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I  INTRODUCTION: THE LURE OF THE HOLOCAUST

Meditate that this came about:
I commend these words to you.
Carve them in your hearts
At home, in the street,
Going to bed, rising;
Repeat them to your children
(Levi 17)

In this part of the poem preceding the novel *If This Is a Man*, which was later published as *Survival in Auschwitz*, Primo Levi, one of the world’s most famous Holocaust survivors, pleads for active remembrance of the Holocaust. Levi says that “one must want to survive, to tell the story, to bear witness” (47). Indeed, some ten years after his liberation from the camp of Auschwitz, Levi started to write about his experiences. After Levi had set the example by publishing a memoir, many artists have responded to his plea to pass on the Holocaust experience. “I will give them an everlasting Name” is the biblical sentence quoted at the beginning of Claude Lanzmann’s documentary film *Shoah*. Lanzmann’s and Levi’s are just two of the innumerable artistic responses to the Holocaust.

The Holocaust comprises the period between 1933 and 1945. More than six million European Jews were murdered by the Nazi forces in an attempt to extirpate the entire Jewish race. An evil so pervading was unthinkable until then. Historical analogues cannot be found. Perhaps the most shocking aspect of the event was the extreme dehumanization and debasement that the Jews were subjected to. Lillian Kremer feels that “[s]ince the close of World War II the Holocaust (*Shoah* in Hebrew) has been an essential touchstone in critical thinking about the human condition” (xix). Fundamental questions arose “about the political, social, cultural, and theological constructs of western civilization” (Kremer xxi). Appropriate responses needed to be found to these perplexing questions about the “human” race. The search for answers and comprehension has proven to be very problematic because “[t]he Holocaust is a watershed event that divides culture into a before and an after” (Berger & Cronin 2). Given the enormity of the event, former conceptions of humanity needed to be reconsidered.

Because of the existential questions that the event poses, the Holocaust has provided subject matter for numerous intellectuals and writers. However, epistemological closure
concerning the event is yet to be achieved. Emotional closure is equally elusive, since the trauma has still not been mourned sufficiently. Moreover, as Geoffrey Hartman posits, little has changed in the past half century: “‘[h]as the world learned anything?’ is the despairing question we hear so often in the testimonies of survivors. In many places, antisemitism diminished or disguised itself; then it crept back, with rightist or leftist politics, and seems by now completely recovered (1)”. It seems, then, that the Holocaust memoirs filled with horror have had limited societal impact. Also, genocidal episodes as in Cambodia, Rwanda, or, more recently, Darfour raise questions about our species, our preconception that we are the human, the “family of man.” Or, less dramatically, we wonder about the veneer of progress, culture, and educability. Through the focusing power of the Holocaust we look at both past and present, and what we see is insane. (Hartman 2)

The outrage caused by the Nazi atrocities has by now diminished as other forms of cruelty have emerged all over the world, and learning a lesson from history has proven to be difficult.

Anyhow, the Holocaust continues to attract artists of all sorts, especially members of the Jewish community all over the world. The ever increasing number of literary works, films, essays, even museums, draws attention to the significance of the Holocaust even to this day. Giving the Jews “an everlasting Name” that will not be forgotten is the noble cause of many scholars and artists reflecting on the Holocaust.

Today, the third generation of witnesses to the Holocaust, the grandchildren of Holocaust survivors, is proof of the continuing interest in the Holocaust as subject of reflection. Whereas the relationship between survivors and their children is often tense and problematic, the third generation has achieved critical distance and, mostly, a healthier kind of involvement in the Holocaust past.

[S]urvivors have spoken in more detail about their prewar life or Holocaust experiences with their grandchildren than with their children. … As survivors age, their need to tell of what they have seen and endured becomes more urgent. The third generation, one generation removed from the survivor, provides a more comfortable and, in some cases, more receptive audience. Survivors can relax somewhat, therefore, as they and their stories are assured of continuity. (Hass 161-162)

In addition to passing on the Shoah inheritance, the third generation provides further testimony to the Nazis’ failed attempts to extinguish the Jewish race (Hass 162).

However, the third generation and its artistic responses to the Holocaust are beyond the scope of this dissertation. What this dissertation does aim to expose is the variety of ways
in which the Holocaust has been appropriated by children of Holocaust survivors. The first chapter will provide a short introduction on representational issues regarding the Holocaust, while also focusing on the writings of two widely recognized survivor writers, Primo Levi and Elie Wiesel. These memoirs deal with the first generation’s motifs for writing, their struggle with language, their idea of realism, their fear of disbelief. The second and third chapter will illustrate that the Holocaust has remained a constitutive factor in the lives of contemporary Jewish children of survivors. Although they are removed physically and temporally from the Shoah, their artistic works negotiate the role and impact of the event on the modern, post-Auschwitz world. Thane Rosenbaum, who is the focus in chapter two, is the herald of a new generation of Jewish American writers, a generation which he has named the “new wave”. With his short story collection *Elijah Visible*, Rosenbaum has written a profoundly varied and moving account of the Holocaust-infected life of a member of the so-called “second generation”. His stories immerse the reader in some of the typical concerns of children of survivors: the transmission of their parents’ trauma, the danger of over-identification, hampering survivor-child communication, their desire for a normal life, etc. Melvin Jules Bukiet’s novel *After* will prove to be a very different second-generation appropriation of the Holocaust. His novel demonstrates the decidedly contemporary possibility of approaching the Holocaust with a postmodernist set of instruments that challenges previously established Holocaust discourses. *After* adopts a wholly different style and genre to contemplate the immediate Holocaust aftermath. My analysis of these second-generation authors will illustrate how writers with a common legacy, and in many instances, a common childhood, produce tremendously diverging works and chose to deviate from the path set by their survivor ancestors.
II  WHEN HISTORY MEETS MEMORY: FIRST-GENERATION REPRESENTATIONS OF THE HOLOCAUST

It took a certain period of time before there was mention of an actual Holocaust literature. In the immediate post-war years, many believed that the appropriate response to the calamity was silence. In those years professional writers remained largely silent on the subject (Kremer xxiv). Just as Cynthia Ozick said in an interview: “the Holocaust ought to remain exclusively attached to document and history”, Elie Wiesel claimed years earlier that “[a] novel about Auschwitz is not a novel or it is not about Auschwitz. The very attempt to write such a novel is a blasphemy” (qtd. in Kremer xxiv). For them, the event was so horrendous that turning it into fiction by use of the creative imagination was out of the question. Melvin J. Bukiet posits that “[t]his was the 1950s and the Holocaust had not entered the public consciousness as it would thirty years later” (2002a: 13). The war stories were told in the midst of fellow-survivors or to the children. Experiences were only exchanged in the private sphere. However, something must have convinced survivors that recording their stories in writing would essentially be a good thing.

1. THE NECESSITY OF REPRESENTING THE HOLOCAUST

Theodor Adorno, a Jewish refugee from Nazi Germany, provocatively declared that “to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric” (qtd. In Rothberg 25). This dictum has often been misunderstood and misquoted as e.g. “no poetry after Auschwitz” (Rothberg 25). However, what Adorno intended was to “caution against the media and any aesthetic exploitation” (Hartman 53). Adorno’s fear was that a poem about the Holocaust would draw attention away from the subject and foreground the aesthetic, literary qualities of the poem. Aestheticizing the Shoah could diminish consciousness about the absolute atrocity of the event. With the event still so fresh in mind, blending the horror of the Holocaust and the beauty of art seemed preposterous. Nevertheless, when Adorno noticed that representations of the Holocaust inevitably popped up, he reconsidered his former statement and acknowledged that

the abundance of real suffering tolerates no forgetting … this suffering demands the continued existence of art [even as] … it prohibits it … It is now virtually in art alone
that suffering can still find its own voice, consolation, without immediately being betrayed by it (Kremer xxiii).

Not everyone evolved in the same direction as Adorno, and some still believe that “[i]n the presence of certain realities [ghettos, death camps] art is trivial or impertinent” (qtd. in Teichman and Leder 1). For them, art cannot provide any meaning and is not wanted in the face of tragedy. Furthermore, art could distort the historical facts and mould them into a nice story to suit the work of art. Efraim Sicher also warns that there might be dangers in the growing legitimacy of fiction that claims to represent the Holocaust and its aftermath (2000: 57). He feels that hypermediated cultural constructions of the past can have consequences. The fear exists that the Holocaust will be trivialized, although the writers engaging in the event are serious and have the best intentions. Both Sicher and Suzanne Rohr have noticed that the Holocaust has entered popular culture in the US. Art Spiegelman’s comic-book memoir *Maus* is a good example of this popularization of the Holocaust, as well as Steven Spielberg’s *Schindler’s List*. Whether this popularization of the Shoah is only negative is debatable, since the evolution does cause more people to gain access to information about the Holocaust. Thus, the process of forgetting might be slowed down, and the process of conscious-making accelerated.

Anyhow, the idea of dealing with the Holocaust in a creative, artistic way remains controversial up till today. However, there is no redemptive or healing power in silence. In an attitude of secrecy, anger and sorrow find no release. The so-called “conspiracy of silence” has proven to be inadequate to deal with the trauma. Moreover, the realization began to dawn on survivors that their stories ought to be remembered. So vicious an event must be imprinted on the public consciousness so that a second Holocaust, or something alike, can never occur again. Although he initially had doubts about the Holocaust novel, Wiesel did understand that people ought to remember the event. The imperative he put forward was to “never forget so that the world will remember and learn” (Bernard-Donals and Glejzer xii). The objection that historical facts might be altered for the sake of a literary work, proved to be subordinate to the conviction that the facts should be remembered anyhow.

The impulse towards telling the story was never completely smothered by the Nazis. Many ghetto victims like Tadeusz Borowski or Jozef Zelkowicz wrote with great fervour during their years in the ghetto. According to Milton Teichman and Sharon Leder, who have composed a volume of essential stories and poems on the Holocaust, “one of the most compelling reasons for writing during the Holocaust was to bear testimony to what would otherwise not be believed” (5). Indeed, there are numerous reasons for writing about what
happened during the Holocaust, the most important of which was perhaps opening the world’s
eyes to the kind of destruction that the human race proved capable of.

The urge to write was not exterminated with the six million and has gained
prominence again. Many theorists and authors are amazed at the enormous energy of
Holocaust studies and writings. The second generation, the offspring of the survivors, is proof
of this bustling creativity. The creative mind is not averse to addressing the enormity of the
Shoah. Theologian and novelist Arthur Cohen refers to the Passover Haggadah\(^1\) which
“commands that every Jew consider himself as though he has gone forth in exodus from
Egypt” (qtd. in Kremer xxiii). Cohen thus voices the religious commitment of witness
literature, since the authors of that literature obey to the liturgical injunction to remember
Jewish history (Kremer xxiii). So even when a Jew is not a personal witness to the Holocaust,
he nevertheless has a religious obligation to bear witness to his people’s past. Also, “Jews
everywhere [those physically present and absent] have been maimed by the European
catastrophe” (Steiner qtd. in Kremer xxiv). The Holocaust has reshaped Jewish identity
dramatically and has challenged some basic assumptions of non-Jews as well. The event has
been so central to modern history that ignoring it, and thus letting the memory fade, is simply
not an option.

