others, too, and that also helped them to come to terms with their hidden childhood.

Other challenges resulted from my desire to preserve the uniqueness of each story while at the same time creating a common narrative. For this reason, I decided to present the life stories through a discussion based on the main content questions I asked in the interview, and to highlight both the recurring themes and the exceptional ones. The study presents the first documentary research regarding this group as an entity whose members share a common denominator: their identity and experiences as children who survived the Holocaust and subsequently became IAF aircrew members. It increases awareness of the gap between their difficult past, both as children during the Holocaust and as new immigrants in Israel, and their contribution to the IAF. This helps us better understand the sociohistorical processes that shaped the face of Israel.

The study also enlarged our knowledge of the IAF during its establishment and presents it as a warm home that cultivated equal opportunity, ideology, and a sense of purpose and mission, even, or perhaps especially, among those who had difficult experiences as children. However, because the intake of Holocaust survivors into the other branches of the Israeli military has not yet been sufficiently researched, this is not a comparative study. This essay offers an overview of the subject in general and its use of Holocaust testimonies in particular, a small section of my work.

## EMERGING MEMORIES OF THE PRE-HOLOCAUST PERIOD

Because they were very young before the war, the survivors had few pre-Holocaust memories, but the topics shared included several common ones, such as their education, their connection to religion, tradition, and Zionism; their relations with non-Jewish neighbors, their relationships with their parents, and their families' economic situation. Some of their memories on these topics are excerpted below. Giora Bar-Nir, 77, born in Warsaw, shared a memory, for instance, about a gift that he received because of his parents' comfortable economic circumstances. He told me that "the strongest memory I have of home is a birthday party that they celebrated for me when I was two or three years old. I received a tricycle." The memory of this special birthday gift remained lodged in his mind from the time he was a toddler until the present and continued to comfort him.

The participants' memories of their childhood during the Holocaust were both traumatic and formative, whether they survived on their own or with a family member. Giora shared as well an early, quite vivid and grim memory of that time: "The Germans came to my grandparents' house and beat my grandfather. . . . I will never forget that picture, of my grandfather lying on the wooden floor in a puddle of blood mixed with jam." He remembers, too, that

as early as 1943, we moved from place to place in the ghetto and hid in empty cellars or hiding places that were prepared in advance. . . . The most frightening thing was the sound of feet on the steps—it's the kind of thing that stays with you.

Another survivor, Izo B., 78 at the time of our interview, told me,

My uncle was caught. I didn't see how they killed him. . . . I became an animal whose sole aim was survival, and there was nothing that I wasn't willing to do. [I was] a six-year-old boy like an animal. . . . I stole . . . looted, lied . . . whatever.

Additional topics shared by the men included the difficulty of separating from their families; their father as a leader; their mother as a brave protector; the challenges of survival: fear, hunger, cold, hiding places, and their sense of persecution wherever they were; and their efforts, in spite of this, to live as normal a life as possible during the Holocaust. While many topics recurred in these interviews, the men's experiences were diverse because the interviewees lived in different countries under Nazi occupation, and thus conditions were a function of differing Nazi policy in each country as well as that country's prior relationship with its Jewish population.





**Fig. 1.** Shaya, age 4, and his sister. Courtesy of Lea Ganor.

Of particular note are the memories these men had of their mothers. In their eyes, their mothers were significant figures who saved lives and were extraordinarily brave. Daniel Gold, 76, affirmed,

My mother is a hero. She decided to give me away to save me. . . . My aunt is a hero. These two women, my mother and my aunt, saved their children. . . . My mother was a strong, wise, resourceful woman, yet she didn't survive. . . . Making the decision to give me away was an act of heroism.

Even on the way to, and inside, the camps, the mothers acted heroically, and their sons remember. Robert P., 76, recalled,

My mother managed to escape from the camp when she was 34, with [me,] a young boy . . . and then there was a horrific moment when a 14-year-old girl managed to crawl out of the window and jump from the train. At that awful moment she shouted to my mother,

"Throw him to me." My mother held me up and threw me out of the window.

Shaya Lazerson, at the age of 87, talks at length about his time in Auschwitz, saying, "I remember arriving in Auschwitz. . . . I will never forget that moment. . . . The most difficult thing was the shame and the humiliation." Then he includes a detail about his mother's sacrifice to buy him shoes:

They took us to the showers . . . they shaved our heads. This is the only episode that is branded in my memory; that I won't ever forget. That is the moment. . . . Heads shorn, with clothes, they left me my shoes. . . . Those were the shoes that my mother had bought for me for a kilogram of rice. [Fig. 1]

### **LIFE IN THE AFTERMATH**

I interviewed these survivors about their life in the aftermath of the Holocaust. For them, this was a period of continuous challenges: coping with their individual post-war reality, facing their losses, and, for many, fending off overwhelming loneliness and emptiness. Liberation is a significant memory for them all. Those who survived with one or both parents remember their parents' behavior as they discovered their terrible losses, often of entire families, and their responses to the profound difficulties of

coping with the new realities that confronted them. On the one hand, they were liberated; on the other, they experienced enormous grief over their losses. They were desperately lonely, uprooted, forced to realize that they had no home to which they could return. Tragically, and for a variety of reasons, sometimes these children had to part from their parents when they arrived in Israel, a terrible blow to both parents and child that added to the difficulties of being a refugee.

Those who survived without their parents or siblings found themselves completely alone. Many experienced an unsettling period of wandering until they were fortunate enough to emigrate to Israel where, as insecure immigrants, they tried to fit in as well as they could to their strange, new environment.

While immigrating to Israel was life-saving, it also included many stressors, including learning a new language, loneliness, and the problems that arose as they tried to adjust to new and foreign locations, circumstances, and people. The different settings in which they were placed when they arrived—group homes for orphans, kibbutzim, boarding schools, or in a new home with their surviving

parents or relatives—affected the choices they made as they tried their best to integrate and ingratiate themselves in their new situation. They paid a great emotional price as they integrated into Israeli society; they had to adopt a new identity and start a new life. As Robert P., who came to Israel alone and lived with an aunt, explains, “I registered for first grade, and they called me ‘the refugee’ . . . the kids didn’t accept me, I didn’t know the language, I didn’t fit it, and no one helped me.” Aria O., born in 1936 and only 11 or 12 when he arrived, told me, “I remember that I was always home alone, with no friends, without anything.”

Yet despite the difficulties they experienced as newcomers, immigrants, often with no immediate family, all with a tragic past, many of the interviewees have vivid, positive memories about the sights, tastes, smells, and experiences of this period, both on their journey to, and as they arrived and made a life in, Israel. Simi Saar, for instance, born in 1935, was a young passenger aboard the

illegal immigration ship *Moledet* and remembers, “Ever since my time on the ship, I’ve liked oranges. The British gave us oranges and I ate them on the ship.” Israel produces oranges, so Simi was able to eat them whenever he wanted. [Fig. 2]

Arriving in Palestine/Israel helped mitigate the sadness that all the refugees experienced. Giora Bar-Nir, born in 1936, who sailed on the immigrant ship *Pan-York*, recalled:

We sailed for seven days in terrible conditions and horrible crowding. . . . On the morning of the eighth day, we all stood on deck facing Mt. Carmel, next to Haifa Port. My heart was pounding with excitement. All the adults broke into “Hatikva” [the Israel national anthem], and many of them must have wept.

Daniel Gold recalled longing for the Land of Israel both when he was in Europe after the war, and on the journey as he traveled to what would be his new home:

What remained with me the entire time was the intense desire to immigrate to the Land of Israel. . . . Also, in Germany after the war, we didn’t look for the Holocaust; we looked for how to move forward, we looked for the future.

Furthermore, many of the men described the powerful and positive effects on their identity of the youth movements and Zionist ideology that they encountered in Israel, and how both helped them cope with the trauma they carried.

Too, life on a kibbutz was a foundational experience that was a major contribution to their integration and to their later success in the IAF as well. Kibbutz life, with its shared values and work ethic, its communal economy, meals, and sleeping quarters for children, its frequent joyous gatherings for song, dance, and celebrations of the chagim [holidays] and other events, made it possible for them to be immersed in the culture, to live an Israeli life, to become similar to their peers who had been born in the country, and to feel they were fitting in. There, they had an opportunity to shed the marks of the Diaspora, to hide the scars of the Holocaust, to learn about their adopted homeland and its people, and to forge and strengthen ties to them both.

## THE ISRAELI AIR FORCE

What motivated these young survivors to consider joining the Israeli Air Force? What factors facilitated their integration into it? Their answers were strikingly similar. First, they wanted to integrate, to live as if they had been born in Israel. Asher N., 71, admitted, as did many of the men, “I envied the sabras. . . . I would do anything,” he



**Fig. 2.** Simi Saar, second from the right, with his younger brother, Benny, May 8, 1945. Identities of the women are not available. Courtesy of Lea Ganor. No pictures of Simi’s early childhood were recovered; this is the earliest photo that he has of himself.



said, “so that people wouldn’t call me a refugee.” Joining a youth movement and the Scouts was one way to integrate; even better, they believed, was to join the Aviation Club and Air Gadna [a military program that prepares young people for military service in the Israel Air Force] activities. Baroch F., 77, recalls,

My whole youth I never wanted to remember the Holocaust. On the contrary, I wanted to forget it. I joined the Tel Aviv Scouts, [but] the Aviation Club became my home. I fit in very well. After Gadna, I would go to the Aviation Club . . . we would go to Sde Dov airfield [a closed airport in Tel Aviv] every Saturday.



**Fig. 3.** Shaya Lazerson, Brigadier General, 1975. Courtesy of Lea Ganor.

Their Holocaust experiences were highly influential in their decision to volunteer for the IAF. Daniel Gold reported that volunteering changed him from being “a humiliated child in the Holocaust to a man who belongs to the top elite of the State of Israel.” Shaya Lazerson hoped that “maybe a Brigadier-General in the Air Force will grow out of that shame and humiliation of Auschwitz.” [Figs. 3 & 5]

In addition, the survivor pilots wanted to make their dreams of full integration come true by making a contribution to the country they loved. Even if they joined the IAF without a specific plan or intention, they all shared a desire to protect the State and have an impact on its growth



**Fig. 4.** Simi Saar, 1957, at the conclusion of pilot training, which he finished with highest honors. Courtesy of Lea Ganor.

and success. Too, joining the Air Force was certainly a source of pride for their real or foster parents and other relatives and friends, and for themselves as well. Simi Saar explained, “When I was in flight school . . . in the Air Force, I was already a Sabra. I was . . . judged according to my performance.” [Fig. 4]

As Asher N. recalled, “When I finished flight school . . . I felt like the king of the world.”



**Fig. 5.** Shaya Lazerson in the field, 1960. Courtesy of Lea Ganor.





Fig. 6. Dani Gold (top man), 1957. The identity of the other pilot is not available. Courtesy of Lea Ganor.

#### FROM REBIRTH TO THE SKIES: A MUTUAL BENEFIT

From these interviews, I learned that joining the IAF was of great benefit to the survivors, and that the IAF benefitted greatly from their participation. The men expressed profound appreciation and gratitude to the IAF for its role in their personal revival and growth. Shaya Lazerson, for instance, made clear that “during my 22 years of service in the Air Force, I served the country loyally, with devotion, and at the same time I knew—I know—that the country and the Air Force gave me much more than I gave them.”

Daniel Gold concurred. “What contributed to my personal rebirth was the State and the Air Force” [Figs. 6 & 7].

The men expressed complete identification with the Air Force as expressed in phrases such as “the Air Force is me” or “I am the Air Force.” The Air Force became their home and their pride and also served as a source of consolation for what they had lost in their childhood, which increased their desire to contribute even more. As Simi Saar explained:

The Air Force was a home and family for me. Service in the Air Force shaped my new identity and marked a sharp transition from a passive victim to an active man in the Air Force. From my point of view, in the



Fig. 7. Dani Gold, 1957. Courtesy of Lea Ganor.



Fig. 8. Colonel Simi Saar, 1957. Courtesy Lea Ganor.



Holocaust I was led everywhere; here, I feel as if I did something. All my life . . . I stayed in the Air Force because . . . it was a passion—I wanted to be a fighter pilot in the war. [Fig. 8]

### **“THE BEST GO TO THE SKIES”**

This study exposed as myth the generally accepted notion that all of the Israeli Air Force officers who served in the 1950s and 1960s—“the best go to the skies”—were sabras. In fact, a surprisingly large number were survivors. Although they had come from “over there” and survived the Shoah, they also completely identified with their duties as airmen and had the same passion for the IAF and the same sense of mission, if not more, as their Israeli-born counterparts. So strongly do they identify with the Air Force that even their desire to come together as a group and tell the story of their past in these interviews is based on their strong ties to the IAF, which, even today, offers a warm, supportive setting for this research project.

The silence of these interviewees for all these years was a brick wall, but in it were understandable cracks. Their avoidance of discussions of their Holocaust past and the new, proud identities they built for themselves were major factors in their success, yet in certain situations, they were flooded by anguished memories. Giora Ben-Nir remembers a disturbing interview conducted by a military psychologist.

“What???” he responded. It was exactly the same surprise he had expressed the first time he interviewed me prior to my enlistment. Once again, it seemed, I did not fit the image of a child Holocaust survivor he had conjured up in his imagination. . . . I felt as if they didn’t believe me, that I was a liar, and this time a liar in uniform. . . . None of my friends knew anything about my past. In the 1950s, the flight training course was attended primarily by recruits from the country’s collective settlements—the kibbutzim and moshavim. There were few recruits from the city, and I was one of them. . . . Who was I to ruin things with my Holocaust story?

Despite the circumstances of their childhood that caused their disadvantaged starting point, they exhibited a powerful ambition and longing to succeed. How can the glaring contrast between their difficult childhood and their notable success as commanders in the IAF be explained? I uncovered a number of factors.

First, they took great pride in playing a role in building and defending the State of Israel. Next, the fact that the IAF and its members served as a surrogate home and family heightened their willingness to make a contribution. These contributions in turn promoted their successful integra-

tion into the Air Force and into Israeli society as a whole. Finally, joining and finding success in the most prestigious branch of the Israeli military served as a repudiation of the degradation and despair they had suffered as children. As Baruch F., 77, asked, “If I managed to go from a yellow Star of David on my chest to a blue Star of David on my wings, then . . . what more does a person need?”

The personal stories of these survivor-airmen are intertwined with the national stories of Israel, as they illustrate aspects of the Holocaust experience and the national-individual revival of all interviewees. The members of this group successfully transitioned from the role of passive child victims during the Holocaust to the role of active combat soldiers in the Air Force. This transition, it appears, was made possible by their love of, and their sense of pride in their ability to defend, the State of Israel and those who built it. The relationship that evolved between these survivors and the Air Force was one of warmth and total identification. This, in turn, provided a basis for the subsequent gathering of this group of men, in their old age, wanting to tell this story. Here, too, the Air Force served as a warm home, with its encouragement of and support for the “From Rebirth to the Skies” project.

These interviews teach us about personal and collective memory and the dynamics of loss, wandering, return, revival, renewal, resilience, and perseverance. In effect, these stories summarize some of the most important chapters in Jewish history. The legacy of Holocaust-survivor air crew members is a rich and poignant oral history that offers knowledge and insights to anyone interested in understanding these men and their unique contribution to the Israeli Air Force and to the rebirth of the Jewish people in the State of Israel.

### **END NOTES**

i The Aero Club of Israel (ACI) is a non-profit organization that today is the hub of aviation sports in Israel. Since 1951, the ACI has been the Israeli representative of the Federation Aeronautique Internationale (FAI), the international body founded in 1905 that sanctions all aviation sports competitions, championships, and record worldwide.

ii The ACI was founded in 1933 under a different name, “The Flying Camel,” and it served under the cover of a sports club as the aviation arm of the State of Israel to be. Many air force commanders, including Ezer Weizmann, a former president of the State of Israel, and other prominent aviation figures had their initial training and first steps in aviation as members of the ACI.



In this snapshot of courage and resilience by Deborah Kahan Kolb, a survivor in his eighth decade of life announces, "I am ready to begin my life." Read it with Mike Frenkel's "She Is Now Ready" (p. 78) and Janet R. Kirchheimer's "Maastricht, January 2007" (p. 56) for a fuller picture of the various ways survivors resisted—and still resist.

