

Freilegungen

Überlebende – Erinnerungen – Transformationen

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Memory's Relay Race

I come from a silent family. My mother, Mimi Artzi, who survived Auschwitz, didn't talk about her horrific past. Even on Holocaust Memorial Day she used to turn off the radio and television and barricade herself behind walls of silence. The only story to leak was about Clarissa, her Kapo in Kleinschönau, her last concentration camp in former East Germany, who had saved her from certain death. Mom called her »my angel«.

I wasn't even the direct recipient of this shred of tormented memory. My mother had chosen to reveal it to my first boyfriend, a young soldier, and seventh generation Israeli. His family was spared the wounds of the European tragedy because they had immigrated to Palestine at the turn of the 20th century. For Mom, that young man represented the »simple son« in the Passover Hagadda, while I was »the girl who didn't know to ask.« That is how I listened for the first time to the fulfilment of an ancient commandment which, in the Jewish tradition, is passed on from one generation to another »you shall tell your son.« That echo of my mother's memory appeared suddenly, like a ghost, invading my life forever.

Years later, Clarissa inspired my book *Hat of Glass*¹ which was the first attempt in contemporary Israeli prose to publicly discuss the issue of the second generation to Holocaust survivors.

The »pact of silence« between surviving parents and their children – »you don't ask and we won't tell« – was not exclusively confined to my family. The survivors' private Holocaust had been concealed in the deepest recesses of their souls, so that only the tip of the iceberg continued to surface, through their nightmares or via the mundane routine of Israeli life; a potato peel, a barking dog, a torn garment, a bare foot, a school trip, a railway track, each and every marginal detail or random event could unlock a spike of memory from behind the fragile defensive wall and crush the house.

Auschwitz – the word was a permanent howl in the emptiness of our household. I can't even recall when I ever heard it for the first time. It was as if it was there all the time, hovering over my early years. Its meaning was never explained to me. In all innocence I told my kindergarten teacher that Auschwitz was the

1 Nava Semel: *Gläserne Facetten*, Frankfurt a. M. 2000.

country in which my mother was born. However, through the sharp instincts of a child, I always knew that Auschwitz was the deepest pit possible, containing every imaginable evil, cruelty and horror. Auschwitz, the name I must never utter, in case I cause my beloved one incomparable damage and sorrow.

An entire generation of native born Israeli kids got the same unspoken message. »You don't ask and I won't tell.« We had to become our parents' protectors against the dangers of memory. It was our task to shield the survivors from suffering the trauma of remembrance. I was part of it until I became a writer and the texts taught me differently. Writing forced me to look straight into the very edge of the black pit.

Writing resembles an archaeological dig, uncovering layer after layer of the soul. In fact, it brings to the surface those very matters that have been repressed, confronting the writer head on with everything he is so desperately trying to escape. Perhaps I became a writer precisely because it was my only way to understand something of the strange world I was living in. I wasn't prepared to accept the reality as presented to me – that same censored reality from which both the darkest of all horrors as well as the few small fragments of light had been erased. Everything had been swept away in favour of the Israeli display of might and steadfastness unaffected by the scars of yesteryear.

Yet, even as a child, I tried to juggle the inconsistency between the two contradictory realities of my life and find a logic that would explain the double existence of a sunny Israeli front shadowed by a dark unexplained background. My imaginary characters paved the way for me and signalled that the time had come to start the painful journey whatever the cost.

During the 1980's, as we moved into adulthood and became parents ourselves, and after a number of wars had been indelibly etched on our Israeli consciousness we finally found the courage to address the question: what would we have done had we been there instead of our parents?

»Holocaust survivor« was no longer a fuzzy image in a black and white movie, no more an abstract concept from a textbook or a slogan at school. The real Holocaust survivor was my mother, standing in our simple kitchen by the frying pan with the meatballs, holding my math notebook. She was as near as could be. At long last I found the courage to voice the forbidden question: »Mom, what happened to you in the Holocaust?«

Slowly, my mother began to respond. The set answer that dated back to my childhood, »This is not for you,« was already a non-starter. The most fragile of dialogues had finally begun.