2. HOW TO ADDRESS THE HOLOCAUST

Today, the legitimacy of Holocaust writing is beyond dispute for most authors and critics. The
“waves” of works on the Holocaust do not diminish (Bukiet 2002a: 15). According to Bukiet,
the “floodgates to exploration of this awful era opened” (2002a: 14). However, the discussion
on Holocaust literature is far from closed. As Melvin Jules Bukiet’s novel After will show, the
debate has shifted from the legitimacy of Holocaust writing to aspects of representation
(Kremer xxiii). How can one depict an event that is beyond the imaginable, an event which
completely escapes the rational mind? Lillian Kremer acknowledges the inevitable
representational problems in her introduction to Holocaust literature: an Encyclopedia:

Theorists debate whether to discuss the event as a unique historic experience or as part
of historic continuity, the (im)possibility of and the need to address the Shoah in forms

\(^1\) “Haggadah, meaning "telling," is a fulfilment of the scriptural commandment to each Jew to "tell your son"
about the Jewish liberation from slavery in Egypt, as described in the book of Exodus in the Torah.”
(“Haggadah”, Wikipedia)
other than documentary, the legitimacy of fusing history and art, and the propriety and
“limits of representation”. (Kremer xxi)

A major representational issue is the adequacy of language to talk or write about the
Shoah. After Auschwitz, it was believed that language could become contaminated. The
German language changed, its words acquired new meanings:

Use a language to conceive, organize, and justify Belsen, use it to make specifications
for gas ovens; use it to dehumanize man during twelve years of calculated bestiality.

Something will happen to it (Steiner qtd. in Kremer xxiv).

Language is “besmirched” and no longer reliable. It was doubted “whether there is a human
form of language adequate to the conceptualization and understanding of Auschwitz” (Steiner
qtd. in Kremer xxiv). This distrust of language combined with the insecurity as to whether the
imagination could be used, caused writers to be extremely cautious about approaching the
Shoah subject.

The Holocaust has forced back into view “the persistence of the question of realism”
(Rothberg 8). According to Michael Rothberg, there is a realist and an antirealist approach to
the Holocaust. The first approach is based upon the belief that the Holocaust is “knowable”
and that it can be rendered according to already established techniques of representation and
analysis, while the second approach sees the Holocaust as “a sublime, unapproachable object
beyond discourse and knowledge” (Rothberg 3-4). Nowadays, the antirealist approach
prevails as problems emerge in the process of writing about the Shoah. It is believed that,
because of the enormity of the Holocaust, previously established concepts no longer apply.
Writing the history of the Holocaust turned out to be complicated. “[D]uring the war”,
Teichman and Leder argue, “history became stranger than fiction” (3). Writers believed that,
if they were to write history in a conventional documentary-like fashion, their accounts would
not be believed. Thus, they made use of fictional techniques to make outrageous history more
credible: “[w]hat seemed so thoroughly unreal had to be made real” (Teichman and Leder 3).

Moreover, Geoffrey Hartman believes that historians are not capable of being
objective about the Shoah, because their task of description is complicated by “a mixture of
numbness (leading to over-objectification) and emotionalism” (39). Holocaust historian Saul
Friedländer also came to the conclusion that historical language is, perhaps intrinsically,
inadequate in the face of extreme events, above all of Auschwitz (Hartman 56). Historians
also debate whether the event should be seen as a radical rupture from the past, or whether it
is an enlarged example of what reality always has been and will continue to be (Teichman and
Leder 16). Those who believe that the Holocaust as “seemingly radical evil is situated within
an explainable tradition and everyday world”, are adherents of the realist tendency (Rothberg 4). Obviously, understanding of the event has not yet been accomplished. As Hartman argues: “while no recent event has elicited more documentation and analysis, knowledge has failed to become understanding” (39).

If a matter-of-fact representation of the Holocaust is not sufficient or reliable, other literary modes must be addressed. Maybe, as Hartman suggests, history and memory can work together in subtle ways (10). This mixture in no way implies that realistic qualities are lessened, the facts are merely approached in a different way. As an example, he refers to the emergence of a testimonial literature, which allows “less rigidity and more tolerance of detail and anecdote” than the traditional *histoire événementielle* (11). Moreover, traditional paradigms such as those drawn from the treasury of the Bible, midrash ² and martyrology, are still influences but are no longer the only accepted modes (Hartman 11). Genres and modes mingled, and this has created new ways of approach. Teichman and Leder are equally interested in the new genres that emerge in Holocaust literature. They make a distinction between works of truth and works of lamentation:

we have observed two broad categories of literary response to the fearsome historic events. One is the transmission of various truths about the Holocaust; the other is the expression of grief, the response of lamentation. Presented in styles ranging from realism to surrealism in fiction, and from the plain and direct in poetry to the fragmented and oblique, these two multi-faceted responses are characterized by a deep sense of moral urgency. (4)

So, next to these two overarching categories, many subcategories make the body of Holocaust fiction extraordinarily diverse. The Holocaust can be approached from innumerable points of view and the event can be recorded in all kinds of formats. When browsing through Kremer’s *Encyclopedia*, one is confronted with “every genre of Holocaust writing”, ranging from “testimony in diary and memoir to poetry, drama, fiction, fantasy, and blended genres” (xxvii-iii). The generation of survivors produces many diaries, memoirs and autobiographies, guided by the moral imperative to bear witness (Kremer xxviii). These are perhaps the best works to learn what victims had to go through during the Shoah. These heartfelt contributions are very real, cruel as they may be. Imaginative writers too, survivors as well as non-survivors, have sought to understand what the Shoah has meant for people and for the progression of history (Kremer xxviii).

² “Midrash … is a Hebrew word referring to a method of exegesis of a Biblical text. The term “midrash” also can refer to a compilation of Midrashic teachings, in the form of legal, exegetical or homiletical commentaries on the Tanakh (Jewish Bible).” (“Midrash”, Wikipedia)
Diversity in Holocaust writings also stems from the diversity in nationality of its writers. They are “American, Canadian, Latin American, British, French, German, Dutch, Russian, Polish, Czech, Hungarian, Italian, Greek, Hebrew, Yiddish, Australian, Algerian …” (Kremer xix). After the war, Jews migrated to the most diverse and distant countries, establishing a very extensive Jewish Diaspora. This is an additional reason why writings which make notice of the Shoah are so important. With Jews spread out all over the world, it is hard to find a firm Jewish identity. Moreover, collective memory might weaken when a sense of a strong community is lost. Holocaust literature might be an aid to recollection, reminding the Jewish people of their roots and common history.

3. FIRST-GENERATION TESTIMONIAL LITERATURE

The first, and for many years the only, form of Holocaust literature to be acknowledged as legitimate, was that of the survivors themselves recounting their wartime experiences. Although they poured their stories into novels, there was no doubt that the accounts were realistic. Horrendous as the recounted events may be, they are not imagined. Hannah Arendt thought that the Holocaust could never be fully embraced by the imagination “for the very reason that it stands outside of life and death” (qtd. in Kremer xxiv). Thus, eyewitness accounts claimed authority over Holocaust literature. However, it took some time even for these testimonial writings to be legitimized.

3.1. What Made Them Write

Primo Levi, one of the greatest contemplators of the Holocaust, was never part of the “conspiracy of silence”. During his eleven months of imprisonment at the satellite camp Auschwitz III-Monowitz, he already scribbled down thoughts and considerations of all kinds, “even though he knew they would be lost and could easily cost him his life” (Gordon 751). After liberation, when he was back in his birthplace Turin, Levi felt an indomitable urge to tell the stories of his encampment to whoever would hear them. He vented this narrative impulse by writing a book. A young man of twenty-eight, he published his first book in 1947, Se Questo è un Uomo, translated as If This Is a Man, is an account of the stories Levi felt he had to tell. For many, this work is perhaps the greatest work of Holocaust testimony.
Nevertheless, when the book first came out people were not keen on reading these stories of human cruelty. The reception was rather faint in literary circles. After some ten years, when the silence was broken and interest in the Holocaust was growing, the book was revised and republished. From then on, it has been included in many school curricula and has attained canonical status. After that, Levi began to write more regularly and became a prolific author of essays, poems, short stories, science fiction, and journalism.

For Elie Wiesel, it took significantly more time to start writing about his time in Auschwitz and Buchenwald. Wiesel was sixteen when the war ended, and after being taken to France with a group of orphans, he decided to study in Paris. He became a professional journalist. Since writing had become his profession by then, the step towards writing about the Holocaust was somewhat easier. And so, in 1954, Wiesel started writing a memoir of his experience during the war. That memoir was first published in Yiddish as Un di velt hot geshvign, which means “And the World remained silent”. Spurred by French writer François Mauriac, whom Wiesel had interviewed once, Wiesel decided to render the memoir in French. The adaptation was titled La Nuit, Night, and was able to reach a wider audience. Just like Levi, Wiesel became a prolific writer engaging in memoir, novels and essays.

Both Night and If This Is a Man are among the most read works concerning the Holocaust. These books have touched people all over the world. For Levi, there was no doubt that he should pen down his war experiences. After the war, his life-goal was to bear witness. He wanted his story to be read “as a sinister alarm-signal” for the future (Levi 15). In his preface, Levi unveils his major motive:

Its origins go back, not indeed in practice, but as an idea, an intention, to the days in the Lager. The need to tell our story to ‘the rest’, to make ‘the rest’ participate in it, had taken on for us, before our liberation and after, the character of an immediate and violent impulse, to the point of competing with our other elementary needs. The book has been written to satisfy this need: first and foremost, therefore, as an interior liberation. (15)

However, after examining his later oeuvre, it becomes clear that there is “a move from catharsis and memorial to articulate reflection and a careful search for understanding” (Gordon 751). The writer was struck by the awareness that writing would not make him forget, although it might help him structure his thoughts.

Wiesel was more wary about assigning any function to his writing. He openly doubted whether the Holocaust should be written down in any form other than history. He equally doubted that his work would make a difference, when he stated that “all survivor testimony
seems to be written by a single person always the same” (qtd. in Rosen 1317). In the preface of *Night*, Wiesel writes that he is not convinced that he survived in order to write that text and that he no longer knows what he wanted to achieve with his words (vii-viii). However, just like Levi, Wiesel believes that it is important to confront the Shoah and its after-effects “so that people might begin to understand the basest tendencies that generated such unprecedented brutality” (Kremer xxiv). Wiesel has one more motive for writing:

I only know that without this testimony, my life as a writer – or my life, period – would not have become what it is: that of a witness who believes he has a moral obligation to try to prevent the enemy from enjoying one last victory by allowing his crimes to be erased from human memory. (viii)

For Wiesel, the Holocaust belongs to Jewish collective memory, and thus, every Jew has a right to learn about the event. Wiesel feels that the “witness has forced himself to testify” (xv). To forget, or allow contemporaries and future generations to forget, “would be not only dangerous but offensive” to those who perished, since to forget would be like “killing them a second time” (Wiesel xv).