*Deborah Kahan Kolb*

## *Re(vision)*

An old man I know — a great grandfather —  
steps into the tattoo parlor, tells the artist,  
*I am ready to begin my life.*

Eight lingering decades carried in his creased cheeks.  
Five blue numerals etched in his crinkled skin.  
He presents his forearm for erasure.

*Make it disappear*, the old man says.  
*This number does not define me.*



Pnina Rosenberg introduces us to Malva Schalek, whose works have been characterized as “perhaps the finest and most complete artistic oeuvre to survive the Holocaust.” Schalek was imprisoned in Terezín at the age of 60. Yet during the years 1942–1944, “despite her age, her frail health, and the dreadful conditions,” Schalek “produced some 140 drawings and watercolors. . . . These sensitive and moving works of art are a sober testament to day-to-day life in Terezín” (Freudenheim, 1981, p. 37).

*Pnina Rosenberg*

## Malva Schalek: A Resistance Artist in Terezín

Malva Schalek was born in 1882 in the Bohemian capital of Prague, in what then was the Austro-Hungarian Empire. She was the youngest of four children in a cultured, well-to-do Jewish family. Gustav, Malva's father, owned and ran the Schalek Bookstore and Lending Library, which functioned as the center of Prague's intellectual circles. After finishing formal schooling for girls, Malva studied art in Munich and later in Vienna, where she established her reputation as an artist. “Her slim, slight figure and spiritual face was [sic] to be seen everywhere where you could find Czech art in Vienna . . . . She drew, painted, was an artist through and through and she had a lot of admirers and friends” (Auředníčková, 1946, translated in Stodolsky, n.d., n.p.).

With her sensitive eye and her skill, Schalek's paintings captured the essence of early 20th-century Jewish bourgeois life in Central Europe, particularly in her portraits of women and children. Many of her works were displayed at the Viennese Secession exhibition (an avant-garde art movement in Vienna of the late 19th and the early 20th century) and in solo exhibitions featuring portraits of prominent women: businesswomen, art critics, artists, and writers. Most of the likenesses were done with quick, effective use of pastels and either charcoal or brown pencil. They required very few sittings and were praised for capturing the force and inner spirit of the individual with a few brush or crayon strokes (Stodolsky).

After the *Anschluss*, Schalek left her paintings behind and fled in July 1938 to Leitmeritz, Czechoslovakia, where her brother Robert had become the chief judge of the regional court. In spite of his position, Malva was forced into a nomadic life following the German annexation of the Sudetenland in October 1938 and the occupation of

Czechoslovakia in March 1939. Like many of her compatriots, according to her aunt Lisa Fittko (1993, p. 136), she fled back to her hometown, hoping to escape the horror, but discovered that there was nowhere to flee. In February 1942, the artist was interned in the ghetto Terezín, which ironically is situated only some two miles from Leitmeritz.

### TEREZÍN: A NEW REALITY

The 60-year-old, physically frail Schalek was interned in the women's barracks, known as *Hamburg Kaserne*, along with 45 other inmates. There she slept on a bunk, an advantage compared to those who slept on the floor. The conditions were harsh, but she “didn't despair or complain, although even after such a short time she looked only a shadow of herself and her pretty wavy hair looked as if it had been sprinkled with silver,” as attested by Anna Auředníčková, an old friend who was interned with her in Terezín. Auředníčková recalls that Schalek

couldn't bear the food; she always had a weak stomach . . . . The “*Zimmerälteste*” [senior barracks warden], the woman who had to keep order in that gigantic room that was almost devoid of light, realized what a delicate human being she had at her side and tried to ease conditions for this fragile and weak person. She turned the attention of the house administrator . . . to the woman painter and thus she was put in a space near the window. The artist was able to paint really interesting views and scenes in Theresienstadt and her condition improved. (Auředníčková, 1946, translated in Stodolsky, n.d., n.p.)

Thus despite her age, her frail health, and the dreadful con-

ditions of life in Terezín, Malva Schalek produced during her years of internment some 140 drawings and watercolors, many of them now in the art collection of the Ghetto Fighters' House Museum in Israel. These sensitive and moving works of art are a sober testament to day-to-day life in Terezín.



**FIG. 1.** Malva Schalek, *Barracks Interior in Terezín*, pencil on paper, 30.8 cm × 45 cm, Terezín, [1942–1944]. Courtesy of the Ghetto Fighters' House Museum Collection. Donated by Hans Ekstein and Lisa Fittko, Chicago.



**FIG. 2.** Malva Schalek, *Women Inmates in the Barracks*, watercolor and pencil on paper, 31.5 cm × 47 cm, Terezín, [1942–1944]. Courtesy of the Ghetto Fighters' House Museum Collection. Donated by Lisa Fittko and Hans Ekstein, Chicago.

## A HOME AWAY FROM HOME

A considerable number of Schalek's drawings and watercolor paintings depict a claustrophobic living space in which imprisoned women and girls lie or sit on individual beds or three-tiered bunks, surrounded by their bundles, suitcases, and kitchen utensils: pots and pans, ladles and bowls in a tidy, almost home-like space [Figs. 1 & 2].

This seeming paradox is explained by the women' need to maintain some semblance of their previous lives. The creation of a virtual bond between their past homes, their world of yesterday, and their constricted space of the present reduced the traumatic rupture caused by their internment, as noted by renowned author and scholar Ruth Bondy (1998), who herself was interned in Terezín:

The trauma of leaving home, with its beloved possessions, went deeper in married women and persisted in the ghetto. . . . Sometimes they held on to a remnant from the past . . . as if it were a thread that would lead them back home. . . . Women, more than men

men, tried to convert their place on the three-tiered bunks into a surrogate home, by covering the mattress with a colored sheet . . . and laying a napkin on the plank that housed their possessions. (p. 311)

Schalek's barracks depictions create a considerable tension between extreme order and feminine tidiness and the inmates themselves who, despite the activities in which they are engaged, seem weary and devoid of life. Quite often, the scenes evoke feelings of desolation and emptiness that even the domesticity of the interior cannot overcome. The inmates' activities seem to be entirely external, while inwardly they are numb and lifeless. Sixty-year-old Schalek depicts and reflects the life of her fellow inmates, older women who tried, despite understanding that they were at the top of the deportation lists, to preserve their humanity and dignity. Yet their anguish, their hopelessness, and even some measure of apathy penetrated the restrained veneer of the neat, bourgeois appearance they so heroically maintained.





**FIG. 3.** Malva Schalek, *Women Inmates Doing Their Laundry*, pencil and charcoal on paper, 30.5 cm × 44.2 cm, Terezín, [1942–1944]. Courtesy of the Ghetto Fighters' House Museum Collection. Donated by Lisa Fittko and Hans Ekstein, Chicago.

### HYGIENE AND SANITATION

Following their accustomed routines of the past, Terezín's women inmates struggled to keep their surroundings clean and to maintain their regular washing habits as much as possible, which let them feel that they were exercising some control over their lives and space. Women inmates were more sensitive to cleanliness, an important weapon in their constant and Sisyphean combat against the fleas and lice that thrived in the conditions of the ghetto. According to Bondy (1998),



**FIG. 4.** Malva Schalek, *Courtyard*, watercolor on paper, 31.5 cm × 47.5 cm, Terezín, [1942–1944]. Courtesy of the Ghetto Fighters' House Museum Collection. Donated by Lisa Fittko and Hans Ekstein, Chicago.

Generally, men . . . suffered more from hunger and women more from filth, bedbugs, and fleas, which became the 11th plague of Terezín, because of the terrible overcrowding (as many as 60,000 Jews lived in Terezín, where 7,000 people had lived before the war). The bugs resisted all efforts to keep the room clean, to air the bedding, to disinfect. All the women's memoirs about ghetto Theresienstadt describe the war against dirt and insects. . . . The old women had to wash from head to toe every day, with each supervising the other, and the rooms were swept each morning. (p. 318)

The women's care for cleanliness can be seen in Schalek's outdoor paintings of inmates doing their laundry [Fig. 3] and airing their beddings in the courtyard [Fig. 4], and in the interior scene of a line of washing hung up to dry [Fig. 5].

The noted art historian Tom Freudenheim (1981) perceptively appraises Schalek's portrayals of daily life:



**FIG. 5.** Malva Schalek, *Interior*, watercolor on paper, 31.5 cm × 46 cm, Terezín, [1942–1944]. Courtesy of Ghetto Fighters' House Museum Collection. Donated by Lisa Fittko and Hans Ekstein, Chicago.



There is a sense of almost normalcy in the depictions of women's . . . barracks life. . . . Schalek seems almost like a courtroom artist, deftly using her materials in a place where no cameras could record. . . . The works are sensitive, using color and line to great effect, such as in the painting of the woman bathing or the old woman resting on her bed. (p. 37)

Schalek's genre paintings and drawings offer accurate and poignant insight into the conditions under which the inmates, mainly the older women, coped during this painful chapter of their lives.

#### PORTRAITS: A DOCUMENTED COMMEMORATION

Malva Schalek pursued her artistic activities in Terezín by portraying her fellow inmates. Many of the portraits were commissioned; for these she was paid with food (Auředníčková, 1946, translated in Stodolsky, n.d., n.p.), a common practice in the camps, where portrait paintings were used to barter (Rosenberg, 2003, pp. 104–105). To attract more clients, she performed some publicity portraits in which the subjects were highly embellished, such as the portraits of Hans Roth [Fig. 6] (done at the request of his parents), Mrs. Dr. Spitz [Fig. 7], and Mrs. Goldman [Fig. 8], contrary to the likenesses in her depictions of the camp (Rosenberg, 2002, p. 103).

The portraits depict a handsome young boy and well-groomed women. Nothing seems to be revealed about their whereabouts or the circumstances in which the portraits were painted. Yet a close look at the inscriptions accompanying the artist's signature (not visible below) reveals a prevalent documentary and commemorative aspect of portraits done during the Holocaust. Inserting the name of the subject and the place along with the usual data—the artist's signature and the date—transformed these works of art into testimonial documents that confirm the inmate's and the artist's existence, at least for the time being.

The gender scholar Catherine Stodolsky, a relative of the artist, envisaged mounting an exhibition that would present Schalek's life and artistic work in the context of her times. Due to her own untimely death, this did not come to pass. In the planned exhibition's narrative, Stodolsky wrote:

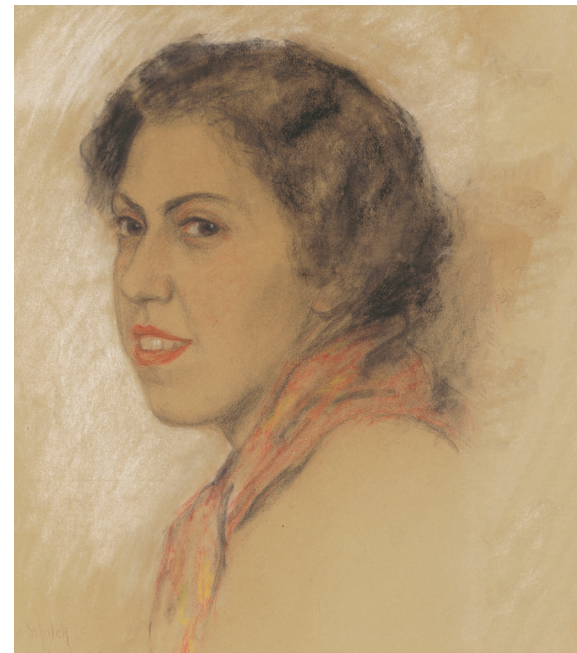
In a perverse twist of fate, Malva Schalek . . . portrayed some of the same people twice: many of the . . . individuals painted at the height of the Viennese success story can be found once again in her Theresienstadt portraits, now in impoverished misery. It is almost as if Malva had been destined to record the same milieu at the age of sixty that she had portrayed earlier, now however, not in bourgeois comfort but in a Nazi concentration camp. (Stodolsky, n.d., n.p.)



**FIG. 6.** Malva Schalek, *Portrait of Hans Roth*, pastel and charcoal on paper, 30.9 cm × 46 cm, Theresienstadt, 1943. Inscription (verso): Hans Roth. Courtesy of the Ghetto Fighters' House Museum Collection. Donated by Lisa Fittko and Hans Ekstein, Chicago.



**FIG. 7.** Malva Schalek, *Portrait of Mrs. Dr. Spitz*, charcoal and pastel on paper, 46 cm × 30.8 cm, Theresienstadt, 1942. Inscription (verso, in German): Fr. Dr. Spitz [Mrs. Dr. Spitz]. Courtesy of the Ghetto Fighters' House Museum Collection. Donated by Lisa Fittko and Hans Ekstein, Chicago.



**FIG. 8.** Malva Schalek, *Portrait of Mrs. Goldman*, charcoal and colored chalk on paper, 45.4 cm × 32 cm. Theresienstadt, 1943. Courtesy of the Ghetto Fighters' House Museum Collection. Donated by Lisa Fittko and Hans Ekstein, Chicago.



Unlike the colored commissioned depictions, the delicate pencil portrait of *Anna Auředníčková* [Fig. 9] (1873, 1957, Prague) intimately depicts Schalek's best friend. Auředníčková (née Schick) came from an intellectual Jewish family, was a writer, prolific translator, and journalist, and, like the artist, lived as an exiled Czech in Vienna and later was deported to Terezín, where both shared the same barracks.



**FIG. 9.** Malva Schalek, *Anna Auředníčková Seated on Her Bed*, Terezín, [1942–1944], pencil on cardboard, 30 cm × 44 cm. Signed (verso): M. Schalek. Inscription (verso): Anna Auředníčková. Courtesy of the Ghetto Fighters' House Museum Collection. Donated by Lisa Fittko and Hans Ekstein, Chicago.

Together, the friends planned for their future artistic cooperation after liberation. Auředníčková (1946) wrote:

She was full of hope, looked forward to her return to the fatherland, and never despaired. She included a portrait of myself in her collection of grannies and hoped that after returning to Prague, I would be able to place that drawing, together with others, in some publication or newspaper. (Stodolsky, n.d., n.p.)

The project never came to fruition. Unlike Auředníčková, who survived and returned to Prague, where she resumed her translation activities and published her memoir, *Tři léta v Terezíně* (*Three Years in Terezín*; Auředníčková, 1945), Schalek was murdered in Auschwitz.

## REFUSING TO PAINT: AN ACT OF RESISTANCE

During the Holocaust, artists, especially portrait artists, were privileged with a certain immunity that sometimes hindered their deportation as, for example, in the case of Auschwitz inmate Dina Gottliebova (Rosenberg, 2019, p. 32). However, this was not the experience of Schalek, who remained true to herself even in the most horrendous conditions in Terezín. Schalek's refusal to do a portrait of a collaborationist doctor led to her deportation to Auschwitz, as witnessed by Auředníčková (1946):

One afternoon . . . a doctor came by whose position in Theresienstadt was exceedingly high. He was . . . a friend of the Germans in front of whom everybody trembled. But the poor artist Schalek was not afraid of him. He stopped in front of us and asked her to come to his place and make a portrait of him. She in her usual soft manner replied that she did not have time and that she had to complete two other orders. Those orders were to be paid for by sugar or margarine. The Doctor therefore asked her to note down that he wanted his portrait done and that she should call on him soon. When he departed, Schalek said, in a very decisive manner, that she would never want to paint a collaborator and traitor nor would she paint him. . .

After a few weeks the doctor . . . stopped again and asked the artist whether she would be able to start working on his portrait in the next few days and again she used the excuse that she did not have time because she had to finish some other work. He took it badly and in a threatening undertone remarked that she should better one day find some time for him.

"Never," she told me. "He serves the Germans. I would rather die than serve a man like that." She knew that the doctor could wield a terrible revenge but she didn't care. . . .

I was afraid of the revenge that was to come. And come it did. Schalek was. . . included in a transport headed for Birkenau. I never saw her again. We couldn't even say farewell. (Stodolsky, n.d., n.p.)