My novel *And the Rat Laughed*² also begins with a question: »How is the story to be told?« An old woman in Tel Aviv asks it. She's a grandmother who, in 1942 when she was a little girl, was hidden in a potato pit under the roof of Polish peasants where she endured brutal abuse and rape, entirely losing her identity. Her only friend and protector was a rat who saved her sanity and taught her how to laugh.

Now the grandmother is petrified. How can she open the door to this terrible memory without endangering the well being of her young granddaughter who is preparing a school project on *family roots*. This horror story threatens to destroy the family which is the survivors' most precious thing in life, her greatest achievement.

Family had become the bedrock of the survivors' rehabilitation and at the same time their life's purpose. The living symbol of the meaning of their survival. Their devotion to the family they had created from ashes mobilized their mental resources and made the process of self healing possible.

Almost half a million Holocaust survivors came to Israel in the first few years following the War of Independence in 1948. The young country lacked any support systems to provide help either physical and mental. Young Israel itself was fragile, recovering from its own first war, so the miracle of rehabilitation was achieved by the survivors themselves. If only we knew from which mysterious safe-deposit boxes they drew the incredible strength to rebuild their life and start again. Each and every person created a self repairing mechanism of their own. I never cease to admire them. This is what I'm writing about.

In *Hat of Glass*, the memory of the Holocaust is passed on from the first to the second generation. However, in *And the Rat Laughed*, written two decades later, the grandmother opens up to a member of the third generation. Her granddaughter is the one who will carry the memory further and push it towards 2099 when there will no longer be any Holocaust survivors or their direct offspring left. This chain of rememberers who pass on the torch from hand to hand as in an Olympic relay race is called in the novel *Memory Carriers*.

What will happen after the era of the survivors? What will happen when we are all gone? What kind of memory will be preserved in a world where the tattooed number will have become merely a photographic image and not a bleeding mark carved into the flesh. The issue of memory goes far beyond the purview of the survivors and even of the State of Israel – established after the Holocaust as a declared safe haven for the Jewish people. It is a question every Israeli, every human being, whoever they may be, must bravely confront. It is our responsibility to ensure that memory is kept alive.

2 Nava Semel: *Und Die Ratte lacht*, Mannheim 2007.

In the future we can expect the Holocaust to become a blur, reduced to an obscure myth.

The myth is double edged. On the one hand it preserves the event in the formaldehyde of history, preventing it from sinking into oblivion, while on the other it weakens its complexity and fixes on what is merely a coded extract. I want so much to believe that in 2099 there will still be those who will attempt to decipher the truth from the vast ocean of documents and testimonies, like Lima Energelly in my novel. Yet it is reasonable to assume that the majority, if they pay any attention to it at all, will make do with the most superficial information and the simplest of explanations.

Even if the memory of the Holocaust is indeed perpetuated this will not be out of obedience to the sacred commandment *Thou Shall Remember* enshrined in the Jewish religion, but rather as a prosaic observation marking just one more event that took place in the course of a distant millennium.

Three unique elements of the Holocaust are in danger of being forgotten.

1. Its unprecedented nature, amounting to a death sentence on every person who, by virtue of his birth, belonged to the Jewish collective.
2. The level of hatred displayed by the Nazis and their helpers which has no parallel in human history.
3. The attempt to annihilate an entire People simply because it existed.

So how shall we remember? To get an answer I turned first to the dead. Janusz Korczak, a highly distinguished author and educator who was gassed in Treblinka together with his pupils, wrote:

»A man must know how, with a pencil, to memorialize those things that he wants to preserve. Here a landscape. Here a face, here a tree. All of which, in a blink of an eye will disappear from the world«.

I went to my mother and asked, »How do you want the memory to go on?« Should it be in the form of an official ceremony or a liturgical service with its known set of rules and customs?