3.2. Their Struggle with Words

These first writers of Holocaust literature faced many problems. The issue of language is very persistent in their testimonial writings. Both Levi and Wiesel seem to support the antirealist approach of Rothberg’s typology. For both writers, language is a double-edged sword. While they know that they cannot avoid using language if they want to write, they feel that language is inadequate as a medium to express their experiences. For them, the Holocaust is not translatable “into a familiar mimetic universe” (Rothberg 3-4). When Levi describes in his book *If This Is a Man* that after only one day of encampment, the Jewish prisoners had already been transformed into “a hundred miserable and sordid puppets”, he realizes that “our language lacks words to express this offence, the demolition of a man” (32). Levi addresses this issue once more in his novel:

If the Lagers had lasted longer a new, harsh language would have been born; and only this language could express what it means to toil the whole day in the wind, with the temperature below freezing … and in one’s body nothing but weakness, hunger and knowledge of the end drawing nearer. (129)
Wiesel addresses his struggle with language in a more implicit manner when he writes that “[t]he word “chimney” here was not an abstraction; it floated in the air, mingled with the smoke”, and that “[i]t was, perhaps, the only word that had a real meaning in this place” (39). He comes to realize that words have different connotations in the Lager. Strikingly, this begins to dawn on him only “[o]ne single night” after they have left the ghetto (37). After he has been in the camp for some time, he contemplates the last day of the Jewish year. “The word “last” had an odd ring to it. What if it really were the last day?” (66). By that time, Wiesel’s life, and that of every prisoner around him, had become incredibly unsure. Therefore, “last” had become a more fatalistic word than before. Present-day readers are unlikely to fully understand this connotation, whereas every fellow-prisoner of Wiesel must have made the association immediately. Later, in his preface to the new translation of Night, Wiesel makes explicit his attitude towards language:

while I had many things to say, I did not have the words to say them. Painfully aware of my limitations, I watched helplessly as language became an obstacle. It became clear that it would be necessary to invent a new language. But how was one to rehabilitate and transform words betrayed and perverted by the enemy? Hunger – thirst – fear – transport – selection – fire – chimney: these words all have intrinsic meaning, but in those times, they meant something else. (ix)

Evidently, Wiesel, too, felt that no language at hand could ever express the peculiarities of Lager life. Geoffrey Hartman feels that words can become “false friends” if they have to characterize the death camp experience: ““[m]artyrdom”, “victim”, “suffering”, “choice”, “resistance” are inadequate phrases even though we may have to use them to communicate and restore a semblance of normality” (3). Language might thus be the only means to make the Holocaust “real” or even imaginable. The use of ordinary language makes the Shoah somewhat more conceivable to the human mind. But ultimately, these ordinary words can never express the horror of the event to its full extent. However, there is no way of avoiding language if one wants to bear witness. Literary and cultural critic George Steiner refers to this as the “hermeneutic dilemma”. This dilemma is now ineradicably installed in Jewish existence as Jews wonder “whether there is a human form of language adequate to the conceptualization and understanding of Auschwitz”, “whether the limits of language do not fall short of the limits of the Shoah experience” (Kremer xxiv).
3.3. Their Realism

Although both Levi and Wiesel support the antirealist perspective on epistemological and representational issues, they are undoubtedly literary realists. They are concerned with presenting their experiences as they occurred. For them, detailed accounts are essential. “Desire for realism and referentiality” is a defining feature of many studies of the Holocaust (Rothberg 99). When one reads in Levi’s preface that “[i]t seems to me unnecessary to add that none of the facts are invented”, one cannot play down the stories as exaggerations or distortions (16). The first generation writers are the only ones with direct access to the past through their memory. Subsequently, they seem to be the only writers who have a claim on realism.

According to Rothberg, the survivor is essentially a realist who “aims at the mimesis of a certain spatial world, but in confronting the structural problem of the relationship between the extreme and the everyday finds herself caught in a traumatic temporality” (13). Thus, the realism of the survivor exceeds the classical realism in that it comprises the element of trauma. After studying Holocaust testimonies, Rothberg concluded that what is particularly traumatic is “the peculiar combination of ordinary and extreme elements that seems to characterize the Nazi genocide in these accounts” (6). For Rothberg, writers of Holocaust testimonies are traumatic realists. What makes these memoirs realist is their desire for documentation. As Wiesel posits, “[s]ubstance alone mattered”. He feared that, if too much emphasis is placed on style or atmospheric description, the focus would shift away from the horrid facts. However, the many details and facts referring to the event have to be put into a coherent story. Thus, Rothberg argues, documentation both consists of reference and narrative (100). Moreover, traumatic realism is more than passive mimesis, since it also engages in self-reflexivity (Rothberg 99). Most importantly, traumatic realism acknowledges that conventional realist representation is impossible (Rothberg 106). The genre, if one can call it that, places emphasis on representational problems and exposes “the scars that mark the relationship of discourse to the real” (Rothberg 106). Evidently, Levi and Wiesel, who struggled with the truthfulness of their story and the language to translate their stories into, are traumatic realists.

Levi does not claim that he holds the one and only truth:

we the survivors are not the true witnesses … We are a small, anomalous minority:
those who managed … not to touch bottom. None of those who did so … came back
to tell the tale, or they came back struck numb; but it is they, the “Muselmänner,” the
drowned, the genuine witnesses, whose evidence could have had some wider meaning.
They are the rule, we are the exception. (qtd. in Gordon 756)

There is a wide gap in the documentation on the Holocaust: the voice of those who perished is
missing. The ones who experienced the Nazi horror to its fullest extent were unable to tell the
story. Levi feels that they, the truly beaten, would have been the only true authorities in the
field of Holocaust representation. Rothberg also feels that much of the narrative of the
Holocaust must turn on absence, and that therefore great emphasis is placed on documentation
and realistic discourse (99). Levi realizes that he is incredibly limited, even as a survivor.
Robert S.C. Gordon elaborates on the limits of the survivor position. He mentions “the
uncertainty of memory”, which played tricks on survivor writers, “the ambiguity of
responsibility, the weaknesses of our ways of understanding, the almost insurmountable
difficulties of communicating in the camps but also afterwards…” (756). The courage to
write, despite these obstacles, is admirable. The writers who did take the challenge, refused to
believe that it is impossible to express the realities of the Final Solution (Gordon 756). They
even wanted to believe that one day, understanding of the Holocaust would be achieved.
Although this remains a largely inaccessible goal up to the current day, communication about
the event is always possible and necessary (Gordon 756). However, the question remains
whether an event that has not yet been fully understood can ever be realistically rendered.

3.4. The Unbelievable

Logically, when a realistic rendering is compromised, disbelief is never far away. This was
indeed the fear of many, in particular of the earliest, authors dealing with the Holocaust. Non-
writing survivors, too, were afraid of not being taken seriously. Atrocities on such a large
scale were unknown until then and people did not yet know that humans were capable of
something as horrendous as the Shoah. Aharon Appelfeld has observed that “[e]verything that
happened was so gigantic, so inconceivable, that the witness even seemed like a fabricator
himself” (qtd. in Teichman and Leder 33). Eyewitnesses themselves sometimes doubt their
memory and look back at the past with disbelief. Levi makes this explicit in his testimony:
“[t]oday, at this very moment as I sit writing at a table, I myself am not convinced that these

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3 The term “Musselman” was used by concentration camp inmates to refer to those fellow-inmates who were on
the verge of death. They are the walking skeletons one associates with the Holocaust, men and women tortured
by hunger, fatigue and despair. Musselmänner had little or no chance to survive Lager life. (Levi)
things really happened” (109). He realizes that memory is a curious instrument, as he remembers certain details with strange accuracy while others elements are only remembered after straining the mind.

Even when they have established some trust in their memory and in language, and think that they have found the “right” words, “survivor writers have feared that the world would surely refuse to believe”:

In the opening passage of The Drowned and the Saved, Primo Levi quotes the boast of the S.S. man who asserts that even if a handful of Jews survive, the world will never believe their story … Even if they were to tell the story, would it be believed? (Teichman and Leder 32).

In If This Is a Man, Levi mentions this issue several times. A case in point is his daydream when he and his fellow-prisoner are delayed in their work because of a train that passes by. “Happy at the enforced delay”, Levi’s thoughts float away from the horrible reality for a moment. He imagines that he hides in the train, staying there until the train would stop and he would get out and “kiss the earth”. An Italian woman would help him and he would tell his story: “and she would understand, and she would give me food and shelter. And she would not believe the things I tell her, and I would show her the number on my arm, and then she would believe” (49-50). Levi realizes that non-witnesses would require absolute proof before they would even consider believing the stories. Although he carries irrefutable evidence of his encampment on his arm, Levi remains worried about possible disbelief. At a certain moment in the memoir, Levi recounts a dream he has had several times. He is amongst friends and family in a free world again:

It is an intense pleasure, physical, inexpressible, to be at home, among friendly people and to have so many things to recount: but I cannot help noticing that my listeners do not follow me. In fact, they are completely indifferent: they speak confusedly of other things among themselves, as if I was not there. My sister looks at me, gets up and goes away without a word. (66)

This dream troubles the writer deeply. To Levi’s astonishment, his friend Alberto tells him “that it is also his dream and the dream of many others, perhaps of everyone” (66). The fear of “the unlistened-to story” is instilled in many of the prisoners. However, they do not know why this dream torments them so. They suspect that it is an unpromising sign for the future.

In Night, disbelief appears at a much earlier stage. Because of this, the consequences are more real and drastic. Moishe the Beadle, a deeply religious inhabitant of Wiesel’s hometown Sighet, is sent away from the town in the beginning of the war together with all the
other foreign Jews. Every Jew had always liked him, he never bothered anyone and he even helped Wiesel a little in his religious explorations. Months after his deportation, Moishe is back in Sighet. He narrates what has happened to him and the other deportees, when they were brought into a forest:

There everybody was ordered to get out [of the trucks]. They were forced to dig huge trenches. When they had finished their work, the men from the Gestapo began theirs. Without passion or haste, they shot their prisoners, who were forced to approach the trench one by one and offer their necks. Infants were tossed into the air and used as targets for the machine guns. (6)

Miraculously, Moishe the Beadle was able to escape after being left for dead by the Germans. From then on, he travels from one Jewish house to the other, telling his gruesome story. Remarkably, he never mentions God or Kabbalah again. He has already lost his faith. Wiesel mentions how “people not only refused to believe [Moishe’s] tales, they refused to listen” (7). As for Moishe, he begged people to listen to him instead of declaring him mad. Startled, Wiesel remembers that he too did not believe the wise Moishe and that all he felt was pity for the old man. Moishe is dead inside: “[l]ife? I no longer care to live. I am alone. But I wanted to come back to warn you. Only no one is listening to me…” (7). Even when the threat of war is very near and people are relocated into ghettos, they still have a naïve hope of remaining unharmed.