Schalek was deported on transport no. 866, which left Terezín with 2,449 inmates on May 18, 1944. She was murdered a week later. The courageous Malva Schalek remained true to her principles and left her art as an expression of her resistance (Stodolsky).

### SELF-PORTRAIT: LAST MEMENTO

As if borne of a premonition, one of Schalek's last paintings is a self-portrait, signed and dated "Malva Schalek 1944," meaning that it was done during her final months in Terezín [Fig. 10]. This most poignant memento depicts the delicate artist looking downwards, apparently at her reflection in a mirror that enables her to do her portrait. She adorns her curly dark hair with an elegant kerchief, and her lips are painted in light red, thus leaving for posterity a moving image of a somewhat fragile but nevertheless beautiful woman of great inner strength. The likeness reflects survivor testimonies that remember her as carrying "her bitter fate with a model of patience, although her fine face became ever thinner and her being ever more fragile" (Aur'ednic'ková, 1946, translated in Stodolsky, n.d., n.p.), and as a "very cultivated and refined person" (Novitch, Dawidowicz, & Freudenheim, 1981, p. 164).



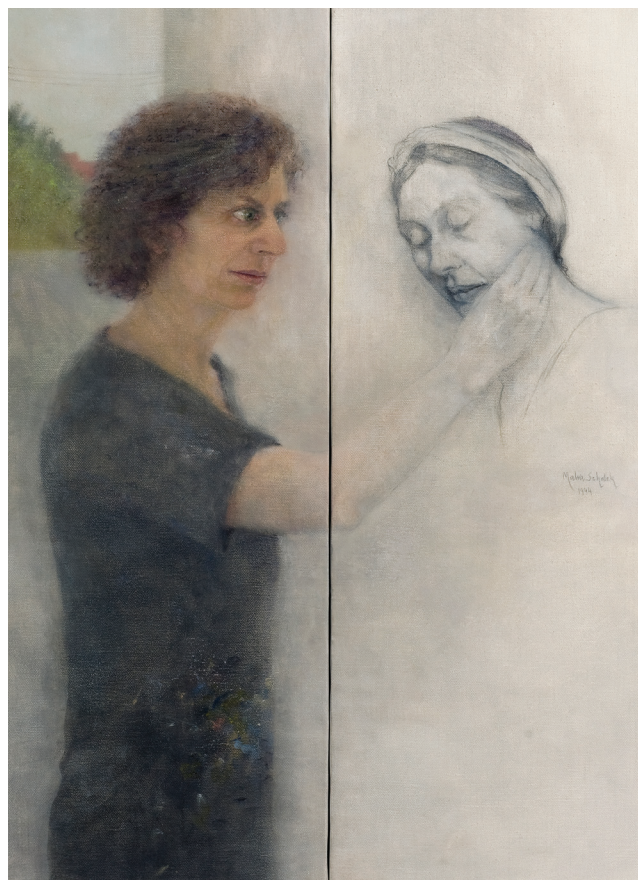
**FIG. 10.** Malva Schalek, *Self-Portrait*, Terezín, 1944, pencil and colored chalk on paper, 30 cm × 22.5 cm. Courtesy of the Ghetto Fighters' House Museum Collection. Donated by Lisa Fittko and Hans Ekstein, Chicago.

### A DIALOGUE WITH CONTEMPORARY ART

The American Israeli artist Ruth Kestenbaum Ben-Dov (b. 1961) created a series of paintings that depict her virtual encounter with Schalek. The diptychs *She and I* (2) and (3) [Figs. 11 & 12] transcend the space and time of the Holo-

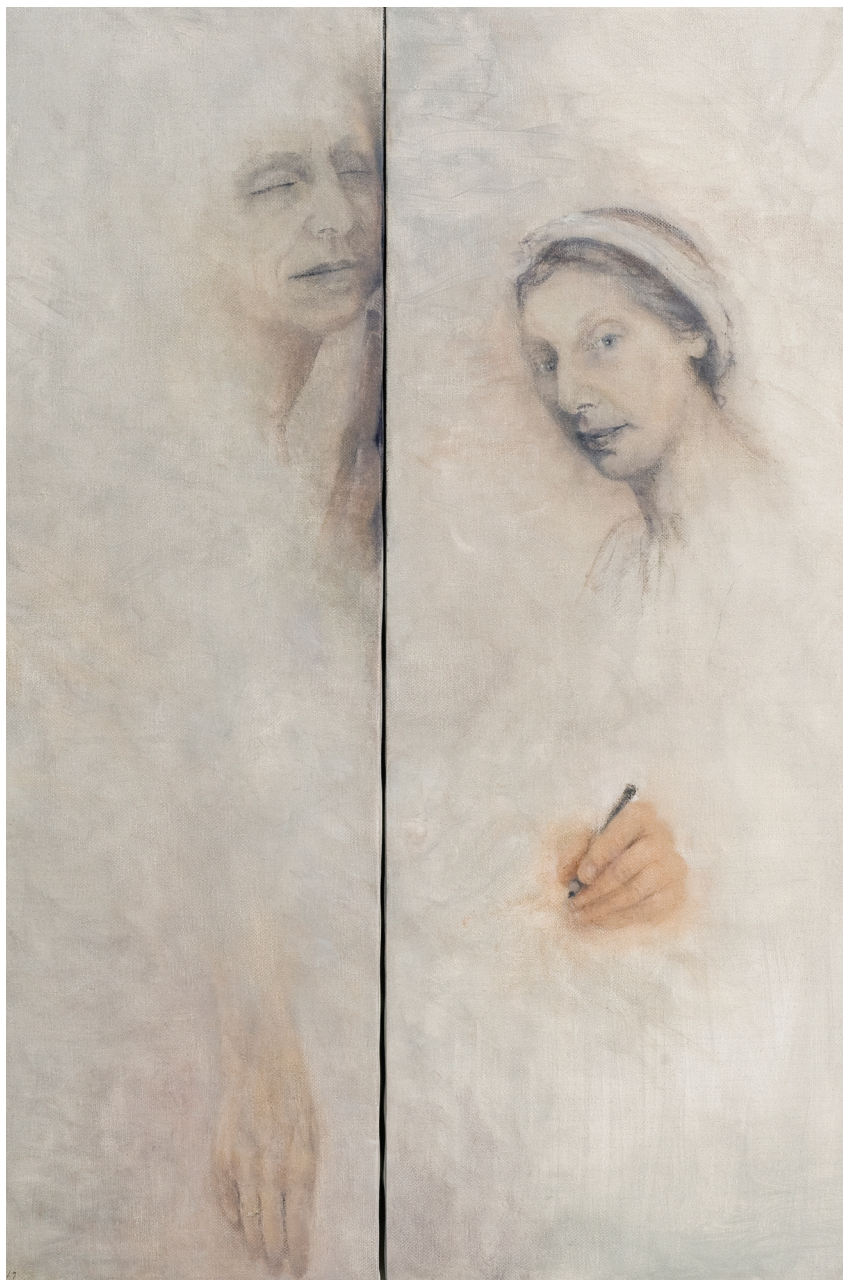
caust while depicting a symbiotic bond between Schalek and Kestenbaum Ben-Dov. The right-hand, monochrome panel of *She and I* (2) [Fig. 11] contains an enlarged adaptation of Schalek's self-portrait. It is painted on a surface that invades the left-hand, colored panel, which portrays the contemporary Israeli artist standing against the background of her pastoral village in the Galilee. Just as Schalek's likeness and the painting's background spread beyond its space, Kestenbaum Ben-Dov stretches out toward Schalek's panel with her right hand, which gradually becomes monochromatic, matching the palette of Schalek's panel. In this diptych, attests the artist, "color appears in the left-hand canvas, relating to here and now, while the color dissipates from the image of the arm as it crosses over to the right-hand canvas" (Kestenbaum Ben-Dov, personal communication, June 11, 2019). Kestenbaum Ben-Dov's hand tries to stabilize and to hold firm Schalek's image.

Kestenbaum Ben-Dov's inter-artist dialogue juxtaposes two different worlds, bridging a gap of space and time through the poignant gesture of reaching out, thus bringing Schalek closer to the Israeli artist's world. The crossed boundaries of the panels visually reveal Kestenbaum Ben-Dov's intense attentiveness to Schalek's fate and work.



**FIG. 11.** Ruth Kestenbaum Ben-Dov. *She and I* (2), 2007, oil and pencil on canvas, 80 cm × 60 cm. Private collection, United States.





**FIG. 12.** Ruth Kestenbaum Ben-Dov. *She and I (3)*, 2008, oil and pencil on canvas, 80 cm x 60 cm. Private collection, United States.

The white, grey, and light brown diptych *She and I (3)* [Fig. 12] differs from the previous dialogue. Whereas the depiction of Schalek in *She and I (2)* [Fig. 11] is quite faithful to her self-portrait [Fig. 10], in *She and I (3)* Schalek has undergone a metamorphosis. Here her eyes are wide open as if she were gazing at the subject that she is portraying with the pencil held in her left hand. She is no longer the introverted artist, immersed in one of her last self-portraits. Here she is an artist who, with her scrutinizing eye and skilled hand, depicts her surroundings. While in the previous painting [Fig. 11], Kestenbaum Ben-Dov's gaze is inquisitive and her hand penetrates Schalek's panel, here her eyes are closed and her hand rests on her side. Bereaved, she seems to be leaning against the panel's frame for support. Both women are depicted against a

white, almost translucent, cloudy background that enwraps them, shroud-like, except their faces and left hands. In this diptych, the roles are reversed: the active Schalek is composed and in control of herself, while the grieving Kestenbaum Ben-Dov is clinging to the older painter for comfort and solace. She explains that she regards Schalek as an inspiring role model:

In these two paintings I created an imagined visual encounter between Malva Schalek and me by juxtaposing my self-portrait with my rendering of hers. This meeting of images reflects my sense of wonder at Schalek's commitment to painting in a life-threatening situation, from the point of view of an artist who struggles to create only in the face of day-to-day distraction and fatigue. The works attempt to touch on Schalek's creative power and perhaps gain some understanding of it. (Kestenbaum Ben-Dov, personal communication, June 11, 2019)

It is no coincidence that Kestenbaum Ben-Dov creates her dialogue through the rather uncommon diptych format, which reveals the dynamic process that she is undergoing. In introducing her series, Kestenbaum Ben-Dov writes:

The inability to really comprehend her experience, her time and place, led to the use of the diptych format—two canvases with a border between them that also constitute one work—on the one hand, two distant planets, and on the other, the exact same world (despite a gap of about 70 years). I recognize the border between these times and realms, yet attempt to cross it nonetheless. (personal communication, June 11, 2019)

Kestenbaum Ben-Dov employs both the form and the content of her painting to pay homage to an artist who defied the severe restrictions of her life in Terezín. Although all were undernourished and exhausted, Schalek portrayed her fellow inmates and herself with dignity, calm, and spiritual vigor. In the *She and I* diptychs, Kestenbaum Ben-Dov not only expresses her fascination with Schalek, but also embraces the Czech artist and tries to incorporate her inner self.

#### **SCHALEK'S LEGACY**

In a letter written by Schalek on May 17, 1944, a day before her deportation, she asked that her works of art be kept in the archive of the *Āltestenrat* (council of elders), the Jewish body that administrated life in Terezín (Stodolsky, n.d., n.p.). The paintings and drawings were hidden and preserved until the liberation of Terezín by the Red Army on May 8, 1945. However,

Malva was not in Terezín anymore at that time . . . the date of her death is recorded as May 24, 1944. It was Malva's choice. What gave her such strength? It was the strength of Malva the artist, the woman who would be guided by her beliefs only. (Lisa Fittko, personal communication, December 14, 2000)

Eventually, most of Schalek's Terezín paintings were given to relatives, who bequeathed them to the Ghetto Fighters' House Museum, where they have been displayed in the museum's major exhibitions.

While serving as the art curator at the Ghetto Fighters' House Museum, I mounted several group exhibitions that included many of Schalek's works, among them *Women in the Art of the Holocaust* (Rosenberg, 2002), an exhibition and catalogue based on my pioneering research on artist-inmates. More than 20 of Schalek's paintings and drawings, alongside works by other talented, courageous inmates, epitomized the heroic attempt by women artists to maintain their dignity in a world that mocked and shattered all civilized and human norms. Her artistic legacy is "undeniable proof of vivid drama, the expression of an invincible faith, and an immortal spiritual lesson that survives the unspeakable ferocities of a regime" (Novitch et al., 1981, p. 164).

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"Mrs. Levine was a neighbor who welcomed the children on our block to play in her yard," says Adele Kenny. "I was only 5 or 6 when the incident in the poem occurred, but it was something I never forgot and that in later life has continued to inform my understanding of the Holocaust and its deepest meanings. By the time I was 7 or 8, Mrs. Levine no longer lived on our street, but the image of the baby blue jay in her hand and the numbers on her arm have become my personal metaphors for spiritual freedom."

*Adele Kenny*

## *Of Feathers, of Flight*

*If I look up into the heavens, I think that it will all come right . . .  
and that peace and tranquility will return again.*

— Anne Frank

That spring, a baby jay fell from its nest,  
and we took it to Mrs. Levine, who told  
us the mother would know our hands and  
never take it back. Spring that year was a

cardboard box, cries for eyedropper food —  
feather-stalks stretched into wings. We  
knew, of course, that we couldn't keep it.  
(Later, we would mark the spot with stones

and twigs — where the bird fell, where we  
let it go — and sometimes, stopped in the  
middle of play, would point and say, *there*,  
*right there*.) The day we freed it, it beat, a

heart-clock (wound and sprung in Ruth  
Levine's old hand) that, finally, finding  
the sky, flew higher than all the briars  
strung like metal barbs above the fence —

a speck of updraft ash and gone. Heaven,  
fuller then for one small bird, spread its  
blue wing over us and the tree and Mrs.  
Levine, who, breathing deeply, raised her  
numbered arm to the light and moved her  
thumb over each fingertip as if she could  
feel to the ends of her skin the miracle  
edge of freedom, of feathers, of flight.



"We are rapidly nearing an age after testimony," writes Rachel Perry. "With the transition from lived to historical memory, how do we connect this generation with the traumatic events of the past? Can art allow us to flesh out or breathe life into what Jean Améry called the 'cold storage of history'?" This essay documents a project led by Perry in which her students at Haifa University researched and ultimately curated an exhibition of "a collection of 138 works of art created by 18 artists" who were persecuted during the Holocaust.

Rachel Perry

## Quand même, Despite Everything: Researching Persecuted Artists

In 1942, during the Nazi occupation of France, the artist Jacques Gotko (born Yankele Gotkovski in Odessa; 1899–1944) painted a remarkable watercolor while imprisoned in the Compiègne internment camp [Fig. 1].<sup>1</sup>



**FIG. 1.** Jacques Gotko, *Quand même*, 1942, gouache and ink on paper, 5.5 in. × 7.5 in. Courtesy of the Ghetto Fighters' House Museum.

It is a beautiful painting by any metric: sharp graphics and rich, saturated colors rendered in ink and gouache on paper. Although the work measures only 5.5 in. by 7.5 in., it has power. In the center, two tall glasses, filled almost to the brim with a rich orange beverage, clink together, raised in a toast. This scene of celebration, however, is firmly set within the camp's confines, framed by signs of captivity. A fence of barbed wire hems the foreground; in the rear, a watchtower looms large, shadowing the libations.

One of the most poignant visual documents created in the French camps, Gotko's work survived thanks to his

friend Isis Kischka, one of the 16 artists assembled at the gathering whose signatures appear in the work.<sup>2</sup> Dated in the upper right corner "21 mai 1942," the painting commemorates the one-year anniversary of their arrival in the camp as the first inmates, when close to 500 Russian-born residents were arrested following the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union. Instead of representing them (Gotko was an able and prolific portrait painter), he allows them to represent *themselves* as artists by signing the work, granting them an authorial presence that was denied them outside the camp. Ironically, the camps were one of the few places in France where Jewish artists could exhibit their work, for after the anti-Jewish policies enacted in the Statut des Juifs (of October 1940 and June 1941), Jewish artists were forbidden to exhibit or sell their work in private galleries or salons. In Compiègne, prisoners had access to art supplies, provided by the International Red Cross. Affixed to each signature is the inmate number given to its bearer by the Wehrmacht authorities in the camp, marking his status as a prisoner—a prisoner, but an artist nonetheless.