Mom's reply was an old tale my late father used to tell. It happened during Napoleon's campaign in Russia. On the Ninth of the Hebrew month of Av the French Emperor arrived in a remote Jewish Shtetel. He was surprised to see all the Jews sitting on the ground crying, so he sent his most senior officer to find out why.

»The Jews are weeping over the destruction of their Temple«, the emperor was told.

»Find out when that event was«, Napoleon ordered.

The general reported back: »It happened two thousand years ago.«

Napoleon declared: »A nation that cries about something that happened two thousand years ago will never be erased from history.«

And yet forgetfulness and denial are already at our doorstep. Even when the last of the survivors are still in our midst, there are those who openly say – and from legitimate podiums across the globe – that the extermination of the Jews never happened. Others, in the guise of scientific scholarship, cast doubt on the historical facts and contest the magnitude of the Holocaust or its uniqueness. Whereas I, perhaps out of naiveté, cling to a belief in the power of the arts to fight against such denial. Art can pass on the emotional memory to those who follow us. Homer, Sophocles and Shakespeare, are all proof of that. A story, a poem, a movie, a play, painting, music and dance are the best carriers of a memory that goes beyond the facts and events themselves. Art encapsulates the fate of one individual and can resurrect his story at the unparalleled time in human history.

Perhaps my protagonist, such as Lima Energelly from *And The Rat Laughed* who, in 2099, rescues from oblivion the life story of one Jewish girl, will be the emissaries and spokespeople in the world of the future. »Rememberers«, I call them in the book, for they must bear the burden of memory.

»Perhaps all the stories have already been told?«, say the sceptics.

In my latest novel *Screwed on Backwards*³ again I wrote a Holocaust story. The novel focuses on a Jewish musician who is rescued by his Italian lover in a small Italian village under Nazi occupation. The novel responds on my behalf to all those sceptics: »Memory must be monitored to its furthest edges so that it doesn't ever fade away«.

I believe that there are still pockets of silence that have not yet been deciphered and ghosts that are still voiceless. This is a point in time when the number of storytellers diminishes by the day. This is the final deadline for us to rescue the last living memories from forgetfulness – truly the road to perdition.

»A stone was cast into memory's pool and the sound continues to spread until it reached us. No one can know where else it will end up and who will open his heart to this wailing«, I wrote in *Screwed on Backwards*. In the attic of that small farmhouse in Piedmont, a man hid while in the rooms downstairs two Catholic women and an innocent boy risked their lives for him. These fictional heroes enabled me to salute the real Clarissa, the Kapo who saved my mother, promis-

3 Kinneret-Zmora- Bitan, Israel 2012.

ing her that one day she would be building a new life in Israel, a land that was then still a mere fantasy.

Throughout the novel, I raise the price paid by my brave characters, who by their noble acts prove that there are still decent human beings – even under the worst circumstances ever. I put them to a test which I doubt I would have passed. The Holocaust is unparalleled, I remind myself, and the more I persist in writing about it, the less I understand.

At the end of the novel *And the Rat Laughed*, the Polish priest, Father Stanislaw, who saved the Jewish girl from the pit, leaves a testament to us all – present and future Rememberers alike.

»Maybe history is a kind of story, a kind of poem, a collection of legends, that people tell themselves at night. And these stories and legends and poems embody the truth, in a code that few will want to decipher.

Some day in the future, memory will be packaged like merchandise, turning into nothing more than a thick cloud, and the story of one little girl during the time of horror will be swallowed up within it.

This memory will live on, I promise myself, just as the laughter of the rat will always be there. It is a laughter that evolves in such utter darkness that we cannot even suspect it exists. Even if we ourselves never laugh it, we will always hope that someone else might, no matter what happens, in spite of everything.

I bury this testimony and seal it shut. Some day it will rise from the dead.

The Jews did exist.

The little girl does exist.

Against all forgettings, this memory shall prevail.«

Translated from Hebrew by Dan Gillon