Hope seems to be one of humankind’s most powerful driving forces. Levi realizes how ridiculous hope may seem in the face of a tragedy as enormous as the Holocaust. When he and his fellow-inmates face another hard winter, he says that they might have run against the electric wire-fence if they had known a year before, “were it not for this last senseless crazy residue of unavoidable hope” (130). Alan Rosen also detects this sense of optimism in Wiesel’s Night. He calls the dialectic of optimism and deception “illusion” (1318). For Rosen, the illusion is dangerous since the future for the Jews of Sighet might have been very different if they had listened to Moishe. Three attempts are made to puncture the illusion: the first by Moishe, the second by a madwoman who has visions of fire in the cattle car, the third by Wiesel himself who faced an “unreceptive audience” in the aftermath (Rosen 1318). However, Wiesel believes that he and his family are typical in their inability to overcome the “dangerous illusion” and “in their tragic quest to maintain optimism” (Rosen 1318). In the face of tragedy, a last sprinkle of hope is not so easily eradicated.
3.5. Categorization

By and large, these Shoah writers are concerned with narrating the truth. In Teichman and Leder’s typology, their memoirs could be listed under truth-telling literature. Both Levi and Wiesel “are apt to focus on the unspeakable brutalities of camp and ghetto life and the extraordinary efforts of victims … to resist their tormentors” (Teichman and Leder 4). They feel compelled to tell the whole story of the extermination and work camps, so that the world would know. As many other witnesses, they “often attempt to draw us as fully as possible into this brutal world” (Teichman and Leder 6). They will not give the readers any reprieve or any opportunity to turn their heads in indifference. For Levi, “nothing is true outside the Lager”, camp life has become all too real for him (qtd. in Gordon 753). For Wiesel, too, the Shoah experience is with him forever:

Never shall I forget that night, the first night in camp, that turned my life into one long night seven times sealed. …
Never shall I forget the nocturnal silence that deprived me for all eternity of the desire to live. …
Never shall I forget those moments that murdered my God and my soul and turned my dreams to ashes.
Never shall I forget those things, even were I condemned to live as long as God himself.
Never. (34)

Because of this ever-presence of the Shoah, first-generation writers often doubt whether reality “was every any different, ever rational or just” (Teichman and Leder 6). Thus, writers feel the urge to convince everyone of the reality of the narrated events, and they do this by attempting to put the reader in the middle of “the inferno” (Teichman and Leder 6). Both If This Is a Man and Night are detailed accounts of Lager life. They tell vividly of inmates’ surviving practices, their work, their food, their innumerable trials and tribulations. Both books inform the reader about smuggling and trading practices, ways of avoiding selection and other things that can only be learned from first-hand experience. Thus, the reader catches a glimpse of the ingeniousness of some prisoners, and the utter clumsiness of those who were doomed to perish.

Not only material deprivations are discussed in these memoirs. There is also a focus on the psychological condition of survivors. As Teichman and Leder argue, “[t]he terrible conditions under which victims live exposed them to a range of moral dilemmas” (6). This is
especially present in Night, where the struggle against dehumanization and for survival makes survivors do things unimaginable before. Wiesel experienced this personally. He was in the camp with his father for the entire duration of his imprisonment. After only one night of encampment, Wiesel is shocked at the realization that his morals are already changing:

I stood petrified. What had happened to me? My father had just been struck, in front of me, and I had not even blinked. I had watched and kept silent. Only yesterday, I would have dug my nails into this criminal’s flesh. Had I changed that much? So fast? (39)

While the prisoners “had ceased to be men” in only a few seconds due to the strange striped costumes, they threaten to lose their ethical sense which distinguishes them as human beings. Emotional numbness and inertia have already made their way into their minds: “[w]e were incapable of thinking. Our senses were numbed, everything was fading into a fog” (Wiesel 36). Teichman and Leder make a distinction between historical truth-telling and psychological truth-telling. For Night, this distinction seems invalid. The memoir focuses both on the historical reality of the Holocaust and on the psyche of war witnesses.

Levi is also concerned with psychological issues. He explores individual psychology and seeks to understand the human capacity for the evil that pervaded the Shoah. Reflections on the “persistent human capacity for violence” show that Levi’s work bears resemblance to philosophical truth-telling as well (Teichman and Leder 15). In addressing psychological and philosophical as well as historical realities, Levi manages to give his memoir depth and nuance. In his preface, Levi explains that his book will add no new information or accusations, but that “it should be able, rather, to furnish documentation for the quiet study of certain aspects of the human mind” (15). Levi surpasses the level of the Lager at certain points to make more general observations about humankind. The grief of the people who will be deported from the ghetto, is “the ancient grief of the people that has no land, the grief without hope of the exodus which is renewed every century” (22). Levi has a “personal curiosity about the human soul” that allows him to observe people’s behaviour and changes (111).

However, as concerned as these memoirists may be with objectively transmitting the truth about the Shoah, their work is pervaded with anger and pain as well. According to Gordon, “[c]learheaded analysis never quite eliminates the anger and pain in Levi” (Gordon 751). Understandably, feelings of hatred and anger are very prominent. One of the prefatory texts of If This Is a Man, the poem-epigraph, expresses this anger tellingly: Levi curses those who will not pay attention to his stories (Gordon 751). For Levi, their house may fall apart, illness may impede them and their children may turn their faces from them (17). The way in
which Levi describes the bestiality and dehumanization of Lager life hints at a feeling of utter helplessness and guilt. Wiesel’s work is pervaded by guilt as well. Wiesel seeks to understand why feelings of anger against the Nazis did not translate into resistance of some sort. It becomes evident that it was the ever-present fear that caused inertia.

The anger that Wiesel portrays in his memoir is of a different kind than Levi’s. Wiesel’s anger is most often addressed to God. Alan Rosen comments that it is this foregrounding of religious life and issues of theodicy that makes *Night* notable among Holocaust memoirs (1317). Mauriac states that for Wiesel

> God is dead, the God of love, of gentleness and consolation, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob had, under the watchful gaze of this child, vanished forever into the smoke of the human holocaust demanded by the Race, the most voracious of all idols.

(qtd. in Wiesel xx)

Wiesel narrates how he first felt anger when he was driven towards a flaming ditch with his father on the first night of their arrival at Auschwitz. He felt an inner rebellion and was not able to pray to the “Almighty, the eternal and terrible Master of the Universe”, who “chose to be silent” (33). Before the war, when he was a young boy, Wiesel was deeply observant and equated praying to living and breathing (4). This strong belief is seriously shaken as the war unfolds. Throughout the narrative, “[s]acred books are studied, transported, discarded; prayers are recited, interrupted, anguished over; blessings are said, inverted, or withheld; rabbis lead, are humiliated, and submit” (Rosen 1317). Religious allusions are pervasive in *Night*, but they are no longer straightforward. Wiesel gives them a sceptical twist. He knows that his relationship towards religion has changed drastically. Towards the ending, he writes: “[a]nd in spite of myself, a prayer formed inside me, a prayer to this God in whom I no longer believed” (91). Although he states that he no longer believes, he cannot discard religion completely. He has come to realize that religion can never live on unchanged after the Holocaust. For Rosen, this “presence and emerging impotence of these traditional media mark the destruction of a culture as well as the people who inhabit it” (1317). Wiesel’s work, together with many other’s, is in fact devoted to preserving some of this culture that is on the brink of disappearance (Rosen 1317).

Remarkably, neither *If This Is a Man* nor *Night* is mainly introspective. Levi’s other-centred style of storytelling is one if his distinctive characteristics (Gordon 752). He focuses on numerous other characters in his memoir, he also writes about more general circumstances without always relating everything to his personal experience. He takes a step back from his own experience to move towards more general analyses of the Lager and its effect on
humanity. Levi is very concerned with human relationships, “even in the violently hostile, systematically divisive universe of the concentration camps” (Gordon 753). Most striking are Levi’s friendships with Alberto and Lorenzo, both of which give him strength and some “sense of human worth”:

They are also indicative of another element of careful ethical … positioning by Levi, who chooses such bonds of companionship, of the local and contingent, over either the atomized isolation or the indistinct massification that were encouraged by the Nazi system at one and the same time. (Gordon 753)

This act of establishing and maintaining a durable bond is in fact a very modest act of rebellion. It is just one of the little efforts to counter the Nazis and not admit defeat just yet.

Wiesel too, struggles massively in the Lager to preserve his most precious bond, that with his father. They become more and more intimate as the war unfolds. From the very beginning of the memoir, the events are told through this relationship (Rosen 1318). As the war unveils its enormities, the father-son bond grows tighter but equally more problematic as Wiesel realizes that the urge for self-preservation is gaining the upper hand (Rosen 1318). He sees people around him fighting to death over a crumb of bread, he discovers that a son deliberately left behind his Rabbi father and Wiesel hopes that he will never do such a thing. Nevertheless, at the very end, Wiesel too feels relief when his father has finally ended his struggle against death. “Wiesel brings out the sense of loss all the more forcefully”, as he narrates the events that logically led to the heightening and subsequent destruction of intimacy (Rosen 1318).

This foregrounding of human relations can also be seen as an act of commemoration. Both memoirists hold on to a certain sense of humanity which is worthwhile remembering and displaying to the world. Writing about their friends and family who gave them strength is mournfully commemorating them. Thus, Levi and Wiesel can also be filed under the lamentation response. Writers of lamentation “express – sometimes directly, sometimes obliquely with understatement and restraint – their grief and heartbreak over the suffering and destruction of European Jewry” (Teichman and Leder 18). The concerns of these writers of lamentation range from criticism of God to loss, disillusionment and the necessity of remembering, all of which can be found in Night and If This Is a Man.

These two memoirs are proof that categorizing responses to the Holocaust is extremely difficult. Both works exceed pure categories and mingle different characteristics to form a wholly unique style. Wiesel’s memoir is heart-felt and modest while Levi’s is more analytical and generalizing. Both memoirs, however, are very earnest and modest and are determined to
open eyes. Nevertheless, it is doubtful whether these representations have a redemptive nature, that is to say, whether “the testimonies allow us to see, to witness, the events themselves” (Bernard-Donals and Glejzer viii). In the end, neither witness nor testimony are adequate as models of representation, since “any attempt to write the disaster, to testify, fails to redeem the events as we can know them” (Bernard-Donals and Glejzer x). They only allow us to see the events for a fleeting moment. Of course, even such brief moments of insight can set people’s minds at work, which makes these testimonies useful and necessary after all.

4. INTERGENERATIONAL TRANSMISSION

Responses to the Holocaust have not remained restricted to eyewitnesses. As years have passed, a new generation of Holocaust witnesses has emerged. This second generation has inherited the Shoah legacy involuntarily through their survivor parents. Some have discarded that legacy, while many others have sought ways to deal with their distinct inheritance meaningfully. Responses are countless and widely divergent. Some second-generation writers have incorporated traditional Jewish elements while others have adopted a wholly contemporary mode. As Alan Berger argues, the second generation has its own voices, “while the artistic responses to the Shoah are ontologically tethered to survivor testimony” (17). Although these survivor testimonies are of paramount importance, the time has come for new voices to arise in Holocaust writing.

Thane Rosenbaum and Melvin Jules Bukiet are two contemporary American writers belonging to the second generation. Bukiet’s father and both Rosenbaum’s parents survived the concentration camps. After the war, both Bukiet’s and Rosenbaum’s parents migrated to the United States where they hoped that they would be able to wipe the slate clean. However, the Holocaust was never far away. Survivor children have been marked by their parents’ experiences. For many, the Holocaust has become an irreducible part of their Jewish self-identity (Berger 1). Aaron Hass states that there is an assumption in Holocaust studies that the transmission of the pathology from survivors to their children is inevitable (25). In any case, the second generation is in a unique position as they are the continuation of their parents’ Holocaust memory.