Gotko's work takes place under the banner of the short cursive inscription "*Quand même*," which translates as "even though," "in spite of everything" or "nevertheless." This same expression was engraved on the walls of Drancy by a Jewish prisoner on the last night before his deportation to the East in a terse but still thankful sentiment: "*Merci quand même à la France*" (Thank you anyway, France) [Fig. 2].<sup>3</sup>

The phrase was also the title of a clandestine Jewish journal published in France beginning in December 1943 by, among others, a painter named Michel Fink (in French; Ukrainian: Moïse Finkelstein): *Quand même!*<sup>4</sup> As Gotko presents them, the two glasses in this work are decidedly



half full; they mark a profound appreciation for what he and the artists assembled still had: each other, their health, their art. “*Quand même*” testifies to a desire to celebrate community and signal one’s partnership in a shared commitment to art-making—at all costs and under the harshest circumstances.



**FIG. 2.** Graffiti on the walls of Drancy. *Confiance Courage*, May 15, 1944. Courtesy of the Musée d'Art et d'Histoire du Judaïsme, Paris.

## RESEARCHING HOLOCAUST ARTISTS

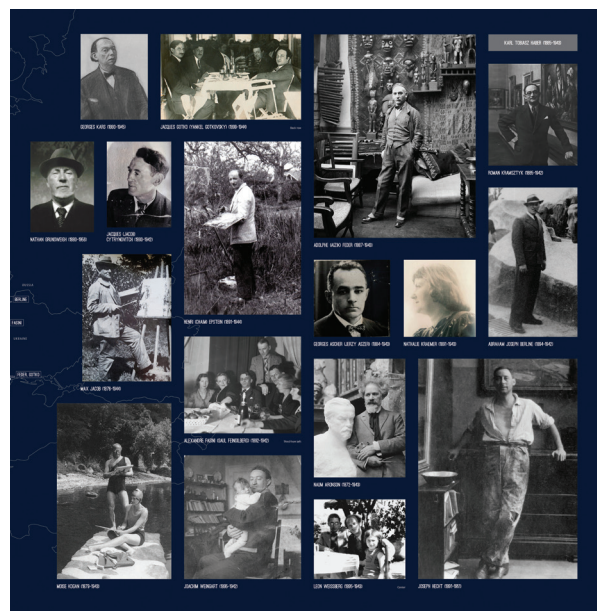
Jacques Gotko's watercolor was the centerpiece of a project I directed at the University of Haifa with a group of graduate students in the Weiss Livnat International Program in Holocaust Studies. Our task was to research a collection of 138 works of art created by 18 artists, among them Gotko, that had been donated to the university by Dr. Oscar Ghez in 1978 under the title “Memorial in Honor of Jewish Artists, Victims of Nazism.” Having narrowly escaped Nazi-occupied France, Ghez returned and began collecting works of art by persecuted artists in order to preserve these “precious relics from dispersion or destruction” (Ghez, 1978, n.p.). When I began teaching at the university, the collection was rarely shown and no research had been conducted on it in over 20 years.

Committed to Ghez's initiative to treat art as a form of commemoration, I launched a two-year project in collaboration with the Hecht Museum under the aegis of the Weiss Livnat Holocaust Studies Program.<sup>5</sup> In the first year, we published the first substantive catalog of this forgotten collection: *The Ghez Collection: Memorial in Honor of Jewish Artists, Victims of Nazism* (Perry, 2017), which reproduced all of the works in color for the first time. I had each student adopt an artist, and in addition to writing a catalog entry on his or her life and work, write a series of blog entries on

the process (<https://ghezcollection.wordpress.com/>). In the second year, we curated an exhibition titled *Arrivals, Departures: Salvaged Works by Persecuted Artists* at the Hecht Museum (June–November, 2018), designed to bring these overlooked works and artists to a wider audience.

We began our work without a template but committed to an interdisciplinary approach that would wed Holocaust art and history. While our work involved editorial and curatorial decisions (of design and installation), the focus remained on questions of Holocaust education. Only one of my students had studied art history as an undergraduate; the rest had majored in history, literature, political science, or education. Throughout, we discussed how to present the works to a general audience in a way that honored their makers. These were, for the most part, questions of tone, but there were those of balance as well. Do we lead with their deaths or end with them? How do we place the works within the broader social and political context of the Holocaust? We opened the exhibition with a wall alongside of a collage of their portraits charting the artists' varied trajectories as they arrived in Paris [Fig. 3].

Opposite, we offered an illustrated timeline, beginning with the emancipation of the Jews following the French Revolution, through the Dreyfus affair, Hitler's rise to power, and the establishment of the Vichy government, concluding with the implementation of the Final Solution in France.



**FIG. 3.** Opening wall of *Arrivals, Departures: Salvaged Works by Persecuted Artists*, June 2018. Courtesy of the Hecht Museum.

Within the exhibit, the works of art were punctuated by film footage of Hitler's triumphant tour of Paris following the Armistice, photographic documentation of the deportations and camps on French soil, and the antisemitic

laws and propaganda disseminated by the Vichy regime. The exhibition ended with a section called Drawing Connections that set the artists' early work from before the war alongside the work made in its midst or aftermath. Composed of six groupings, this wall encouraged reflection on how social pressures affect art-making—not only the artist's subject matter, but also his or her medium, technique, style, and tone.

Driven by an ethical commitment not to leave these artists, or their work, on the margins of history, we approached our project as a search-and-rescue mission—to collect as many traces of their lives as possible: a photograph, an identity card, a letter. Most of the artists in the Ghez Collection were murdered, their studios pillaged, and their personal papers, archives, memorabilia, and photo albums dispersed or destroyed. The students began the project with a deep skepticism. What could they possibly contribute to the academic record? Alexa Asher (2017) wrote that she initially

struggled to believe that we would find any significant information. We were not the first people to delve into the history of these works or the artists. "Hadrn't all the relevant information already been found?" Other books had been published that included information concerning these 18 artists; would we not simply be regurgitating this same information? (n.p.)

Working backwards from the deportation pages in the databases of Yad Vashem and the CDJC (*Centre de documentation juive contemporaine*) in Paris, we verified each artist's last place of residence, date of deportation, and location of death, relying on Serge Klarsfeld's invaluable *Mémorial de la déportation des juifs de France*, which inventories almost all of the 76,000 Jews deported from France. The old catalog offered a scant five lines on each artist, with few if any personal documents or photographs. We could now say with precision when they were arrested and interned, when and with whom they were deported, and the exact date they were murdered. Although most of our research was done online and through correspondence, a few students traveled to Paris with me to visit the archives and interview the artists' descendants and distant relatives. In the process, we not only corrected the historical record regarding these 18 artists, we also discovered previously undocumented facts about their personal lives, such as their addresses and the names of their spouses and children. We also found photographs of several artists (most notably Kraemer and Grunsweigh) who had never before been identified photographically. What follows is both a description of some of our findings and a rationale for the value of art historical research and curation in Holocaust education.



**FIG. 4.** Nathalie Kraemer, August 21, 1939. *Archives de Victimes des Conflits Contemporains*, Caen. Courtesy of the Ministry of Defense of France.

### JEWISH ARTISTS IN THE HOLOCAUST

Nathalie Kraemer, the only woman artist in the collection, is a case in point. With the largest number of works—a hefty 34—she was nevertheless a complete enigma. Nothing was known about her life. The records listed a question mark for her date of deportation and place of death. Recognizing that Kraemer might have been married and changed her name, Pninit Saban tracked down her full name: Camille Nathalie Fanny Kraemer Lévy. (She is inscribed in the memorial wall at the Mémorial de la Shoah in Paris as Camille Kraemer.) We found a photograph of her, hidden for over 70 years, tucked in an obscure archive in Caen and discovered that she was not the daughter of Polish refugees, as is commonly asserted, but born and bred in Paris [Fig. 4].



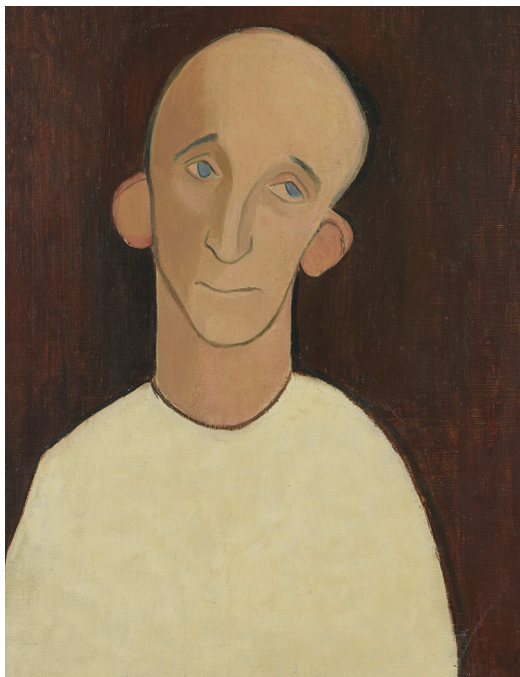
**FIG. 5.** *Les époux* (*The Married Couple*) n.d., 51.2 in. × 38.2 in., oil on canvas. Photograph by Studio Monique Bernaz. Courtesy of the Association des Amis du Petit Palais, Geneva.





**FIG. 6.** *L'inquiétude (Worry)* [1940–1943], 36.2 in. × 25.6 in., oil on canvas. Photograph by Studio Monique Bernaz. Courtesy of the Association des Amis du Petit Palais, Geneva.

She moved to Vichy when she married Marcel Nathan Lévy, who escaped her fate thanks to a Righteous Among the Nations who saved the rest of the Lévy family. Kraemer, who specialized in uncanny portraits such as *Les époux (The Married Couple)* [Fig. 5], was indelibly affected by the increasingly tense political situation in the late 1930s, as evidenced in disquieting paintings, such as *L'inquiétude (Worry)* [Fig. 6], *L'exilé (The Refugee)* [Fig. 7], and, espe-



**FIG. 7.** *L'exilé (The Refugee)*, n.d., 24 in. × 19.7 in., oil on canvas. Courtesy of the Ghez Collection, University of Haifa.



**FIG. 8.** *Le traquéé (The Hunted One)* [1940–1943], 28.7 in. × 21.3 in., oil on canvas. Photograph by Studio Monique Bernaz. Courtesy of the Association des Amis du Petit Palais, Geneva.

cially, the dark and evocative *Le traquéé (The Hunted One)* [Fig. 8], that reflected Kraemer's own experience as she moved from residence to residence in the south of France, trying to elude the Nazis. Arrested in Nice on December 1, 1943, she was deported from Drancy to Auschwitz on December 17, 1943, on Transport 63.

Georges Ascher is another artist largely neglected in the art history books. The six paintings of his in the Ghez Collection are beautiful, sun-drenched Provençal landscapes and bold still lifes. The photograph reproduced in Hersh Fenster's *yizkor* book, *Our Martyred Artists* (1951), shows a handsome man, formally dressed with a bow tie and suit jacket [Fig. 9, p. 50].

The old catalog indicated only that he had been born in Warsaw and moved to the resort town of La Ciotat before being deported to Gurs in 1943 and "later to a death camp" (Ghez, 1978, n. p.). None of the archives yielded any more information. Ascher, though, had been born in Poland. Could his name have been spelled differently on the lists? Armed with Klarsfeld's inventory, we got to work. Asher? Acher? Aser? Suddenly his name materialized: "ASZER, Jerzy." (Georges is a common name for the Polish name Jerzy.) Could this be he? Two facts on the deportation list confirm it: He listed his profession as "artist-painter," and his last place of residence was la Ciotat. From Gurs, Ascher was sent to Drancy, and then deported to Majdanek on Convoy 50 on March 4, 1943. Another artist was on the same transport: the German-born painter and sculptor Otto Freundlich, whose sculpture "The New Man" graced the cover of the Nazis' 1937 catalog of degenerate art.





**FIG. 9.** Georges Ascher (Fenster, 1951).

Klarsfeld's (1994) *Mémorial des enfants juifs déportés de France*, an inventory of the 11,400 Jewish children deported from France, revealed that Ascher had a 15-year-old daughter named Suzanne. She was deported on October 7, 1943, on Convoy 60 with her mother, Rayzle Ascher (also written as Raisle Acher, née Broive), also a Polish émigré.<sup>6</sup> Mother and daughter were rounded up in Marseilles in the fall of 1943, when SS police

directed by Alois Brunner (Adolf Eichmann's assistant and commander of Drancy beginning in June 1943) waged a campaign of terror across the French Riviera, conducting brutal roundups of Jews who had sought refuge in the former Free Zone. Interned first in Les Milles, they were sent to Drancy and then to Auschwitz on Transport 60, the first convoy following the German takeover of what had been the Occupied Italian Zone in the south of France. Ascher's portrait in our collection suddenly registered not as some anonymous *Woman With a Scarf* but as a portrait of his wife, Rayzle [Fig. 10].



**FIG. 10.** Georges Ascher, *Woman With a Scarf*, oil on canvas, 16.1 in. x 13 in. Courtesy of the Ghez Collection, University of Haifa.



**FIG. 11.** Nathan Grunsweigh. Archives of Rose Grunsweigh, Paris.

There were also moments of complete serendipity. Nathan Grunsweigh was supposedly deported to his death in 1943, but over the past decade a number of his paintings dating from after the war (1945–1948) have surfaced at auction. They could have been forged, but there was no re-

cord of him on any transport. Perhaps he had died in a camp or in a roundup? Perhaps he left France before the war? All of our efforts turned up dry. Then one day, as one of our students, Annika Friedman, was working with the photographer shooting the collection, she described some of the troubles we were having with Grunsweigh, and he responded that, in fact, he had a distant cousin with the same last name. Within minutes, we were on the phone speaking with Grunsweigh's daughter-in-law in Paris, who provided us with a life story and photograph [Fig. 11].

A truly remarkable coincidence thus allowed us to correct the historical record. Annika related that

the paper trail of Nathan Grunsweigh came to a halt not because he was deported to his death, but rather because he went into hiding and survived under the noses of the Vichy Regime. As the victim count of the Nazis and their collaborators only seems to grow in size, it was exhilarating to take one name *off* that list as we forge ahead in bringing his story of survival to life. (Friedman, 2017, n.p.)

Grunsweigh died of old age in 1956 and was buried in Montparnasse Cemetery. His entire family survived. The mother and three children lovingly depicted in his *Picnic in the Country* [Fig. 12] enjoying a quiet moment in the countryside were no doubt his own family.

After the law requiring Jews in the occupied zone to wear a Star of David was enacted on May 29, 1942, Grunsweigh traded this pastoral tranquility for an unnerving self-portrait [Fig. 13]. Dressed formally in jacket and tie, he wears a yellow star prominently affixed to his lapel, the only bright color in an otherwise dark painting. In his early 60s by this time, Grunsweigh's hair has whitened with age. His forehead is furrowed with worry, but he has not lost his faith; his head is still covered with a *kippah*. He gazes out directly at the viewer, holding his paintbrush in his hand. Despite the circumstances,





FIG. 12. Nathan Grunsweigh, *Picnic in the Country*, oil on canvas, 21.3 in. x 28.7 in. Courtesy of the Ghez Collection, University of Haifa.