So what do you do with this cosmic responsibility? You were born in the fifties so you smoked dope and screwed around like everyone else. But your rebellion was pretty
halfhearted, because how could you rebel against these people who endured such loss? Compared to them, what did you have to complain about? How do you deal with it? … if you were a writer, you wrote. (Bukiet 2002a:14)

Hass argues that the two major mainsprings for the second generation are guilt and anger: guilt because they have an infinitely better life than their parents and anger at the injustice done to their parents (28). Both Bukiet and Rosenbaum grapple with the unspeakable horrors committed against their parents, and they have sought an escape valve to release their problems. Yet a study of Rosenbaum’s *Elijah Visible* and Bukiet’s *After* will show how remarkably different the responses of the second generation can be. Bukiet’s novel is outrageous and shocking, while Rosenbaum’s work stays within the realm of the more “acceptable” or “traditional” second-generation response. Both writers have found a personal way of dealing with their legacy. However, although their styles may differ, they mainly want the same thing: to restore some sense of dignity and self-esteem in their parents who are marked for life, to give them an everlasting name.
T. ROSENBAUM’S  

ELIJAH VISIBLE

III THANE ROSENBAUM’S NOVEL-IN-STORIES

ELIJAH VISIBLE

Thane Rosenbaum’s mother survived Maidanek and his father escaped death from several extermination camps, including Bergen-Belsen. After meeting one another in Germany, the parents emigrated to the United States. Thane Rosenbaum was born and raised in Washington Heights, Manhattan, until the family moved to Miami Beach when Thane was nine. Tragically, Thane Rosenbaum lost both his parents within two months, his father dying from successive heart attacks and his mother from cancer. After earning a degree in public administration and in law, Rosenbaum ultimately decided that money is not everything. He gave up his previous job as a lawyer and started writing. Ever since, he has written novels, stories, essays, book reviews for numerous prestigious magazines. Next to his writing career, Rosenbaum also began teaching human rights and law, and literature. Because neither of his parents spoke about the Holocaust when Rosenbaum was a child, he views his writing as a “compensation for the years of childhood silence”. He confided this to Alan Berger, author of Children of Job: American Second-Generation Witnesses to the Holocaust (Berger 72).

1. FORMAT

Elijah Visible is the first of Rosenbaum’s literary explorations. It is a collection of nine relatively short, divergent stories. Each story evolves around Adam Posner, the single protagonist of the collection. However, the identity of Adam Posner is different in each story because details about him vary every time. In the first story Posner is a lawyer, in the second an expressionist painter, in three of the stories he is a teacher, in the last story he is a child in kindergarten. His childhood is situated in various geographical areas, from New York and Miami to Atlantic City. In all the stories, however, Adam’s parents are Holocaust survivors. This is exactly the element that binds the nine stories together. The post-Holocaust world is the basis of Rosenbaum’s trilogy of fiction, of which Elijah Visible is the first volume. Rosenbaum’s first actual novel Second Hand Smoke provides the second part, the novel The Golems of Gotham completes the trilogy. According to Janet Handler Burstein, these writings “read within the families of [Rosenbaum’s] protagonists, on their bodies and in their emotional and spiritual lives, the scars of a traumatic past” (64).
Rosenbaum has drawn on his own life for the writing of the stories in *Elijah Visible*. A child of survivors himself,

Rosenbaum explores with great intensity the special burdens of the second generation in America as he grapples artistically with the seemingly ineffable horrors committed against his parents and, more specifically, with the legacy of those horrors visited upon him. (Furman 2003: 1021)

His own experience provides him with enough subject matter to engage in a creative appropriation of the Holocaust’s continuing after-effects, more specifically its traumatic effects on survivors and their offspring. However, Rosenbaum’s book is not autobiographical in the strict sense, since the author freely draws on the imagination as well. Efraim Sicher feels that what many writings of the second generation have in common is “the breakdown of any generic boundary between fiction and autobiography” (2000: 81). Further on in the analysis, this mixing of memory and fantasy will prove problematic, however.

For the second generation, memory of the Holocaust is in fact what Marianne Hirsch has termed “postmemory”: “traces of the past transmitted unconsciously from parent to child” (Burstein 48). Since they have no direct personal experience of the Holocaust, children of survivors derive their knowledge of the event from their parents’ memories. The members of the second generation are in the position to relate and reflect on their parents’ experience as they “view the past through a longer lens”, as Margy Gerber aptly puts it. In a lecture entitled *Bridging the Gap: Genealogical Reconstruction in Recent Novels of German and Austrian Jewish Writers*, Gerber examines the international surge of “novels of family”. According to Gerber, personal identity is now more informed by heritage and genealogy than before. Not surprisingly then, the Holocaust becomes a part of that identity for families whose members have experienced the atrocities themselves. Therefore, the family histories of many Jews incorporates the painful terrain of the Shoah. These Jews realize that their identity is in part formed by a history that precedes their own time and over which they have no control. Collective memory for many of the Jewish community means that “the past lives on in their present”. Gerber believes that in this new era of post-individualism, the “probing family novel” is a major new literary trend. These novels probe into suppressed memories and emotions of the family. Writers of this kind of novel look back at their family’s past in the hope of regaining a harmonious, balanced soul.

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4 This lecture was given at the conference *Response, Remembrance, Representation: A Dialogue between Postwar Jewish Literatures*, organized by the Universities of Antwerp and Ghent on November 6-7, 2006. My information about Gerber’s ideas derives from personal attendance at that conference and from her paper abstract.
Although Gerber restricts herself to the Austrian and German Familienroman, the phenomenon is not restricted to these geographical areas. In Elijah Visible, the past comes up suddenly and unexpectedly many times, each time triggering a rush of family memories. In the second story of the volume, “Romancing the Yohrzeit Light”, “[t]he sizzle from an ignited match always revived the same memory” (15). For Adam Posner, a lighted match releases the memory of his mother lighting a candle and praying at the commencement of the Sabbath. These unconscious acts of remembrance provide some sense of continuity. For survivors, continuity of memory is not always wanted. In “Bingo by the Bungalow”, Cohen’s Summer Cottages provide a safe haven as a vacation colony, “a summer loony bin of refugees from the fallen Europe” (107). Each fall, these “crazies” would leave after their summer stay, back to their respective boroughs, grateful that they had lived through another summer. Perhaps by next year, their memories of Europe would grow dimmer. But nobody actually believed that. (120)

Nevertheless, remembering what happened to them is of great importance for generations to come. For their offspring, reconstructing the family history inevitably means “entering the often painful terrain of family members’ experience during this time” (Gerber). In “An Act of Defiance”, Adam is obsessed with learning about his parents’ past. When his uncle Haskell from Belgium, also a survivor, visits him in New York, Adam hopes to learn more about the Holocaust experience of his family. Haskell, however, believes that Adam has been immersed in Holocaust information too much. Uncle Haskell, a true bon vivant, does not want to pass on the Holocaust memory to Adam and thus nurture his nephew’s obsession with the event. To Adam’s class, Haskell does want to tell his story to help Adam’s students with their studies, “not just in Adam’s course, but in life” as well (82). Haskell then tells the class how he and his siblings lost their parents in the ghetto. For Adam too, it is the very first time he hears the story. This emotional confrontation with the survivors’ past, psychologically harmful as it may be, in fact unfreezes that past and restores continuity and remembrance. This is an exemplification of what Freud termed “working through” trauma. For Burstein, “working through” means to be able to achieve critical distance, to reconnect, to read scars (50). Remembering the past provides a first step towards mourning. Bit by bit then, the trauma, which is inherited from the parents, can be coped with and remedied. Gerber views the family novel as a great opportunity for “working through”. Adam Posner tries to fill the gaps in his genealogy by probing his family’s past and his own postmemories of the Shoah.

Summarizing, Elijah Visible can be seen as a “probing family novel”, among many other things. It is also a mix of autobiography and fiction, a fictional memoir, etc. The nine
postmodern tales are woven together into a very strong and haunting debut that engages in many of the concerns of the second-generation witnesses to the Holocaust.

2. THE AMERICAN JEWISH EXPERIENCE AND THE "NEW WAVE"

The ways in which American Jews experience their Jewish identities differs from the European Jews’ experience. After the Second World War, numerous camp survivors emigrated to the United States in pursuit of their very distinct “American dream”. The dream of survivors was mainly one of forgetting. Emigration is never an easy experience, and as John Sigal and Morton Weinfeld observe, “[o]n top of all the trials and tribulations facing any immigrant, they brought with them their own unique set of baggage, the legacy of the Holocaust” (6).

Burstein argues that postwar American Jewish culture disregarded the recent European past and its survivors (5). Jews who had emigrated to America before the Holocaust did not want to be associated with their European fellow-Jews. They were too busy assimilating and “getting and spending” (Burstein 4). Moreover, “Jewish American writers have proved especially reluctant in the wake of the Holocaust to dramatize the atrocity in their fiction” because their knowledge is basically second- or thirdhand or acquired through other cultural artefacts (Furman 2000: 59). Therefore, these writers expected to be scrutinized for the truth-value of their work and for their claim on Holocaust depiction. Many American Jews stayed at a safe distance from the event that would inevitable change their sense of Jewishness. Whereas European Jewish intellectuals began “probing into the implications of the Holocaust” relatively early, it took American Jewish fiction remarkably longer to come to terms with the catastrophe (Furman 2000: 60). Since the 1960s, however, Jewish American fiction engaging in the Holocaust has increased steadily. Soon enough the need was felt to create a tighter Jewish people again. As Burstein writes:

Despite recent scholarly arguments about the contamination of our collective memory by cynically exploitative, self-serving interest within the American Jewish community, the deeper cultural effort to diminish the felt distance between American Jews and the European past; to reconnect imaginatively, emotionally, to the Jews of Europe and what happened to them is actually in process. (5).

Since 1945, the Jewish population all over the world has changed radically. They know now how vulnerable they are. After all, they nearly faced extermination. The Shoah also makes the
chasm between Jews and other “races” bigger, which enhances a feeling of otherness. This sense of being different has indeed made Jews think about their future as a people. Jews in America feel the need to join forces with their fellows in Europe, and thus create a sense of unity and affinity.

Thane Rosenbaum first applied the term “new wave” to Jewish American writers who undertook this cultural work in the eighties and nineties (Burstein 6). Andrew Furman also noticed that “although assimilation will continue … to “Americanize” its fair share of Jews in this country”, “we are in the midst of a powerful countervailing trend towards rediscovery” and thus, reconnection (2000: 17). The members of the new wave search new ways to construct identities as they try to regain some sense of the past and Jewish culture. Both Rosenbaum and Melvin Jules Bukiet illustrate how the second generation “continues to grapple with the Holocaust in its own distinct and creative ways” (Furman 2000: 18). For contemporary Jewish American fiction writers, the Holocaust has become an unavoidable subject. With the Holocaust somewhat fading into the past, these writers know that remembrance of the event might wither as well. Furthermore, these contemporary Jews often have to guess at what happened exactly to their fellow-Jews in Europe, since eyewitnesses tend to be very reluctant to talk about their experience. Although elaborate historical information about the Shoah is on hand, “the facts alone (those “documents”) are finally not enough” (Furman 2000: 61). As a consequence, the imagination is embraced as another, new means to represent the Holocaust. As Sicher argues, “[w]itnessing through the imagination” has been seen as a legitimate way for those who were not there to approach the Holocaust” (2000: 57). As the Jewish American experience is changing, so is the literature that accompanies that experience.

However, Sicher is afraid of what might happen when the Holocaust can only be understood in an effort of the imagination (2000: 57). Today, the Holocaust is not exclusively the terrain of witnesses and historians anymore. Other media appropriate the event as well, so that it has entered popular culture in America. This “Americanization of the Holocaust” raises questions about the legitimacy and sincerity of Holocaust representations. The ways in which Jewish American writers treat the Holocaust are in many cases controversial. Some critics fear that the Holocaust will lose some of its seriousness when appropriated by the imagination. As the event is receding into the past, the imagination might take over, leaving nothing but an essentially imagined atrocity.

Appropriation of the Holocaust for all kinds of agendas means it is now likely the Holocaust will be met as a trivialized trope, as a representation of a memory or as a
memory of a memory in a twilight museum culture of simulacra and hypertext. (Sicher 2000: 58)

At least, this is what critics who stress the negative nature of this Americanization believe. Whatever the case may be, most of these representations are works of serious artists “who cannot be lightly accused of trivializing the Holocaust” (Sicher 2000: 57). In an age in which people have grown infinitely more critical, the Shoah has to be portrayed in more nuanced ways. This might shock or provoke, but it will definitely set people’s minds at work about existential matters such as human nature and evil. Contemporary works dealing with the Holocaust are essential for the prevention of the tendency to relativize the Holocaust:

The reopening of old wounds, half a century after the end of World War II, should have awakened national consciences to a full, if painful, accounting and to a re-examination of the historical record, yet public amnesia has not ended nor have racist attacks and new genocides been prevented. . . (Sicher 2000: 58)

Clearly, the work is far from over. Many writers realize this as they pick up on the event of the Shoah in their works. Although they do things differently than their eye-witness predecessors, they are equally concerned with passing on what should never be forgotten.

3. THE SECOND GENERATION

A sizeable subgenre of this new wave of Jewish American writings is that of the offspring of Holocaust survivors. The American second generation puts forward questions which may have gone unasked before. For example, “what does the tragedy of European Jewry have to do with American Jews in particular and American culture at large” (Berger 9)? Indeed, the presence of the second-generation witness and his writings confronts American Jews with the suffering of the Jews of Europe. It is now untenable to claim that the Holocaust has no effect on American non-witnesses. Jews all over the world, a people with a history of suffering and persecution, have made the Holocaust a part of who they are. The second generation is in fact a constant reminder of the event that wiped out nearly a third of the world’s Jewish population. Each of these survivor children has experienced the Holocaust in a way, as their parents pass on their Holocaust experience, consciously or not. Therefore, many of the children of Holocaust victims have felt the need to make explicit their special and inevitable relationship to the Shoah. As inheritors of the Holocaust, “they point toward a new direction
in Jewish American narrative by directly confronting the psychic legacy of the Shoah” (Parker Royal 5). Although the Shoah did not happen in their countries of birth, the event has had an enormous impact on their lives and on Jewish American identity at large.

Every “2G”, as Bukiet denotes the children of survivors, has something in common: each of their families “knows a variation of the same unhappy story” (Bukiet 2002a: 13). Yael Danieli, a clinical psychologist, similarly stresses the “commonality of core issues confronting the Holocaust survivors and their offspring” (qtd. in Berger 14). Hass has also detected common concerns:

while we may not precisely understand the transmission process from one generation to the next, we do find common motifs, sensitivities, and conflicts in this population. There is obviously a matrix, an atmosphere that has permeated the development of children of survivors. And while this atmosphere may have affected different children in different ways, I am convinced … that its influence was inescapable. (36)

Furthermore, Berger has observed that second-generation witnesses “have their own distinctive Holocaust images and ways of bearing witness that reflect their own memories”: listening to tales of survivors, lighting yahrzeit\(^5\) candles for the commemoration of the dead, pilgrimages to the European birthplaces of their parents, etc. (3). Still, the output of second-generation works is very varied in tone and content. Although all these children of survivors have their legacy in common, they differ greatly in personality and upbringing. As a consequence, the writers of the second generation have produced markedly different works.

3.1. Survivor Syndrome and its Transmission

3.1.1. The Pathology of Holocaust Survivors

Chronic anxiety, fear of renewed persecution, depression, recurring nightmares, psychosomatic disorders, anhedonia (an inability to experience pleasure), social withdrawal, fatigue, hypochondria, an inability to concentrate, irritability, a hostile and mistrustful attitude towards the world, a profound alteration of personal identity, and, in many cases, hallucinations and depersonalization…. (Hass 8)

\(^5\) “Yahrzeit” is a commemoration of the death of a member of the Jewish community, on the anniversary of his or her death. Lighting a Yahrzeit candle is one of the most common Yahrzeit practices. This is a special kind of memorial candle that is lit after dark on the evening before the anniversary and that burns for twenty-four hours. (“Yahrzeit”, About)
The list of symptoms that psychiatrist William Niederland observed in people who have survived Nazi persecutions seems endless. Others with clinical contact with concentration camp survivors have equally proclaimed the existence of a “survivor syndrome” (Hass 8). In her work *Memorial Candles: Children of the Holocaust*, Dina Wardi asserts that the primary purpose of the Nazi psychological warfare, which was the destruction of the Jewish people as a collective, was realized partly through the destruction of the identity and personality of each individual as a person and as a Jew. … Life in the camps was a protracted process of traumatization, which was intended to destroy all inner reality… . (8)

The Nazi policy had an alienating effect on all war victims and caused radical changes in their psyche. Therefore, most survivors suffered from some variety of the so-called “concentration camp syndrome” (Wardi 18). Hass rightly observes, however, that “the experiences of individual Jews during World War II varied markedly”, which makes it difficult to view Jewish survivors as a unitary phenomenon (7). Helen Epstein makes a similar observation when she says that the survivors were “perhaps the most heterogeneous group that had ever made mass migration” (qtd. in Berger 13). Some spent the whole war in hiding or living in the ghettos, others fought as partisans, while the less fortunate were sent to concentration camps or even extermination camps. Moreover, survivors’ characters and age varied, causing reactions to the Shoah to be very different as well. Because survivors vary in so many ways, generalisations about survivor pathology seem somewhat careless.

One thing seems to reoccur over and over in studies about survivors: the inability to live in a normal way, to return to the kind of life they lived before the war (Hass 9). The persecution left lasting scars. Physical wounds and numbers tattooed on victims’ arms were the most visible signs of what happened to them. The real wounds, however, lay deeper. Survivors personally experienced the extreme cruelty that a human being is capable of. As a consequence, their basic trust in humanity was irrevocably damaged. Many studies reported survivors’ difficulties to establish satisfying relationships again (Hass 9). Another thing preventing survivors to live normal lives again was their inaccessibility to feelings: “[d]uring the Holocaust, while they were experiencing the overwhelming losses and stresses and the resultant intolerable anger or fear, survivors blocked out all capacity for emotion” (Hass 9). In the aftermath of the war, survivors had problems switching on their emotions again. This “generally blunted ability to feel” was caused in part by the desire to repress and forget wartime memories (Hass 10). Also, “[o]nly psychic emptiness could continue to protect them from being flooded with feelings of loneliness that threatened their very existence” in the
post-war world (Wardi 20). This lack of emotions caused survivors to malfunction socially, which in its turn impeded their readjustment into society. This “psychic numbness” or “psychic closing off” is exemplified tellingly in Bukiet’s *After*, a novel in which most of the survivor characters have grown harsh and sceptical, bereft of any empathic qualities.

In *Elijah Visible*, Rosenbaum tries to show how instable survivor parents are. “Both the unmanned father – his physical fragility and embodiment of his damaged sense of self – and the powerful, destructive, deeply traumatized mother” testify to the difficulty of finding a balance again after the Shoah (Burstein 69). The sixth story in the collection, “Bingo by the Bungalow”, provides a good sketch of survivors’ ailments. The entire vacation colony “was filled with crazies” (107). Indeed, for outsiders the behaviour of Holocaust survivors might seem more than abnormal. Hyman Cohen, the owner of the colony, drags his leg about “as if chained to some burden no one could see” (108). This invisible burden is undoubtedly his memory of the Shoah, which he desperately wants to escape from and forget. Each of his tenants is a survivor with the same dark past. They all share the need to forget, and the need to feel safe, which is partly satisfied among their fellow-sufferers at Cohen’s:

> They were safe here – well, as safe as they would ever allow themselves to feel. There was much they could never believe in again. Faith was lost. No god. No humanity. No good place to hide. Cohen’s at least offered a refuge of shared cynicism. (108)

Cohen’s sign at the entrance reading “Leisure macht Frei” attests to this cynicism. Breathing room is extremely valuable to every one of the tenants, even the slightest sense of confinement makes them panicky. Eventually, all of the survivors want to be left alone and live a peaceful life until they die. This is exemplified once more when Artie, one of the tenants, contemplates the heart condition of Morris, Adam’s father: “[he] wondered why a man like Morris, who had suffered so much senseless pain, should not be allowed some kind of immunity from ordinary diseases, at least for a while” (115). It seems as if these survivors who have suffered such unspeakable psychic and physical pain are not allowed any reprieve. They can never return to a normal happy life, they are not even spared of “ordinary diseases”. All the tenants of Cohen’s Summer Cottages have a sense of not being totally conforming or “normal”. According to Hass’ chapter on the psychological profile of survivors, the idea of experiencing oneself as “not normal” is indeed present in many Holocaust survivors (23). They know that they are “forever scarred by their wartime experiences” as they “mourn the loss of their former selves and former lives” (Hass 23). However, studies show that survivors in general do feel that they are able to function properly, though not optimally (Hass 23).
Elijah Visible provides a somewhat different picture. Although the concept of functioning properly is relative, it seems that Adam’s parents have serious problems with readapting to society. In “Bingo by the Bungalow”, Adam’s mother Rosa is the one with the adaptation problem since her husband died of heart failure:

she stumbled over the language. She did not know the secret handshakes that seemed so natural for immigrants who came before the war. And of course there was the concern over money. … “I know from nothing except how to survive,” she pondered. In the camps she had been a saboteur, a black-market organizer, an underground operator. It took years to relearn the simple etiquette of life among the living. (110-111)

A woman so resourceful and self-sufficient in the camps seems unable to thrive in the free world after the war. After the death of her husband, Rosa fears being a widow in a land with which she is not yet acquainted. As Morris nears his death, Rosa’s sanity begins to leave her “in sympathy with her husband’s deterioration” (119). Adam realizes that his mother is not as much eccentric as she is in fact crazy, “but that’s not the kind of silent confession a child can easily allow about his mother” (107). For the outside world, Rosa is just a woman who works in a stationary store. In line with her secret goings-about in the camp, however, she has become a fervent gambler. Her gambling in Brooklyn and her bingo games during the summer at Cohen’s in Florida become compulsory activities allowing her to feel in control for a brief moment. The games, as well as the two day trip to Florida, are “all part of his mother’s therapy” (111). Adam knows this, even when he is still a child. Rosa is “overwhelmed with grief, fatigue, and persevering nightmare” and anger because of what happened to her (120). Therefore, she can never be a normal, joyful woman or parent again.