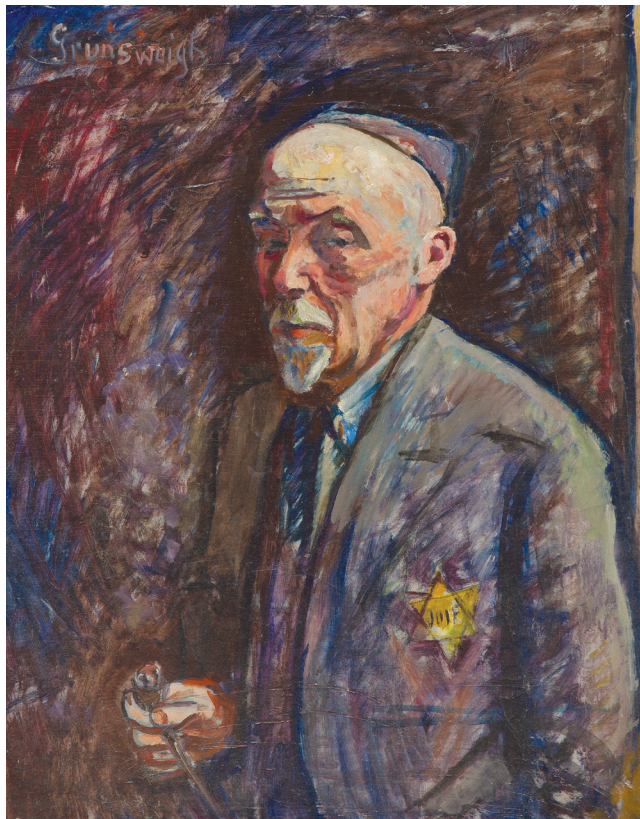


FIG. 13. Self-Portrait, 1943, oil on canvas, 25.8 in. x 21.1 in. © Collection of Marek Roefler, Villa la Fleur, Warsaw.

despite the persecution and danger, he is still painting. *Quand même.*

The 18 artists in the Ghez Collection constitute a mere fraction of the hundreds of Jewish artists persecuted during the Holocaust. Romy Golan and Kenneth E. Silver's important study *The Circle of Montparnasse: Jewish Artists in Paris 1905–1939* did much to raise the profile of these artists. Nadine Nieszawer's *Jewish Artists of the School of Paris 1905–1939* offers a short biography of many of these artists largely based on Hersh Fenster's 1951 *yizkor* book *Our Martyred Artists* [*Undzere Farpaynikte Kinstler*] (Paris: Abécé, 1951). Although Fenster's book is an indispensable research tool, offering one of the most important sources of information on an entire generation of artists deported and killed during the Holocaust, it has yet to be translated in full.

A common misperception is that everything has been discovered about the Jewish artists of the École de Paris. Certainly, in recent years there has been substantial research on the big names, the famous artists, such as Otto Freundlich and Chaim Soutine. So many others, though, such as those represented in the Ghez Collection, have eluded close critical or academic attention. This lacuna in the scholarship highlights how incomplete mainstream accounts of Modernism are and how badly the canon of Holocaust art needs to be expanded.



## AFTER TESTIMONY

We are nearing an age after testimony. With the transition from lived to historical memory, how do we connect the present generation with the traumatic events of the past? Can art allow us to flesh out or breathe life into what Jean Améry (1997) called the “cold storage of history” (p. xi)? To be sure, we only scratched the surface, but, if anything, our project reveals great cause for optimism. The fall of the Iron Curtain, the rapid pace of globalization, and the internet have provided access to new materials and documents. Digitalization has made the databases of archives and collections across Europe available. All of the students not only learned important research skills but also left the project feeling intimately “connected to the artists they chose to research,” as Annika Friedman (2017) wrote:

In an area of study like ours, where so many questions remain and continue to arise . . . it was thrilling to be able to find some answers. . . . Instead of focusing on the horrors of their deaths, I pictured the colorful lives they led before. Every bit of information brought their stories to life. (n.p.)

The students compared their process to running a small detective agency. For Alexa Asher (2017),

Working on the Ghez collection and researching these artists ignited in me a new curiosity within Holocaust scholarship; I felt that I had become a *detective*—with the opportunity to bring to life the personal stories of Jews in the Holocaust. . . . What an honor to be able to give to the world not only an accurate account of who these people were and how they died, but most importantly, *how they lived*. (n.p.)

With hard work, patience, and a bit of luck, these once overlooked works of art can help a new generation bridge the past and the present.

Despite everything, so many artists like Gotko, Ascher, Kraemer, and Grunsweigh continued to paint and draw, to sculpt and print, during the Holocaust. Today, despite their deaths at the hands of a system determined to erase any trace of their identities, we can recover details of their lives and experience, thanks to the works they left behind.

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## END NOTES

i For the broad strokes of Gotko's biography, see Pnina Rosenberg's treatment of the subject on Learning About the Holocaust Through Art (<https://art.holocaust-education.net/explore.asp?submenu=200&id=28>) and her 2003 book *L'art des indésirables: l'art visuel dans les camps français* (L'Harmattan).

ii Kischka returned from Drancy with this work and donated it, along with many others, to the Ghetto Fighters' House Museum. A Red Cross nurse, Germaine Purvoyeur-Buvard, was also instrumental in saving many of Gotko's works. On the back of the work, in the corner, is an inscription in French that reads, “To remit to Mrs. Salomon Kraczman, 7 av. de L'Entenete in Satrouville. Please visit her on a Sunday at her convenience (go there with Gaby). She and her husband will be very pleased.”

iii The inscription was written by Heinz Greiffenhagen and is dated “15.5.44.” He was on Transport 73, the only transport from France to the Baltic States and Estonia. The graffiti on this wall in Drancy includes other expressions of hope and solidarity: “COURAGE! On les aura et bientôt!” and “Vive la France.” A full analysis of such graffiti has yet to be conducted.



iv A member of the Jewish resistance, Fink served as secretary of *Quand même!* beginning with the first issue (December 1943). Born on August 25, 1919, in Ekaterinoslav (Ukraine), he moved to Arras, France, as a child in 1927. He was arrested on May 26, 1944, in Toulouse by the Milice and deported to Monovitz, subcamp of Auschwitz, on Transport 76. He died of exhaustion in Buna on April 26, 1945, and was posthumously recognized by the French Forces of the Interior for his work on behalf of the Resistance.

v The project was funded by Doron Livnat, with works of art from the Petit Palais in Geneva generously loaned by Dr. Claude Ghez.

vi For documentation regarding Transport 60, see Serge Klarsfeld's *French Children of the Holocaust: A Memorial*, <https://phdn.org/archives/holocaust-history.org/klarsfeld/French%20Children/html&graphics/C60.shtml> (modified March 9, 2008).



When we meet survivors, what changes within us? How do we—how will we—remember them and their trauma? Compare this poem by Lou Ella Hickman to Deborah Kahan Kolb's "Renaissance" (p. 36).

*Lou Ella Hickman*

## *Encounter with a Shoah survivor*

corpus christi, texas

she stood in front of me  
on a line at the post office  
she was petite, perhaps 4' 8" or 9"  
yet spry for her age  
looking down from my 5' 7" height i could see  
her hair  
so thin on top

i thought she was a cancer survivor  
then i noticed her left arm  
on the glass counter to the left of us  
numbers  
inked into her skin  
since then  
when i remember her  
i also remember soup lines    ashes  
and swirling smoke



Kurt Borchard writes, "I have read and taught about Treblinka for years. When I finally traveled there in 2017, I was struck by how completely the Nazis had removed nearly all traces of the camp. Beyond the jagged rocks of the memorial, nature had reclaimed the space." The oft-raised question of how life could continue in the midst of, and after, the Shoah is central to this meditation. Kurt asks, "How could it be?"

*Kurt Borchard*

## *Treblinka*

A place  
with grass and trees  
natural  
but not  
a place  
with blood and bone  
unnatural  
but not  
and that  
keeps you  
thinking, feeling  
disturbance, dissonance  
where birds sing  
and sunshine glares  
wondering  
who was there  
how could it be  
in the field  
of stones, flowers, bees  
that so much human  
disappeared.



In this reflective poem by Janet R. Kirchheimer, the poet, addressing lost relatives as she visits their final address, wonders what their lives were like in 1942, "before deportation / before Westerbork / before Auschwitz." Compare with Annette Bialik Harchik's lament "Family" (p. 69).

*Janet R. Kirchheimer*

## *Maastricht, January 2007*

I am outside Wilhelmina Singel 88.  
The skies are gray.  
I take a deep breath and enter the building.  
I walk up to the third floor. That's where you lived.  
Before deportation.  
Before Westerbork.  
Before Auschwitz.  
I knock on the door, hoping someone is there.  
Hoping someone will let me in.  
The door is locked.  
I stay for a while.  
I walk back down and sit on the curb across the street.  
I stare up at the third floor.  
I wonder what your life was like in 1942.  
Did you stay at home most times, afraid to go out on the street,  
the yellow star on your overcoats announcing  
you wherever you went?  
The synagogue you went to is still there.  
There is a plaque in memory of those deported from Maastricht  
to Westerbork,  
then to Auschwitz or Sobibor. That's where most of you went.  
Cars go by, people walk past, and I sit,



watching the third floor, waiting for something to tell me it's time to go.  
The street is beautiful, you know, tree-lined, well kept.  
A light rain begins to fall.  
Oma, Opa, Ruth, and Josef, you jump from the third-floor. I catch you  
and carry you to America with me.



The author's grandparents Simon and Jenny, and Josef, their son, before the Holocaust.  
Courtesy of Janet R. Kirchheimer.



In David Ray's poem about visitors who go to "what / had once been the home / of their loved ones" and wonder "had this been their / family furniture, their etchings / and paintings on the wall?" we hear the same anguish that time does not diminish, the same longing for answers and truth that we find in Janet R. Kirschheimer's "Maastricht, January 2007" (pp. 56–57).

*David Ray*

## *Visitors From America*

In a Ukrainian village a group  
of Americans sought out what  
had once been the home  
of their loved ones who had  
been rounded up by the Nazis,  
all their possessions forfeited,  
no legacy to pass on.

The current owner is genial, invites  
the visitors in, seems glad to see  
them. The wife serves drinks  
and sweets. The children smile  
at those their age. The hospitality  
is flawless. And yet the nephew  
of the uncle who was betrayed  
by some neighbor risks being rude  
by looking around, seeking  
evidence. Had this been their  
family furniture, their etchings  
and paintings on the wall?  
Should they ask for anything back?

The man of the family, this American,  
wonders if his grandfather or the others  
had glanced back, said farewell  
to the house and all that was in it  
as they left at gunpoint and soon



toppled into the open pit. He asks  
his hosts how they had acquired  
the house. The pater familias  
does not seem to know, says he  
was only a child at the time, shrugs,  
looks puzzled. "After the war,"  
he adds, and perhaps is glad his English  
is so inadequate. He and his wife  
exchange looks as if the other  
might come up with magic words.

"From whom did you buy?"  
the visitor persists. But it seems  
he is dealing with owners who have  
no idea how their house was acquired.  
They look around at one another.  
The children giggle in embarrassment.  
The host lifts his shoulders, his eyebrows.  
How should he know — it's been sixty  
years. But his wife disappears, returns  
with a bag of apples, hands them over  
with a smile, apologetic, almost a grimace.

Were these the apples of guilt, forgiveness,  
evasion, sorrow, reparation? Would apples  
undo the past or serve as a fair trade  
for the house, the view of green hills,  
the laden trees? Were these apples  
the blood-red descendants of those  
that grew in the yard that day in 1942  
when the family came out, herded  
at gunpoint, nudged along if they tried  
to look back? The visitors on this path,  
taken by those rounded up, climbed a knoll  
and had no trouble finding the mass grave  
though it was unmarked. It almost glowed  
out of the earth. They stood gazing down,  
eating apples. But they knew these  
were not the golden apples of paradise.



Sven Milekić explains that “the distortion of the Holocaust in Croatia did not start recently: it is a result of decades-old factors.” This essay examines the phenomenon of Holocaust distortion in contemporary Croatia, “a country in which historical revisionism thrives.”

Sven Milekić

## “Of Course We Don’t Deny the Holocaust”: Holocaust Distortion in Contemporary Croatia

As the city of Zagreb is preparing to build its first monument dedicated to the Jewish victims of the Holocaust, it would seem that Croatian society is leaping forward in its memory politics, giving significant recognition to the victims. The city assembly approved a massive concrete monument, a huge wall of suitcases, symbolizing the Jews who had to bring their belongings in suitcases before they were deported by trains to death camps (Vladisavljevic, 2019b). In this manner, the Zagreb municipal administration planned to commemorate Jewish suffering during the Holocaust, thus confronting Croatia’s troubled relations with its Holocaust past.

Often internationally criticized for its lack of will to deal with its actions during the Holocaust, Croatia has been labelled as a country in which historical revisionism thrives. The latest such critique came in January 2019, when the Holocaust Remembrance Project published its report on how EU states, including Croatia, face, or fail to face, their Holocaust past (Vladisavljevic, 2019b). Before the Holocaust Revisionist Report, this revisionism, which attempts to rehabilitate Croatia’s fascist Ustaša regime, worried Holocaust experts and historians across the globe (Yeomans, 2018).

### HISTORY: THE USTAŠA MOVEMENT

With the support of Nazi Germany and fascist Italy, the Ustaša movement established its own state—the Independent State of Croatia (*Nezavisna Država Hrvatska*, NDH). Like Nazi Germany, the NDH soon passed racial laws against Jews and Roma, as well as laws that targeted its large Serb community, which numbered over 1.8 million out of 7 million people in total. These laws resulted in the persecution, loss of civil rights, expulsion, and murder of those targeted populations. The Ustaša established a system

of concentration camps all over the country, with Jasenovac its central and largest camp. In Jasenovac, over 83,000 Serbs, Roma, Jews, and other enemies of the regime were murdered by the Ustaša through direct mass and individual executions by firearms, knives, bayonets, axes, bats, and tools as well as through disease, hunger, and especially exhaustion from unbearable physical labor.<sup>i</sup>

For the last few years, historical revisionism downplaying Ustaša crimes has been quietly advancing from the far-right into the mainstream media (Milekić, 2018d).<sup>ii</sup> The revisionist narrative claims that the steps taken by the NDH were legitimate means of suppressing revolts, that no massive crimes or genocide was committed in the NDH, and that Jasenovac was a mere labor, punitive, and collection camp where enemies of the state were gathered to be isolated, not murdered. It became a death camp, the narrative contends, only under the postwar Communist regime (Kasapović, 2018).

The hard core of the revisionist movement is the Association for Research of the Threefold Jasenovac Camp, a Zagreb-based NGO (Opacic, 2017), whose ideology is supported and disseminated by several persons who appear regularly in the mainstream media.<sup>iii</sup> In 2018, Igor Vukić, the secretary and the most outspoken member of the association, published *Radni logor Jasenovac (Labor Camp Jasenovac)*, which drastically minimizes the crimes committed in the camp by the Ustaša.<sup>iv</sup> In addition to the backing of many of the media outlets, the association has the support of the government and receives state funds for its activities (Opačić, 2017). However, there are those who disagree; experts on the NDH and Ustaša have analyzed how the book distorts the historical facts in claiming that executions were not systematic and that people were not targeted on ethnic or religious grounds (Hutinec, 2018).



The primary target of the revisionists is the genocide of Serbs in Jasenovac, as 47,627 out of 83,145 victims were Serbs, according to the list of individual victims of the camp (Jasenovac Memorial Site). Downplaying crimes against Serbs is part of the dynamic between Croatian and Serbian nationalists and revisionists. This dynamic has existed since the 1980s in Yugoslavia, when certain Serbian intellectuals began inflating the figures of the genocide committed against Serbs. While the Croatian side tries to downplay Ustaša crimes committed against Serbs, Serbian nationalists try to inflate the death toll of Jasenovac and Ustaša crimes in general. Such revisionism is used by both Croatian and Serbian politicians and functions as a tool in international relations.<sup>v</sup> One example of how it has been employed for such purposes was the exhibition on Jasenovac organized by Serbia at the United Nations in New York City. Croatian downplaying of crimes committed against Serbs serves to assert Croatia's superior position in competitive victimhood in the region, as the two groups were at war during the 1990s (Milekić, 2018a). Other recent historical revisionists, such as Stjepan Lozo and Roman Leljak, focus on denying the crimes committed by Ustaša against Serbs. Both authors claim that Serbian nationalist propaganda, even during Yugoslav socialism, used lies and forgeries to blame the Croats for committing genocide of Serbs (Leljak, 2018; Lozo, 2018). While Leljak claims that documents deposited in Belgrade's archives prove that only 1,654 inmates died in Jasenovac, Lozo goes even further, claiming that Serbs actually committed a genocide of Croats and then accused the Ustaša for these crimes. However, none of these authors ventured into Holocaust denial.