In “An Act of Defiance”, Rosenbaum presents an equally disturbing picture of Adam Posner’s father. When Adam’s uncle Haskell from Belgium, who is also a camp survivor, comes to visit, uncle and nephew discuss how to live in the aftermath. Haskell is a joyful man, cherishing every second of his life. Even at his age, about eighty, “life is filled with women, and drink, and dance” (66). Adam believes that this way of life is an attempt to forget. Haskell, however, believes that his life is an act of defiance against the Nazis. Haskell believes himself to be “an assassin to their mission”. He will not give the Nazis another victory by living unhappily for the rest of his life. Adam’s father never agreed with Haskell. He chose to live in a very different manner:

Silent suffering. A private death that travelled with him, wherever he went, a ghost always on his shoulder, whispering into his ear, not letting him eat, work, rest. We
spoke many times about this. I [Haskell] would say, ‘I survived the camps in order to live. To be like you, marchers in the army of the living dead, is a victory for the Nazis. (66)

Apparently, Adam’s father was never able to pick up a normal, satisfying life again. The trauma of the Shoah remained with him always, which caused him to be “too serious, brooding, not able to enjoy life” (62). According to Haskell, these attributes apply to Adam as well. Uncle Haskell wants to show that Adam does have a chance to live in a different way from his father, because their situation is essentially different: “[y]our father had an excuse for his suffering. What reason do you have to carry these sins around like bricks?” (62). In “The Pants in the Family” too, Adam’s father comes across as a gravely injured man. Before he became ill, he was a “solid, rough, mysterious, painfully silent” man: “[a] freak accident of history had transformed him into a superhuman” (43). But then came the “arterial sabotage”, and Adam’s father transformed into an “afflicted creature whose life accelerated in tragic bursts of deterioration” (43). Adam was confronted with his father’s vulnerability at a very young age, which is a scary experience for a child.

Because both his parents are concentration camp survivors, Adam has his own idea about what survivors are like. Seeing survivors as afflicted bearers of constant pain is part of Adam’s “own private therapy”. Before having met his uncle, Adam imagines him as “a walking ghost of horrors past” (58). This picture is soon dismissed when Adam meets the energetic, pleasure-seeking man that Haskell is. Haskell does struggle with his demons, but he does not show them to the outside world. For Adam, his uncle comes as a shock. Haskell severely upsets the picture Adam had created for himself: “[t]he Holocaust survivor as myth, as fairy tale, as bedtime story” (59). It seems as if Adam wants to believe in the pathology of survivors. Maybe it is easier to be around his parents when he believes that every survivor is equally tormented and abnormal. If he lets his imagination do the work, he has something tangible to direct his anger towards. Creating “mangled family portraits” from memories that are not his is a way of justifying his own manner of living. Shamelessly, he can wallow in self-pity for what his parents have made him into. In “An Act of Defiance”, this allows him to be a tormented, worrying man who is obsessed with the Holocaust. Haskell tries to show that Adam in fact does have a choice. The legacy of the Holocaust does not necessarily have to be a cursed burden. Through Haskell, Rosenbaum “complicates our perception of the Holocaust survivor as silent sufferer” (Furman 2000: 69).
3.1.2. Transmission of the Trauma

Children of survivors bear marks of their parents’ horrendous past. Survivor households can be very various. Danieli distinguishes “victim families, fighter families, numb families and families of those who made it” (qtd. in Berger 14). Each of these types of survivor families has its own way of dealing with the memory of the Holocaust. Also, each “has a particular postwar home atmosphere that impacts profoundly on the identity and worldview of the second generation” (Berger 14). The way survivor parents perceive themselves has a definite impact on their children. Victim and numb families tend to be silent about the Shoah past whereas fighter families are more concerned with recounting the stories of the Holocaust (Berger 14). No child of survivors is likely to have ever heard the complete story of his parents’ experiences. Whether they were traumatized or wanted to protect their children “from knowledge of the tree of evil”, survivors always left gaps in their stories (Bukiet 2002a: 14).

Whatever family they might be from, second-generation witnesses to the Holocaust all knew that something in their homes was out of the ordinary:

The Second Generation will never know what the First Generation does in its bones, but what the Second Generation knows better than anyone else is the First Generation. Other kids’ parents didn’t have numbers on their arms. Other kids’ parents didn’t talk about massacres as easily as baseball. Other kids’ parents had parents. (Bukiet 2002a: 14)

Although this talking about massacres was not the case in every family, there were always clues pointing towards the tragedy of the Holocaust. Tensions of all kinds were present in many survivors’ homes. When parents walk around with depressions and anxieties, children inevitably notice their unease. Also, when survivors have problems with social relations, this will affect the way in which they deal with their children as well.

As will be seen in Elijah Visible, survivor children often echo problematic themes of survivors (Hass 26). In “An Act of Defiance”, Adam Posner has become obsessed with the Holocaust. He has taken the full burden of the Shoah upon him and is weighted down by it. Survivor child Bernice Eisenstein in her memoir I Was a Child of Holocaust Survivors similarly describes the Holocaust as a drug, an addiction: “the craving is there, it is always there. I’m tied to it” (23). Adam’s capability to acknowledge delight is practically non-existent because he worries constantly. Uncle Haskell wants to “fix” Adam’s life by making him realize that he should not feel guilty for living a happy life. Adam believes that he has no choice: “[i]t’s called legacy. The Holocaust survivor in me was passed on through the genes.
Who knows how many generations it will take to cancel the virus from our blood?” (63). For the second generation, the Holocaust is an inheritance, something that inevitably determines who they are. *Elijah Visible* explores the process of transmission of the Holocaust between generations: “Adam Posner believes that his legacy is transmitted genetically … the children of Job [the children of survivors] are biologically informed about their patrimony” (Berger 80):

It was unavoidable. The legacy that flowed through his veins. Parental reminiscences had become the genetic material that was to be passed on by survivors to their children. … Adam had often heard the screams of his parents at night. Their own terrible visions from a haunted past became his. He had inherited their perceptions of space, and the knowledge of how much one needs to live, to hide, how to breathe where there is no air. (5)

Adam Posner contemplates his legacy many times. He firmly believes that he is determined by the Shoah.

Life has been very strange for the second generation. As Bukiet argues, the most important event of their lives occurred before they were even born and thus, for them, “[i]n the beginning was Auschwitz” (2002a: 13). All the second generation knows is that they have received “a tainted inheritance, secondhand knowledge of the worst event in history” and that their knowledge too, is just part of the story, since the books in the “library of the deceased” are not accessible to us (Bukiet 2002a: 18). However wanted or not, their legacy forces the second generation to find meaningful ways of dealing with the Shoah, to which they are tied personally.

### 3.2. Over-Identification with the Survivors

Sometimes, children of survivors tend to make their parents’ suffering their own. Sadly, life becomes almost intolerable for these afflicted children. One of Aaron Hass’ interviewees who has adopted the role of victim relates how that affects his life:

I think that I bought into the image of being easily victimized. This has undoubtedly affected my self-confidence. A victim’s mentality\(^6\) sometimes causes me to quit before I’ve started. … Bad things happened to my family, so why shouldn’t they happen to

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\(^6\) My emphasis
me? … I identify with [my mother’s] losses. I have a sense that I will always lose ….

(41)

For some second-generation Holocaust witnesses the transference of survivor pathology is driven to the extreme. Sicher notices this phenomenon in non-survivor children’s search for Jewish identity as well: “[t]here is, alongside authentic identity rooted in Judaism and practice of its living tradition, a tendency to internalize the status of victim and create an alternate Jewishness out of a legacy of suffering …” (2000: 62). Furman speaks of this identification with Hitler’s victims as a “cult of victimhood” (2000: 72). This again shows the enormous and ongoing impact of the Holocaust in the post-war world.

In *Elijah Visible*, the stories each treat the transference of survivor suffering differently. Although the stories share some themes and concerns, they are very diverse. Not only the exterior traits of Adam Posner are different each time, such as his profession or his parent’s names, the way in which he deals with his Shoah legacy also differs from chapter to chapter. Burstein argues that Adam Posner is broken into different personae in each chapter, “like light passing through a prism” (64). Similarly, Furman posits that “Rosenbaum creates a mosaic figure to capture the complex, nuanced, and, above all, fractured existence of the Holocaust survivor’s child in America” (2000: 64). Understandably then, Adam’s second-generation response “ranges from denial to overidentification in different experiences of a post-Holocaust American Adam” (Sicher 2000: 66).

The most striking instance of Posner’s Holocaust-determined life is the collection’s first, widely anthologized, story “Cattle Car Complex”: the story “illustrates the power of the Shoah in the unconscious life of the second-generation” (Berger 80). In this story, Posner is a lawyer. He detests the job and his colleagues but joined “whatever club offered him the privilege of membership” (4). Above all, he wants to feel safe, and life as a lawyer seems to guarantee that safety. His craving for safety makes Adam “painfully aware of his own legacy, and its contribution to the choices he was destined to make” (4). His Holocaust inheritance has made the important decisions. As Furman argues, the opening story shows “that the past, specifically the Holocaust experiences of Posner’s parents, bears down heavily on this American Adam” (2000: 64). The Holocaust has prevented Adam from making independent choices and forming meaningful relationships. Just like his parents, Adam has been unable to live a satisfactory life because of the Shoah. After he has been working late at the law firm one night, Adam has to take the elevator downstairs alone. The elevator breaks down and whatever Posner tries to do, the “car remained inert” (3). In the elevator, Posner is overwhelmed by claustrophobia and “he suffers a psychological trauma that exemplifies the
presence of the Holocaust in his life” (Furman 2000: 65). In this story, the “unmastered parental past overtakes a child of the second generation”, as the “sealed space in which he is stalled fills with the sights, sounds, and smells of the cattle car that took his parents to Auschwitz” (Burstein 64). Adam imagines himself to be in a cattle car, takes the Irish security guard to be a German, and believes a Russian taxi driver to be the allied forces. The story shows how much Adam Posner has internalized his parents’ suffering: “he does not suffer for his parents, but assimilates their suffering into his own experience” (Furman 2000: 65). Adam Posner has become obsessed with the Holocaust to the point of victimizing himself. For Adam the lawyer, the Holocaust experience is in his genes and allows no reprieve. In Spiegelman’s second volume of Maus, namely And Here my Troubles Began, Art has a similar experience of appropriating his parents’ suffering. He recounts how he fantasized as a child that Zyklon B was coming out of his shower instead of water (16):

I know this is insane, but I somehow wish I had been in Auschwitz with my parents so I could really know what they lived through! … I guess it’s some kind of guilt about having had an easier life than they did. Sigh. I feel so inadequate trying to reconstruct a reality that was worse than my darkest dreams. (16)

Adam Posner is clearly not the only child of survivors who has trouble separating his own suffering from that of his parents. Although he is inevitably linked to their past suffering, his own troubles are of a very different nature and origin. His problems are relational, epistemological and less tangible than those of his parents.

In “An Act of Defiance”, Adam Posner again has difficulty separating his parents’ experience from his own. He has adopted his father’s outlook on the world. His life is determined by the Nazis, decades after the Second World War. For Adam, everything is a struggle against the Nazis. He does not wear a watch or attend to his class on time because punctuality “is the plaything of barbarians”. The barbarians are the bureaucratic, rule-loving Nazis: “I don’t wish to honor the obsessions of murderers with my timely presence” (60). Moreover, Adam idolizes justice because of the pervert injustice done to his family: “[r]ighting an injustice. Championing the oppressed. Fighting off the bully. Second nature called, urging me forward, as though my father’s ghost lurked somewhere in the trees at the north end of Central Park” (75). Many of his ideals and values derive from his second-hand Holocaust experience. He uses the Holocaust to justify his behaviour. He believes that his father posthumously urges him to fight for the Jewish cause. Uncle Haskell has come from Belgium to make Adam realize that he should not let the Shoah determine his life. Haskell shows that even survivors can chose how they live. Just like Adam, Haskell wants to continue
resisting the Nazis, but how he resists differs greatly. His is a silent revolt, while Adam cries out his anger to whoever wants to hear it. By living joyfully, Haskell succeeds in denying the Nazis one last victory. Haskell shows that the Nazis have not beaten his morale and his human spirit. Adam’s pronounced anger does not harm anyone but himself. The Nazis would have liked to see that they succeeded in destroying the lives of later generations of Jews. It is only through Haskell that Adam can learn that there is more to his life than his Holocaust legacy. As Burstein puts it, “Adam cannot mourn because he can neither connect nor disentangle his own malaise from his parents’ past” (65). Throughout the novel, efforts are made to “reconstruct the personal past” with the goal of differentiating “the child’s experience and memories from those of his parents” (Burstein 67). Adam will need to come to terms with his personal identity before he can reconnect with his parents posthumously.