### OBSCURING AND DISTORTING THE HOLOCAUST

As they focus on downplaying the genocide against Serbs, Croatian revisionists have tried similar tactics concerning the Holocaust as well. However, their approach to the Holocaust is quite different from their distortion of the crimes against Serbs. While these revisionists claim that the Serbian genocide never happened, almost none of them will publicly question the truth of the Holocaust.<sup>vi</sup> As Vukić told the Balkan Investigative Reporting Network (BIRN): "Of course we [the association] don't deny the Holocaust. . . . When it comes to Jewish people, nobody who is serious, nobody who is smart can deny or fail to be compassionate with that" (Opacic, 2017). Additionally, Croatia's Catholic Church, which often gives a platform to these revisionists, marked the International Holocaust Remembrance Day in January in the Zagreb cathedral (Milekić, 2019a).

What the revisionists do, however, is to obscure and distort the Holocaust by downplaying the role played by the Ustaša. One popular claim among revisionists and some mainstream historians is that antisemitism was not part of the core ideology of the Ustaša before World War II

and anti-Jewish laws were implemented solely due to German pressure. It cannot be doubted, however, that the Ustaša movement had a strong antisemitic element since its early days in the late 1920s, and some historians of the younger generation claim that radical antisemitism was very much present in Ustaša propaganda in the mid-1930s and quickly developed to genocidal levels in the 1940s (Kralj, 2019). While Nazi Germany did send some advisors to assist the Ustaša in passing racial laws against Jews and Roma in 1941, there is no evidence of strong German pressure on Ustaša to do so.

There also was no pressure from Germany to persecute Croatian Jews. Yet in Jasenovac alone, 13,116 Jews were murdered, according to the camp's list of individual victims, while thousands more were killed in other camps and prisons, in mass executions, or as fighters in the antifascist partisan units. Overall, some 30,000 out of some 39,000 Jews in the territory of the NDH died or were murdered in the Holocaust (Goldstein, 1999, p. 136).

Croatian revisionists claim that the Ustaša did not take part in the Holocaust, placing the blame solely on Nazi Germany. Thus, in May 2018, Vukić said on a prime-time television show on *Hrvatska radio televizija* (HRT, Croatian Radio-Television) that there was only "one group of Jews" interned in Jasenovac, and that they were thereby saved from deportation to Nazi death camps (Šimičević, 2018). A similar claim about the leniency of the Ustaša towards Jews was promoted in the highly controversial and fraudulent 2016 documentary film *Jasenovac—The Truth*, by director Jakov Sedlar (Milekić, 2017a). Immediately upon the 2016 screening in Zagreb, the Jewish community expressed outrage, especially over the praise it received from the controversial minister of culture, Zlatko Hasanbegović (Milekić, 2016a). The Israeli ambassador to Zagreb, Zina Kalay Kleitman, wrote in an open letter that the film "selectively shows history, attempts to revise historical facts, and offends the feelings of people who have lost their loved ones in Jasenovac" (Milekić, 2016b). An in-depth analysis of the film and its basic structural characteristic as a conspiracy theory of Serbian and Yugoslav historiographies against Croats is given by Ana Kršinić-Lozica (2018).

Besides denying the Ustaša's genocidal execution of Jews and their help in deporting Jews to Nazi death camps, the revisionists downplay the Ustaša's use of racist ideology, as well as their ostracizing the Jewish community from the rest of society and seizing their property. Further, revisionists overemphasize the fact that some individuals of Jewish origin took part in the Ustaša administration, while also wrongly claiming that the Jewish death toll was much smaller in relation to the size of the Jewish community in Croatia than in other European countries (Černivec, 2019).

## DECADES-LONG HOLOCAUST DISTORTION

However, the distortion of the Holocaust in Croatia did not start recently; it is a result of a few decades-old factors. Since the 1960s, when knowledge of the Holocaust as we know it today became global, the process of developing an authentic Holocaust memory has been particularly problematic in Communist and Socialist Eastern Europe, where the emphasis has been on the antifascist struggle of multi-ethnic and multiconfessional countries (such as the Soviet Union or Yugoslavia) against the Axis countries. As a result, the legacy of the Holocaust was downplayed to a certain degree. In addition, Holocaust remembrance in these countries was strongly influenced by

Marxist orthodoxy, which placed the Jewish question on the margins of the class struggle, viewed antisemitism primarily as a tool to divide the working class (rather than as a belief system with autonomous and widespread impact), and fascism as a product of capitalism. (Herf, 2002/2019, p. 19)

This was certainly true in post-World War II Yugoslavia, where the Socialist regime did not hide the fact that Jews were persecuted by the Ustaša and Nazi Germany, but did not single out their victimhood among other “victims of fascism”—the term used almost exclusively by the regime.

One of the reasons different victim groups were not singled out lies in the complex nature of interethnic conflict within Yugoslavia during World War II, the regime was careful to commemorate the places of mass murders of civilians. The leaders did commemorate places where Jews were murdered within the country, such as in Jasenovac, but did not put that camp at the center of the Yugoslav memory politics.

As Yugoslavia fell apart in 1991, with armed conflict starting in Croatia and spilling over into Bosnia, the state of Holocaust commemoration did not improve. World War II and the Holocaust were interpreted from the vantage point of post-Yugoslav nations and nation-states. The legacy of the antifascist struggle was shunned in the public sphere. So was the legacy of “the fascist terror,” with some 3,000 antifascist monuments (including one to the victims of fascism) partially or fully destroyed or else removed by the early 2000s. The memory of the Holocaust suffered similar treatment. National memory politics was an especially delicate issue because the perpetrators in Croatia, the Ustaša, were predominantly ethnic Croats who committed crimes against ethnic Serbs. Thus, their actions during World War II were interpreted through the lens of the 1990s conflict.

Another factor that contributed to creating such a national memory of Ustaša crimes is that in Croatia, as in many post-Communist and post-Socialist states in Europe,

Communist crimes from World War II to 1989 became a focus of national memory politics. Unlike the West, where Auschwitz was seen as a symbol of the central tragedy of the 20th century, in the East, it was the gulags that were such a symbol (Subotić, 2019, pp. 23–25). As Communism—and not Nazism—is seen as the greatest historical enemy of these newborn nation-states, the Holocaust is downplayed. What has followed are various attempts, some successful and some not, to distort, minimize, or openly deny crimes of various Nazi-aligned domestic collaborators in Croatia, the Baltic states, Ukraine, Hungary, and others. These men are often seen simply as anti-Communist fighters. The revisionist narrative suggests that post-war Yugoslav historiography harshly criticized the Ustaša due to their staunch anti-Communism, while they were the real victims. Thus, in the Croatian case, the crimes committed by antifascist partisans against Nazi collaboration forces (including Ustaša and civilians that accompanied them) at Bleiburg Field (Austria) and on the way across Yugoslavia in May 1945 are viewed as the nation's most tragic event. In other words, Bleiburg is framed as a more important event for Croats than Jasenovac, as a greater number of ethnic Croats perished there.

Croatia's struggle to achieve international recognition and prestige during the war of the 1990s and its immediate aftermath also was entangled in the country's problematic relationship with the Ustaša legacy and the Holocaust. Croatia's president during the 90s, Franjo Tuđman, was one of the persons responsible for a somewhat stained image of the country. He tolerated a few Ustaša sympathizers in the ranks of his *Hrvatska demokratska zajednica* (Croatian Democratic Union, HDZ) and did not react well to numerous examples of the tarnishing of the country's anti-fascist legacy.<sup>viii</sup> Even before becoming president, Tuđman published *Bepuća povijesne zbiljnosti* (*Wastelands of Historical Reality*), a highly controversial historical book in which he disputed the claims of Serbian nationalists by going to the other extreme and downplaying the genocide committed by the Ustaša. Tuđman cited two sources, both former Jasenovac inmates, who claimed that Jews ran the camp and had a privileged position, even as the two made obvious antisemitic slurs—just one example of the historical revisionism that emerged from Tuđman's uncritical use of problematic sources (Dulić, 2009). Further proof of Tuđman's mistakes came in 1996, when he republished the book in English under the title *Horrors of War: Historical Reality and Philosophy*, with the most problematic chapter omitted. Yet another error, almost equally problematic, was Tuđman's idea of burying the remains of Jasenovac victims in a common grave together with victims from Bleiburg, some of whom were Ustaša perpetrators in the camp (Milekić, 2017b).

In his desire to establish good diplomatic relations



with Israel, Tudjman occasionally confronted the Ustaša legacy, such as in the case of the extradition from Argentina and trial, in 1998–1999, of Dinko Šakić, the former Jasenovac camp commander (Milekić, 2018b, 2018c). During the 1990s, Tudjman did not deny the Holocaust; rather, he tried to distort it as much as possible. According to this narrative formed under the influence of Tudjman, the Holocaust was executed solely by Nazi Germany, while the role of local collaborators—such as the Ustaša—is downplayed, minimized, or denied (Subotić, 2019, p. 42). In the case of Croatia, the Holocaust is detached from the genocidal crimes against Serbs and Roma and presented as an import, as is antisemitism (Subotić, 2019, p. 26). This reflects the universalization and Europeanization of Holocaust memory in Europe. As Radonić (2014) explains, these processes started in the 1980s, when the Holocaust was considered by the European community to be “Europe’s negative founding myth” (p. 490).

In the universalized and Europeanized Holocaust memory, crimes are often taken out of context and the Holocaust experience is used for comparison with contemporary human rights breaches (Radonić, 2010). Thus, in post-Communist Europe, the memory of the Holocaust is to be compared solely with the crimes of Stalinism and Communism. Nationalist and anti-Communist politicians in Central and Eastern Europe therefore have no problem with commemorating the Holocaust, as long as they can put the blame on Nazi Germany and ignore local participation. The Holocaust becomes a universal tragedy torn out of context, out of our control, that serves as a universal warning sign for intolerance. In Croatia, even politicians and public persons who openly sympathize with the Ustaša regime commonly claim to have the deepest respect for Holocaust victims.<sup>ix</sup>

The current permanent exhibition in Jasenovac, inaugurated in 2006, is an example of the universalization of Holocaust memory, although it claims to be inspired by the memorialization practices of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum and Yad Vashem. While the curators’ initial plan was to remove all ethnic identifications from the victims, in response to complaints, all the victims are listed with their ethnic origin. While the exhibition focuses almost exclusively on victims’ individual stories, it fails to explain who the perpetrators were and what ideology drove them to the mass murder of the Jews.

The exhibition presents a very problematic narrative according to which the NDH was a puppet state under almost full control of the Germans. It does not tackle years of denial, distortion, and downplaying. It does not fully explain the role of the Ustaša in the Holocaust—a role that was obscured for years before (Zuroff, 2006). Although the designers tried to use the individualized approach to Holocaust victims implemented in the Washington and Jerusalem

museums, some suggest that such an approach is not applicable in Jasenovac, an actual site of killing. As the Jasenovac Memorial Site is located *in situ*, besides presenting individual lives of the inmates, the exhibition should fully contextualize how the camp operated, where were the Jews kept and executed, and who were the perpetrators (Radonić, 2010, 2014; Kršinić-Lozica, 2011). In other words, there must be a difference between how the Holocaust is presented in Holocaust museums in unrelated locations and how it is presented on an actual site of mass murder. Not surprisingly, since its inauguration, representatives of the biggest victim groups—Serbs, Roma, Jews, and antifascists—have criticized the exhibit and advocated its alteration.

### THE MEMORIAL IN ZAGREB

State commemorations of the Holocaust in Croatia are completely decontextualized, transferring all the blame to Nazi Germany. Although the planned memorial in Zagreb is the first one dedicated to the Holocaust in the city, it too is an example of this practice.

First, the Zagreb authorities decided to build the memorial without consulting the Croatian Jewish community, just as they had done in 2017 when they were developing a project for opening the Zagreb Holocaust Museum (Pavelić, 2017). Additionally, the monument is dedicated to all the Jews murdered in the Holocaust by “the Third Reich and its allies”—a deliberately vague inscription that further downplays the Ustaša’s role in the killings and further distorts the Holocaust (Milekić, 2019c). Zagreb Mayor Milan Bandić’s statement that the memorial is “an act of remembrance of six million Jews murdered in the Holocaust” further strengthens fears that it was built precisely to hide behind a decontextualized figure of 6 million. Such a monument cannot fulfill the purpose of informing an observer about the special nature of the Holocaust in Croatia (Milekić, 2019c).

It is for these and other reasons that Croatian Jewish community leader Ognjen Kraus said that there was no place for such a monument in Zagreb, but a place for “a monument to NDH victims”—Serbs, Roma, Jews, and antifascists (Vladisavljević, 2019b). The World Jewish Congress also condemned the announced monument and said that its erection would be “a distortion of the historical record and an insult to the memory of the men, women, and children who perished” (Winston, 2019). While Mayor Bandić responded that the inscription on the monument was still being discussed, he added that “Croatia will decide on the matter on its own and no one will set any conditions to it” (Hina, 2019). In this way, Bandić confirmed once more that the monument is not dedicated only to the victims but also to a distorted memory of the Holocaust that serves nationalist ends.

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## END NOTES

i The Ustaša did not use gas chambers.

ii Historical revisionism in the Croatian mainstream does not minimize Ustaša crimes alone. The magazine *Vojna povijest* (*Military History*), a part of the *Večernji list* (*Evening Gazette*) group, owned by Austrian Styria Media Group AG, ran a series of articles on the German *Waffen-SS* and *SS-Kavallerie-Brigade* on the Eastern Front. The articles obscure or omit the role of these units as part of the *Einsatzgruppen* (Nazi death squads) and the Holocaust in general (Hutinec, 2015).

iii "Threefold" refers to the ostensible three stages of the Jasenovac camp: a Ustaša labor and penal camp for enemies of the regime, with a purported death toll, from exhaustion and disease, as low as 1,500 (during the years 1941–1945); a concentration and death camp for imprisoned Ustaša, Homeguard troops (NDH's regular conscripted army), Yugoslav political prisoners, and Croat patriots, who were completely innocent victims of the Communist regime (1945–1948); and a facility for Yugoslav political prisoners arrested during widespread purges amid the Tito–Stalin split (1948–1951). One commonly interviewed association figure is Slovenian national Roman Lejak, whose book *Mit o Jasenovcu* (*The Myth of Jasenovac*) (2018) claims that most current knowledge is a lie; he sets the death toll at 1,654.

iv To the shock of many, Vukić launched his book on the prime-time television show *Good Day Croatia*, on public broadcaster *Hrvatska radio televizija* (HRT, Croatian Radio-Television).

v Contemporary Croatian revisionists claim a Jasenovac death toll as low as 1,500 to 1,654 victims. Croatian revisionism also has roots in the most important Croatian institutions, such as the Parliament. On the basis of a law passed in October 1991, the Croatian parliament formed the Commission for the Identification of War and Post-War Victims of the Republic of Croatia. This Commission, made up from MPs, historians, heads of research institutions, and other experts, was tasked with gathering information and potential court evidence about all people (military and civilian) who lost their lives in WWII and the Yugoslav post-war period (1945–1990), as well as victims of Serbian war crimes from 1990 onwards. The Commission was also tasked with establishing locations and circumstances under which victims died, while also gathering information on the perpetrators of these war crimes. The Commission published its report in 1999 in which it stated that only 2,238 people died in Jasenovac. On the other hand, Serbian historians such as Antun Miletić and Milan Bulajić had already in the 1980s inflated the number to 700,000 (Miletić, 1986/1987; Bulajić, 1988/1989). Croatian demographer Vladimir Žerjavić wrote about inflating Jasenovac's death toll (Žerjavić, 1992).

vi An example of a person who questions the Holocaust is Stjepan Razum, president of the aforementioned Association for Research of the Threefold Jasenovac Camp and director of the Archdiocesan Archives in Zagreb. In 2017, Razum published on Facebook his support for Richard Williamson, the British bishop convicted of Holocaust denial in 2013, writing: "I believe that the historical evidence is hugely against 6 million Jews having been deliberately gassed in gas chambers as a deliberate policy of Adolf Hitler" (Opacic, 2017).

vii All quotes are translated from the Croatian by either the author or by journalists from English-written media.

viii The Croatian weekly *Feral Tribune* discovered in 1993 that Croatian ambassador to Argentina, Ivo Rojnica, served as a mid-ranking Ustaša officer in Dubrovnik in 1941, when he signed a public order against Jews and Serbs (Lucić, 1993). Vinko Nikolić, former Ustaša adjutant and poet, was named as an MP in the Chamber of Counties of the Croatian Parliament (*Leksikografski zavod Miroslav Krleža*).

ix For example, Croatian President Kolinda Grabar Kitarović went to Yad Vashem and apologized for the Ustaša's role in the Holocaust, but has also downplayed Ustaša crimes (Milekić, 2019b). Another is the aforementioned director Sedlar, who grossly downplayed the crimes committed in Jasenovac in his documentary, thus distorting Holocaust memory, but directed a theater play about Anne Frank and other Holocaust-related topics (Milekić, 2016d).

"Remembrance is a very important political and sociological component of policies in every country," writes Agnieszka Zajęczkowska-Drożdż in this editorial on Holocaust history and memory in Poland. "It becomes dangerous, however, when the political goals become more important than facts and historical truth." Read along with Sven Milekic's essay (pp. 60–65) to begin to understand the growing problem of Holocaust distortion in Eastern Europe.

*Agnieszka Zajęczkowska-Drożdż*

# Holocaust History and Memory as Political Tools: Contemporary Disputes in Poland

Remembrance of the Holocaust plays a significant role today in the political sphere in Poland. Over the last few years, the history of the Holocaust has begun to serve as a political tool, used by politicians to achieve particular goals, and thus public discourse has deviated from scholarly research. Specific narratives are being promoted with the ultimate goal of building a common national identity among Poles. Such narratives are based on the ideas of battles fought throughout Poland's difficult history and on the courage and willingness of the Polish people to sacrifice for the greater good of their nation, especially during the war and the Holocaust. To achieve cohesion with these narratives, the history of Holocaust is being adjusted and a new narrative implemented by the most important institutions.

One example of these policies is that the heads of many public institutions whose activities concentrate on researching and commemorating Polish history have been let go, to be replaced by others who have led a shift in the way that the Holocaust is interpreted and memorialized. Two of the most important institutions that have been reshuffled in this way are the Museum of the Second World War in Gdańsk and the Institute for National Remembrance in Warsaw. In the new Polin Museum of the History of Polish Jews, built in what was the Warsaw Ghetto, similar changes may be afoot.

In Gdańsk, the exhibition has been changed, the valor of Polish people has been highlighted, and the commemoration of meritorious Poles, such as Irena Sendlerowa and Maxymilian Kolbe, has been underscored. In addition,

Polish suffering has been accentuated. The ruling party has openly stated in the media that exhibitions such as the one in Gdańsk should reflect its understanding of the Polish point of view (Sadowska, 2018, n.p.).

Another example is the Institute for National Remembrance, which before its transformation was an important research and archival institution. Today, scholars whose research is inconsistent with the official narrative are dismissed from their work there. For example, Dr. Adam Puławski was dismissed after the director of the institute rated his work as biased (Pospischil, 2018, n.p.). During the last few years, the institute has claimed as fact many details about the Holocaust that have already been proven false by scholars. For instance, the institute has stated that the Jews were in a better position in the ghettos than the Poles during the occupation, and that the pogrom in Jedwabne was organized by the Germans, who forced Poles to take part in it (Forecki, 2017, n.p.).

Another significant example of using the history of the Holocaust as a political tool is the Law on the Institute of National Remembrance, implemented on January 26, 2018. The most controversial part of this law seeks retribution from anyone who claims that the Polish nation was responsible for Nazi crimes. As the government explained, the main purpose of this law was to stop the use of the term "Polish death camps," an incorrect description that had occasionally appeared in the public eye (*Instytutu Pamięci Narodowej*, 2018). According to a report prepared by the Centre for Research on Prejudice, the law did the opposite of what was intended: After only a short time,



that phrase appeared in print much more often than it had previously (Commissioner for Human Rights, 2018). Further, the law provoked a diplomatic crisis with Israel, which became the most widely commented news event in the media for some weeks afterwards. This conflict, as well as more recent squabbles, escalated with a remark made by Israel's newly appointed acting foreign minister, Yisrael Katz, whose statement that "Poles suckle antisemitism from their mother's milk" had an enormous impact on Polish society (*Times of Israel*, 2019, n. p.) and set off a firestorm of criticism.

Such staff changes, laws, and many other examples have purely political goals. It is apparent that the history of the Holocaust is being used to create national myths and to consolidate society in order to win votes for the party in power. The most frightening result of this kind of policy is that both antisemitism and hate speech have been on the rise for the last few years. The prevalence of both is easy to see in social media, and they appear on official profiles of politicians (Skarżyński, 2019, n.p.). In addition, conflicts within Polish society have deepened. In the public sphere, we have two contrary opinions: Those on one side claim that the majority of Poles attempted to rescue Jews during the war, while those on the other argue that the more common behavior of Poles during the war was to denounce those who were hiding, or blackmail or kill Jews. Even the most distinguished Polish Holocaust researchers are called pseudo-scholars by right-wing activists (Kula, 2019, n.p.), and members of the scholarly community are in conflict with one another.

The new Museum of the Warsaw Ghetto is in the process of being created. It is evident that historians' decisions about whether to take part in the creation of the exhibitions is political. Participation in designing the exhibitions in this museum is seen by those researchers who are not involved in this process as the equivalent of supporting the ruling party; this perception is the best example of how much the history of the Holocaust has been pushed to the side and is no longer a scholarly matter in Poland.

Perhaps the study of testimonies will help fend off this present danger of politics superseding scholarship. Testimonies focusing on historical truths are crucial and must be protected by historians, because these are significant proof of real events and cannot be changed, distorted, or denied. Today, when scholars in many countries are discussing new ways of using, digitizing, and sharing testimonies using new technologies and methodologies, in Poland, I believe, we are taking a step back. To illustrate how important the words of survivors are in such political circumstances, I refer to part of a letter written by Simcha Rotem, the last survivor of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, to the President of Poland, Andrzej Duda, after the commemoration of the 75th anniversary of the uprising, in 2018:

I've read the speech you delivered last week at the ceremony marking the 75th anniversary of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising.

I became very frustrated, disappointed, and even amazed by your systematic disregard of the fundamental difference between the suffering of the Polish nation after Poland was seized by Nazi Germany, which I do not disparage, and the methodical genocide of my brothers and sisters, Poland's Jewish citizens, by the Nazi-German extermination machine, ignoring the fact this extermination machine had many Polish accomplices.

I don't blame the Polish nation as a collective, and I'm well aware of the thousands of Poland's Righteous Among the Nations, in addition to the many other Poles whose actions to save Jews during the war have not been revealed.

I salute all these noble Poles and have enormous appreciation for them. However, Mr. President, the historical truth is that even those brave Poles, who jeopardized their lives and often their families to save Jews, had to hide from their Polish neighbors.

I, Simcha (Kazik) Rotem, who fought shoulder to shoulder with my brothers and sisters against the damned German Nazis on the streets and in the sewage systems of the Warsaw Ghetto, am telling you, Mr. President, that many of your people took a very active part in the murder of Jews in the Holocaust, expelling Jews from their homes in Poland while cruelly abusing them. They even murdered Jewish Poles who managed to escape the Nazi extermination machine and sought to regain their homes and property when the war ended.

Rotem concludes with strong and necessary words:

Only once the Polish society truly faces the bitter historical truth, revealing its scope and severity, will there be a chance that those horrors will not be repeated. Therefore, I vehemently oppose the distorted law recently passed in Poland, meant to eradicate from historical recollection the heinous acts the Poles committed against the Jewish people during that dark time. (Eichner & Tvizer, 2018, n.p.)

This unique letter has been widely discussed in the Polish press and has engendered a feeling of shame in many readers that a man of the age of 94, an eyewitness to heinous atrocities, needed to remind Poles about the true history of their own country. The few survivors still alive cannot protect history forever. This is a job for historians: to protect and fight for historical truth.

Both politicians and historians should be mindful that the level of understanding of the history of the Holocaust is very limited, both in Polish society and around the world.

This has been proven by research carried out in 2010 by historians for the Museum of the Second War and by surveys conducted in 2018 and 2019 by the Claims Conference. In such a political atmosphere as exists in present-day Poland, where even the choice of one's research topic can be seen as a political declaration, the scholarly approach is marginalized. This may lead to unimaginable consequences.

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As you read this poem by Annette Bialik Harchik, consider the child of survivors who have lost everything: the child who, to touch her extended family, cannot reach out to a loving grandparent or a joyful aunt, but must “turn to the dead.” Read it along with Harchik’s other poem (p. 22) and Janet R. Kirchheimer’s “Maastricht, January 2007” (pp. 56–57), and compare voice and tone.

*Annette Bialik Harchik*

## *Family*

Where others can touch their families  
I turn to the dead.  
I conjure the family  
I know  
from  
inward shadows of my mother’s vacant eyes,  
beseechments muted in her heart;  
refractions in my father’s tears,  
voices muffled in his stone silences.



John Amen explains, "There's always been mystery around how some of my family made it to the US before the outbreak of World War II and some did not. Additionally, the issue of 'fitting in' was always a pressing issue in my household, this drive to be 'American.' I never fully understood what that meant—what were the criteria?—though it became clear that it had something to do with being, or at least appearing, Christian." In this poem about his relatives Vi and Alfred, "who in every photo I've seen / shrouded the ink on their forearms," John laments, "there are questions I never posed / & now there's no one to ask."

*John Amen*

## *Toward a Genealogy*

My grandparents,  
who sailed to New York in '38,  
rarely spoke of the two siblings  
who arrived 10 years later,  
who in every photo I've seen  
shrouded the ink on their forearms,  
as if to hide it would be enough  
to earn the world's forgiveness.  
In a family shot taken on a beach in '54,  
long sleeves ride up thin limbs  
to reveal a 3, a 6, an 8.  
Vi, who moved to Chicago & spent her days  
smoking Camels, staring at Lake Michigan  
through a 7th-story window.  
Alfred, who shredded his money in Texas,  
oil that never seeped,  
pump that died mid-thrust.  
It's easy to forget that breath has wings,  
beauty is horror's common-law bride.



Such gospels are understood at dusk,  
viewed from over your shoulder  
as the sidewalk ends, your lead leg  
sinking in the mud.  
There are questions I never posed,  
& now there's no one to ask,  
a line of Jews reborn in America,  
my American Jews  
buried in Christian ground,  
gathered beneath the shadow of a hulking cross,  
refugees to the grave  
& beyond.



"In three brief narratives presented here, educators from Austria, Romania, and Poland who have been teaching the Holocaust for a decade or longer reflect on their individual interests and goals and on how their teaching has been shaped by specific opportunities and challenges," writes Jennifer Lemberg. "All three authors stress the need for international dialogue and exchange as a way of gaining insight into how our knowledge of the Holocaust is framed by particular issues or questions."

Jennifer Lemberg, Nadine Ulseß-Schurda, Oana Nestian-Sandu, and Katarzyna Łaziuk

# Holocaust Education in Europe: Snapshots From Austria, Romania, and Poland

Teaching about the Holocaust can raise universal questions as to the capacity of human beings for good and evil, but as Kansteiner and Presner (2016) note, "today it is a given that the scholarly perception of Nazism and the Holocaust is deeply connected to shifting political landscapes, historical contexts, and cultural values" (p. 5). The ways in which our approaches to the Holocaust are shaped by local and national contexts are especially evident in the classroom, where teachers and their students work together to form meaningful interpretations of the past. For these reasons, it is helpful to think across national borders about how the Holocaust is being taught. In particular, those of us teaching on other continents have much to learn from teachers in Europe, who must guide their students toward confronting local and national histories and their continuing effects.

In three brief narratives presented here, educators from Austria, Romania, and Poland who have been teaching the Holocaust for a decade or longer reflect on their individual interests and goals and how their teaching has been shaped by specific opportunities and challenges. We find in their approaches strong differences regarding how the Holocaust can be taught given its implications for specific national histories. We also find striking similarities, including an emphasis on the impact of changes in Holocaust education in Europe at the beginning of the 21st century, a shared interest in forging connections with present-day Jewish and Roma communities, and a focus on how Holocaust education is relevant to critical thinking about current forms of nationalist discourse.

Importantly, all three authors stress the need for

international dialogue and exchange as a way of gaining insight into how our knowledge of the Holocaust is framed by particular issues and questions. This may be due in part to their being leaders of professional development seminars for teachers sponsored by the Olga Lengyel Institute for Holocaust Studies and Human Rights (TOLI), whose namesake founder was a Holocaust survivor and the author of *Five Chimneys: A Woman Survivor's True Story of Auschwitz*. Nadine Ulseß-Schurda, Oana Nestian-Sandu, and Katarzyna Łaziuk have each participated in TOLI's capstone summer seminar in New York City, an immersive program that focuses on dialogue, inquiry, and effective Holocaust pedagogy. The work of the authors represented here reflects a dedication that is professional but also deeply personal. It is a pleasure to present their voices in concert, and to learn from and with them.

—Jennifer Lemberg

## AUSTRIA: REBUILDING RESPECT FOR THE TRUTH

Because, friend, these are not just the bones of murdered Jews lying in this grave. The conscience of humankind lies buried here as well.

—Julian Tuwim  
(2008, *My Żydzi polscy*  
[*We Polish Jews*])

The voices of the victims of the Holocaust were not heard in Austria for a very long time, having been silenced, driven into exile, or drowned out by the louder voices of the *Kriegergeneration*, or war generation. As a result, the



Holocaust was regarded as a moral burden inflicted upon Austria from the outside. Facing this problem, in 2000 the Austrian Ministry of Education founded a Department of Holocaust Education, or “erinnern.at” (“erinnern” means “remember”), which is dedicated to improving Holocaust education and research on National Socialism, developing teaching materials, and designing professional development for teachers (cf “www.erinnern.at/bundeslaendr/oesterreich”). In 2001, Austria joined the Task Force on International Cooperation on Holocaust Education, Remembrance, and Research, which defined an agenda for Austria that included determining what visits to memorial sites should include, how to spur a broader part of society to observe Holocaust remembrance days, how survivor testimony can be used to educate teachers and students about the Holocaust, and how antisemitism and antisemitic incidents should be addressed and prevented (Dreier, 2010).

Almost two decades later, there are numerous commemorations of the atrocities of National Socialism, and the Austrian government officially recognizes its obligation to address contemporary antisemitism. However, a commissioned study published by the government in March 2019 concluded that antisemitism was still widespread in Austria in latent and manifest forms (Zeglovits, Unterhuber, & Sommer, 2018). This and other studies (e.g. Rathkolb & Ogris, 2010) show that much has to be done in schools to teach about the Holocaust and National Socialism in order to combat antisemitism. Antisemitic prejudices invoked by Austrian and European politicians, accompaniments to a political turn back toward nationalism and borders, make clear that this work is urgent.

When they arrive at our school, my students know something about the Holocaust. They know there is a place called Auschwitz, that it is in Europe, and that other concentration camps are located close to where they live. Yet each new class has fundamental, unexamined questions: Can the Holocaust be analyzed like other historical events? Or is it inexplicable, beyond our grasp? Through our teaching, they quickly realize that the Nazis were not inhuman and that there is nothing otherworldly about the Holocaust. At the core of our work is clarifying and accepting often-challenging historical facts—the Holocaust happened, Austrians were perpetrators and profiteers, Austrians were sometimes persecuted, Austrians were sometimes among those who helped the Jews (Dreier, 2010)—and reflecting on how our history continues to haunt us. Questions of responsibility, denial, and “what would I have done” are at the heart of my students’ thinking. They come to see that the Holocaust emerged from decisions made by ordinary people and that because nothing can guarantee continued respect for ethical values, nothing is more important than our commitment to defend them.

In part, their learning is accomplished through exposure to Jewish life in the area. We visit the synagogue in Innsbruck, whose Jewish community is responsible for all aspects of Jewish life in the states of Tyrol and Vorarlberg, and learn about its history. My students sometimes do not know that there is a Jewish community in Innsbruck, and they are troubled by the presence of police officers at the synagogue entrance, so our visit helps move us into a discussion of contemporary antisemitism. We go to the Jüdisches Museum Hohenems (Hohenems Jewish Museum), in Vorarlberg, which is dedicated to preserving the memory of the local Jewish community and educating Austrians about Jewish life in Europe and beyond, and which has forged close connections with living descendants from the area. We also speak with survivors, historians, and members of the local Jewish community. We honor the stories of those who survived and died, and create a safe space in our classroom in which students can respond.

Further, we engage in dialogue with students in the United States, sharing our different responses to studying the Holocaust. All of these activities are undertaken with the goal of finding ways to teach the Holocaust that are different from my own learning experiences as a student, so that my students will come away with feelings of responsibility and agency rather than with a sense of paralyzing guilt.

Working for hope and against hate means being embedded in a community, engaged in dialogue, and responsive to those around us. A truly democratic society is marked by a strong will to talk about individual or collective mistakes and take responsibility for them. When we stand in our classrooms and teach the Holocaust, we are also teaching how we can rebuild respect for the truth and for the voices of the past and present.

—Nadine Ulseß-Schurda

## ROMANIA: WORKING THROUGH THE CONTRADICTIONS

After a very long period during which the Holocaust was mostly ignored or distorted in Romania, in 2003, at the initiative of the president of the country, an international commission was set up as an independent research body with the goal of researching and reporting on the role of the Romanian government in the mass murder of the Jews and Roma. The commission, which was led by Elie Wiesel and Jean Ancel, was also charged with making specific recommendations for educating the public about this history. The report, published in 2004, revealed the unequivocal responsibility of the Romanian government for the deportation and systematic murder of Jews and Roma from Bessarabia, Bucovina, and other parts of the country (Wiesel, Friling, Ioanid, & Ionescu, 2004). Among other recommendations, the report called for making revisions to the national curriculum and providing opportunities

for teachers to receive training and share resources.

At that time, many history teachers had not received any formal training in how to teach about the Holocaust. Even worse, they had been taught about the Holocaust in ways that obscured the truth by hiding or diminishing the responsibility of the Romanian government and attributing blame entirely to the Nazis, a phenomenon present in other European countries as well. For this reason, participation in workshops in Romania and abroad, as well as access to updated resources, is crucial to their continued professional development. In many European countries, people have difficulty accepting that their country and their parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents were capable of atrocities. This is exacerbated by the fact that our history continues to be taught from a nationalist perspective and is still expected to serve as a source of pride. However, there are encouraging signs that teachers are slowly moving away from ethnocentrism, as they understand and show their students that patriotism is also learning the truth about the country's history and striving to work through its complexities.

Today, more than 15 years later, the national curriculum has been revised and new information continues to come to light through ongoing research. This includes the discovery of mass graves, such as those in Popricani, Iasi, where over 10,000 Jewish men, women, and children were murdered in 1941 by the Romanian Army.<sup>i</sup> Overall, there is growing interest in the Holocaust in Romania, not only in academia and education, but also in the arts, which help to generate conversations in public spaces and social media and to bring the history of the Holocaust and discussions about responsibility and social justice into the daily lives of Romanians. Several important films about the Holocaust have been produced by Romanians in the last decade, such as Radu Jude's *I Do Not Care if We Go Down in History as Barbarians* (2018) and, recently, *Kali Traš* (Romani: "The Black Fear"), a play about the Roma genocide, was performed by Giuvlipen, a Roma theater company. These productions make history more accessible while demonstrating the importance of facing the past and counteracting Holocaust distortion and denial.

Educators and other Romanians are continuing to work out their relationship to the populations targeted during the Holocaust. Many Romanians have never met a Jewish person, because most Jews who survived left Romania during the Communist era. However, the legacy of the Jewish community is preserved in synagogues and cemeteries and remains present in national cuisine, music, and language. Growing interest in the Holocaust and Romania's Jewish history has brought the government, Jewish communities, and civil organizations to work together to restore synagogues, and educators from TOLI summer seminars in Romania are taking their students to visit these sites.

The Romanian Roma community, which was also targeted during the Holocaust, remains large, comprising the second-largest minority in the country. Unfortunately, Roma continue to suffer discrimination and are one of the most disadvantaged groups in Romania and throughout Europe. In Romania, research about the experience of Roma during the Holocaust is scarce, but there is growing interest on the part of scholars and teachers. Several TOLI seminar participants have invited Roma survivors and activists to address their classes. The students were moved but also surprised that knowledge of the Roma experience had not surfaced until recently.

In working with Romanian, other European, and American teachers, we see both similarities and differences between teaching styles. American teachers tend to focus their study of the Holocaust on what happened in Germany and the concentration camps, while European teachers look mainly at what happened in their own countries. In both cases, teachers typically have little knowledge of what occurred in other parts of Europe, and even less about what transpired on other continents. A more diversified approach to how the Holocaust took place across Europe and beyond would lead to a better understanding of what made it possible and how governments and ordinary citizens reacted in various ways to Nazi ideology. Particularly in Europe, such an understanding could lead to the development of a more nuanced sense of identity, one that helps to move us away from perspectives constrained by national borders. As we know, borders are changeable, and of little help in understanding what human beings are capable of doing.

—Oana Nestian-Sandu

#### **POLAND: LEARNING FROM THE PAST**

There is a specificity to teaching about the Holocaust in Poland. Much of the Holocaust happened here, and that event has a significant part in Poland's geopolitical and cultural identity, not least because it left a deep imprint as a national trauma. Acknowledging the past, learning from it, and building a future based on knowledge of it help move us forward, as do efforts to preserve the memory of war, genocide, and their victims. Nevertheless, there are ongoing concerns and questions about how to commemorate and teach about the Holocaust, and many educators continue to seek approaches that allow for complexity, familiarize students with history, encourage critical thinking, and foster advocacy and action. In the words of Primo Levi (1986/1989), "It happened, therefore it can happen again: this is the core of what we have to say. It can happen, and it can happen everywhere" (p. 199).

The current core curriculum for middle and secondary schools in Poland is a very general document that includes suggestions for teaching multiculturalism as part of the history of Poland and focuses on religious and ethnic



minorities and attitudes about otherness, crucial to understanding the Holocaust. Theoretically, the curriculum requires teaching the history of the Jews in Poland. The Holocaust itself is taught within the context of the rise of Nazism, the Third Reich, and the history of War World II. Robert Szuchta (2012), co-author of the Holocaust curriculum, proposes going beyond this framework to include Jewish history in the teaching of general history courses and the history of Poland (Szuchta & Trojanski, p. 22).

Mandatory Holocaust education was implemented in middle schools in 1999 and in secondary schools in 2001 (Leek, 2015). Unfortunately, with ongoing changes to the core curriculum, in 2011 instruction about the Holocaust was moved to the first year of secondary school. Changes are ongoing, causing confusion as teachers contend with adjustments to the curriculum. As a consequence, there is a lack of coherence regarding the material taught in world history, Polish history, and social studies classes. Students do not receive an accurate overview of the Holocaust, because the curriculum does not address the need for instruction about its cultural and historical dimensions. [See Kania and Shawn, *PRISM*, Spring 2017, pp. 81–89—Ed.] Hopefully, the new curriculum, implemented in September 2019 and promising a unified approach, will help to organize and harmonize these aspects of Holocaust education.

Because educators can dedicate only a limited amount of time to the Holocaust and Jewish history, numerous institutions and NGOs in Poland offer extracurricular projects to help students and teachers deepen their knowledge of the Holocaust and explore some of its broad thematic and historical implications. The School of Dialogue is an array of programs offered by the Forum for Dialogue that educate secondary students about Jewish history in Poland. Participants attend workshops on culture, history, and Jewish tradition and work on researching, reconstructing, and commemorating their towns' Jewish past. They confront stereotypes about Jews and become advocates for learning about an intertwined Polish and Jewish history. Educators can bring their students to Warsaw's Polin Museum of the History of Polish Jews, whose stated mission is "to recall and preserve the memory of the history of Polish Jews, contributing to the mutual understanding and respect among Poles and Jews as well as other societies of Europe and the world" (Polin Museum of the History of Polish Jews, n.d.). The museum promotes new standards of Holocaust and human rights education and offers programs for teachers and students. Both Polin and the Forum for Dialogue sponsor programs, respectively called Ambassadors to Polin and Leaders of Dialogue, in which educators learn to promote the ideals and values of these institutions in their local communities. These programs are taught by scholars, activists, or museum employees who help to set new directions in Holocaust education, so that the con-

tinuing instruction in Holocaust pedagogy is generally very strong.

I feel honored to be a member of both the Ambassadors to Polin and the Leaders of Dialogue, and to work to preserve the memory of Jews from my hometown, Mińsk Mazowiecki. With support and cooperation from teachers and librarians who offer workshops at their schools, I organize commemorative events, among them a Days of Jewish Culture series. These events foster a sense of responsibility to remember and teach about the Jewish community and emphasize how such learning enriches our sense of community in the present day. We cannot change the past, but we can nurture a better future. To do so, we must work on strengthening our community by increasing our knowledge and awareness of its past and its present.

While I am deeply invested in this work in my community, I also increasingly seek opportunities for professional development programs in Poland and abroad. I have come to see that across cultures and nations, educators continue to respond deeply to survivor testimony and to look for connections between the Holocaust and contemporary social justice issues. Studying with teachers from other countries allows me to learn from them while sharing my insights into teaching the Holocaust in Poland. It has also shown me that while we may represent a wide range of backgrounds, we consider the future and stand together in recognizing the value of human rights and the terrible costs of antisemitism, hatred, and bigotry.

—Katarzyna Łaziuk

## LOCAL CONTEXTS, GLOBAL MISSION

Teaching about the Holocaust is, for many of us, rooted in a commitment to remember the past but also to create a better future. This is evident in the practice of the three educators whose voices are represented here. Their work in the classroom is built on recognizing the ways in which learning about this can shape our understanding of history, of the actions of the different countries involved, and of ourselves. For these educators, such teaching requires taking on the burden of starting difficult conversations about their nations' past. Reading about their efforts and their experience leading TOLI seminars in Austria, Romania, and Poland, we are reminded of the highly local context of our work and how this shapes the dynamics of our classrooms and schools. We note the importance of building transnational relationships with others who share our commitment to Holocaust education and whose perspectives broaden our own. The teaching described by Nadine, Oana, and Kasia is inspirational and underscores the necessity of connecting deeply with our students, with our communities, and with those across the globe whose knowledge and dedication help us to further our shared mission.

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## END NOTE

- i On the Iasi pogrom, see Ioanid, R. (1993). The Holocaust in Romania: The Iasi Pogrom of June 1941. *Contemporary European History*, 2(2), 119–148. A mass grave was discovered in Popricani in 2010, and another one, connected to it, was found in June 2019. No paper has been published in English, but information in Romanian is available here: [www.pogromuldelaiasi.ro/gropi-comune/groapa-comuna-de-la-popricani-iasi/](http://www.pogromuldelaiasi.ro/gropi-comune/groapa-comuna-de-la-popricani-iasi/).



"The poem began in me with a longing for Yiddish," Gail Newman explains, "the language I heard growing up, but never spoke. Yiddish evokes the memory of a lost world, the life of Polish Jews before the war, before my family came to America. What does it mean to stand in two worlds, born in one, living in another? This is a question that pulls me through the poem."

Gail Newman

## *Lost Language*

I walk along a road pronouncing  
words: *winter, field, landscape, obscure.*

In the distance a field appears,  
an obscure landscape, trees weeping white

frost from childhood, not the country I grew up in  
but the one where I was born,

where my father traded coffee for bread  
and rocked me in a cradle, a string tied

to his big toe while he slept beside my mother,  
snow forming crystal angels on the windows.

I mumble random words, alphabets of a lost  
tongue, alert for the perfect lexicon,

the one that will free me from longing  
and loneliness: *zayde, earth, l'chaim, faith.*

*Mameloshen*, words of endearment, words that women  
spoke in the street, bargaining for carp, bagging radishes,

How much, *Vi ful?* greeting a neighbor, *Guten tak*,

while the men intoned holy words to each other  
in the temple pews and on the bima —

*Shepsele, Ketsele, Shaya Punim, Meyn Kinde* —

How I love you more than life.



"She was not ready," writes Mike Frenkel of his mother, "when they marched her and her family to an abandoned, frozen town in the Ukraine and left them to die. She was not ready even as she suffered through disease and starvation and the loss of her parents and younger brother. She has survived Hitler by more than 70 years and will, hopefully, celebrate her 100th birthday in June of this year. Now she is ready—to leave, when her time comes, with her dignity intact and her story entrusted to her children and grandchildren." Compare to Deborah Kahan Kolb's "Renaissance" (p. 36) and to Justin Ross Muchnick's "The Man in the Checkerboard Outfit" (pp. 3–7), and celebrate the resilience of these senior survivors.

*Mike Frenkel*

## *She Is Now Ready*

I called out to this frail woman,  
who had outlived Hitler by more than 70 years,  
as she ascended the stairs;  
she lost her balance as she looked back  
and went heels up  
and over the banister,  
crashed onto her shoulder,  
shrugged it off,  
accepted my hand and my apologies  
and proceeded back up the stairs.

Months later she toppled down four hallway steps  
and fell full force,  
her face and torso pressed flush  
against the front door,  
legs firm against the floor,  
arms pinned underneath,  
back bent like a yogi's.

When I arrived for my daily visit,  
the bell went unanswered.  
Her weight against the door  
resisted a key turn and a shoulder push.  
I peered through the peep hole



and saw her small white sneakers,  
toes pointed downward,  
pressed against the bottom step.

The siren screamed and then sighed  
and the firemen  
kicked down the backyard door.  
She refused a gurney or a wheelchair,  
and walked unaided to the ambulance.

At the hospital  
I bragged about the keen memory  
and iron jaw of a woman  
who survived the War alone  
and bore witness to generations.  
As I prepared to leave  
she asked me  
to help her to the bathroom  
and stand guard to her modesty.  
I paced like a sentry  
until I heard a thump,  
and found her  
lying face down in a pool of dark blood.

It is only her balance  
that has been taken,  
but without it  
she is like a blind woman  
feeling for the walls  
at the mercy of the mugger  
who flips her over banisters,  
flings her into doors,  
slams her to the floor.

Her time is coming.  
She knows it and is now ready  
and asks only that it be  
quick and painless,  
like a sucker punch.



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Karen I. Treiger was educated at Barnard College and New York University Law School, where she was editor-in-chief of *NYU Law Review*. After 18 years of practicing law in Seattle, WA, she left her position to have the time to explore the story of her in-laws, Sam and Esther Goldberg. The result of her three-year inquiry is the book *My Soul is Filled with Joy: A Holocaust Story*, published in 2018 by Stare Lipki Press. Treiger speaks around the country, sharing her story of hope after the Holocaust.

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Nadine Ulseß-Schurda, teaches German, English, and social justice education in Innsbruck, Austria, and also teaches at Innsbruck University and the Pedagogical University Tyrol. She facilitates seminars in Innsbruck for The Olga Lengyel Institute for Holocaust Studies and Human Rights (TOLI), which provide a space for educators from Austria and the US to explore each other's narratives about National Socialism and the Holocaust. Her current work focuses on pedagogical relationships, recognition theory, human rights, and Holocaust education.

**MADELINE VADKERTY**

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Madeline Vadkerty is an American scholar conducting Holocaust research in the Slovak Republic. Passionate about Holocaust remembrance, human rights, and supporting democratic institutions, she worked at Advocates for Survivors of Torture and Trauma and for the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, DC. She also volunteers at the Holocaust Documentation Center in Bratislava. She is a Master's degree student at Gratz College (PA) and received her bachelor's degree in French and Russian at Georgetown University, Washington, DC.

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Agnieszka Zajaczkowska-Drożdż holds a Ph.D. from the Institute of Political Science of Krakow's Jagiellonian University (JU) and a master's degree from the Institute of Jewish Studies at JU. She is the director of the Centre for Holocaust Studies and an assistant professor at the university.

# Notes





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