That Adam Posner sometimes has a hard time connecting his own malaise to his parents’ past as well, is exemplified in “Romancing the Yohrzeit Light”. In this story, the reader is presented with a picture of denial instead of immersion in the Holocaust legacy. Adam the artist has grown accustomed to blasphemy as he treats synagogues as “virtual leper colonies … to be avoided at all cost” (17). He never celebrated any Jewish holidays and “ate all manner of spineless fish, and the commingled flesh of unhoofed animals” (17). Most importantly, however, his taste in women does not reveal his religious origins as recently “he had fallen in love with yet another in an unending series of Gentile women” (17). This shattered the hopes of his mother that her son would one day find a nice Jewish girl. On top of everything, he does not look Jewish either. He has long blond hair, large blue eyes and a small and impractical nose which makes him far from “the more typical Hebrew violinist or plastic surgeon” (18). His art is not particularly Jewish-oriented either. Nothing about himself reminds Adam of his people and his heritage. His mother denounces his paganisms, although according to Furman, she does not encourage Adam’s identification with the Holocaust (2000: 71). On the first anniversary of his mother’s death, “a curious exigence to commemorate his mother in a religiously meaningful way” wars against “Posner’s religious alienation” (Furman 2000: 70). For the first time in his life, Adam wants to buy a yahrzeit candle. He wants to do honour to his mother and follow the Jewish way of mourning: “he abides self-consciously by one meaningful Jewish ritual to alleviate some of his pain following his mother’s death” (Furman 2000: 73). However, he faces many trials and tribulations. He has to search for a yahrzeit candle in a night shop, one match after the others fails to ignite, Adam does not know the prayers accompanying such an act of mourning, and on top of it all, his Swedish girlfriend Tasha turns up. They have not yet “consummated their relationship” because Tasha wants to
wait until the mood hits her. Coincidentally, she announces to Adam that the wait is over on the same night that he is commemorating his mother Esther. He knows that he “owed something to Esther’s memory” but he is faced with “a Swedish smorgasbord of temptation, juxtaposed with a paltry three ounces of scrupulous wax” (30). He cannot resist the temptation of his tipsy girlfriend. Although he knows that the yahrzeit flame “was to remain undisturbed”, he allows Tasha to extinguish the candle. After years of denial, Adam’s “first attempt as an adult to reconnect with his Jewish heritage” fails (Furman 2000: 73). The initially hopeful prospects of reconnection are disturbed by Posner’s sexual impulses. His art reflects his personal development. Adam has great difficulty accepting his mother’s death, which is apparent in his work: “angry expressionistic images … monstrous apocalyptic shapes and physical dimensions … and the representational images, well … they depicted burnings, famines, sicknesses, nightmares – devastations of one sort or another” (23). After having purchased a yahrzeit candle, he paints portraits of his mother, of Tasha, even of himself in warm, bright colours. This reveals a more positive outlook on the world and actual hope of restoring affinity with the self and with lineage. For Adam, the work of identifying with his mother has just begun, a work which is disturbed when the act of mourning is interrupted. Now, he wonders again: “where was his home?” (32).

In the different stories, Adam wavers between over-identification with and denial of his parents’ suffering. He will need to find some balance between these two poles, separating his own experience from that of his parents without denying that their war experiences have had great impact on him. Only then will he achieve some distance and will he be able to start the work of mourning.

3.3. Survivor-Child Communication

For survivors, talking about the Shoah was extremely difficult. First of all, the event was perceived by many as being too traumatizing and enormous to put into words. Secondly, many desperately wanted to forget, and talking about the experience would not serve that cause. Thirdly, as Levi and Wiesel testify, there was the fear that their horrendous stories would not be believed. As Uncle Haskell says in “An Act of Defiance”: “[w]hat to say? Where to begin? Who would believe?” (82). These inhibitions caused many survivors to keep silent on the subject of the Shoah. Towards their children, many camp victims held on to this silence because they felt that telling their children would not do anyone any good. They
wanted to protect themselves from raking up such painful memories. Their protectiveness was also directed towards their children, whom they wanted to preserve from hearing stories of such unthought-of cruelty: “[t]he memories are too painful, the truth too horrific for words. Besides, why burden the next generation with such stories?” (Furman 2000: 67). Neither Rosenbaum’s mother nor his father ever spoke about the Holocaust when he was a child. As Rosenbaum views his works as a compensation for this silence, he is concerned with portraying what this atmosphere of secrecy does to a child.

Although many survivor parents carefully avoided the subject of their wartime past, “children of survivors appear to know that “something terrible” has happened to their parents” (Berger 11). Hass similarly argues that:

"Despite the fact that most children of survivors were not well acquainted with their parents’ lives during the Holocaust, all had a sense of being aware, from a very early age, that they were, indeed, children of survivors. (69)"

In “Bingo by the Bungalow”, Adam is aware at a very young age that his mother is afflicted. He also realizes that he should not ask her any questions about their uncomfortable Greyhound bus trips to the South because he knows that it is some kind of medicine for her. Although Adam may be aware that his parents are not completely “normal”, he is, however, “too young to understand” (120). That a survivor child like Adam Posner should sense that something essential is kept from him seems almost self-evident. The peculiar behaviour that his parents display at times is bound to raise suspicion.

Rosenbaum is very concerned with depicting the estrangement between the survivor parent and the second-generation child. Adam Posner never hears the complete story of his parents. Other relatives as well, are reluctant to tell the story. Uncle Haskell, for instance, believes that it will do Adam no good to hear more about the Holocaust, since his nephew is already so immersed in it. In “Romancing the Yohrzeit Light”, Adam’s mother Esther reproaches him for never painting anything Jewish. Adam replies that that is just not what he does: “I know nothing about the shtetls. Never been to that part of the world” (24). Implicitly, he is blaming his mother for never telling him about her pre-war European life. Although he tells her that he is not really interested, he does experience a feeling of being lost. When his to-be girlfriend tells Adam that she feels lost in New York, Adam answers: “[s]o do I” (19). Because he has no extended family and family history, he feels disconnected from his roots. When his Swedish girlfriend says that decorating a Christmas tree makes her feel at home, Adam wonders quietly where his home is. Communication with his parents could have restored that sense of origin.
In “The Pants in the Family”, Adam’s parents are equally reluctant to share their stories with him:

It was always such an impenetrable secret – my parents, speaking in code, changing the passwords repeatedly, keeping me off the scent. And he [Adam’s father] was always so ill. There was never the occasion to catch them off guard, ask the big questions, holding out for something other than that familiar silence. (48)

Tragically, Adam has to figure out everything for himself. He has to create his own image of what made his parents who they are. As a child, Adam had “decoded some whispers about an Elka”, who must have been the first wife of Adam’s father (44). The woman was murdered by the Nazis and that fact was painstakingly kept a secret. This attitude of secrecy creates relational problems. For Adam, it is almost impossible to try to understand his parents when he knows almost nothing about the event that so radically changed their lives. Adam’s parents, on the other hand, were always on their guard not to let anything slip from their mouths. Moreover, they could never be themselves because they felt that they had to conceal a pivotal part of their identity. Because neither Adam nor his parents feel truly at ease, the relational dynamic becomes distorted. Because neither Adam nor his parents feel truly at ease, the relational dynamic becomes distorted. As exemplified in “The Pants in the Family”, a lack of or poor communication is the main reason why the relationships do not run smoothly. As Furman observes, “Rosenbaum focuses … not so much on the father’s physical and psychological trauma as on Adam’s continual struggle to penetrate the mystery of his father’s agony” (2000: 67). Adam feels helpless and frustrated with curiosity (Furman 2000: 67).

Rosenbaum elaborately addresses this issue of parental silence, which he experienced himself. In “Elijah Visible”, too, Adam suffers from his parents’ secrecy. Moreover, his second-generation cousins all experienced the same as their parents “were related not just in blood, but also in experience, in memory”:

There was a calculated silence in all things associated with the past. … there was a conscious avoidance of bringing together those who knew, who had been there, with those of the next generation, who were witnesses to nothing but the silences, and the screams. (95)

Although their parents all bear the same suffering, they “were often at war with one another” (95). Strangely, these survivors worried about banalities such as lent money although they had met with far greater difficulties in the past. Obviously, communication was already hampered between the first-generation survivors. Now, their children seem to make the same mistakes as they are fixated on the former feuds between their parents. Cousin Artur, a jeweller from Antwerp who also survived the camps, wishes to meet his cousins: “[I]o see you. To know
you. To tell you, in person, our family history. Your children should know what happened. They must continue to remind the world” (97). He wants them to learn some lessons from their parents’ collective past. None of the cousins is prepared to welcome him, however. They are suspicious that Artur is just “trying to sponge a trip to America” from them. When Adam considers that maybe Artur just “wants to restore some honor to this family”, the others are not prepared to look beyond the fact that Artur owed money to their father (98). Adam’s nieces are determined to continue the battles that their father fought, overlooking the possibility of restoring some durable family bond. Adam is the only one who realizes the urgency of remembering the family stories: “[o]ur parents concealed everything from us. Too much guilt, I guess. Too much regret. We can’t afford to do that again. We owe it to the children, to ourselves – there is too much at stake” (102).

In “The Pants in the Family”, too, efforts are made to restore communication between the first and second generation. Adam is constantly in search of vulnerable moments to pop some of his most burning questions. A good moment for him is: “[f]ather to son. Man to man. Heart to weakened heart” (48). Now that his father is ill, it might be easier to catch him off guard. Indeed, as his father “nears his own death, he becomes more communicative with his son and regrets having imposed a silent childhood on him” (Furman 2000: 68). His father wants to redeem his errors after he has heard the terrible news concerning his wife, who is diagnosed with cancer: “[a]ll these years I haven’t been a father to you – too sick to do any good … now, all of a sudden – after such a day – you need me” (46). The tragic fact is, however, that Adam has always needed his father but never thought of him as a person to build upon. His childhood had been “a fatherless upbringing”, although there was a father (43). Now, finally, the ice seems to melt a bit between father and son as they grow closer after the death of Adam’s mother. However, Adam’s father still does not understand why his son wants to know about the past (Furman 2000: 68). This problematic is present in other second-generation works as well. In *Maus I, My Father Bleeds History*, Artie wants to hear all about his father’s past in order to compose a comic book about it. His father tells him: “better you should spend your time to make drawings what will bring you some money” (12). His father does not realize that Artie wants to hear the stories for himself, and not in the first place to make a living out of them. Artie’s father Vladek, however, is much more comfortable with talking than Adam Posner’s father. Posner’s father needs more time to unfreeze but eventually he does talk:

> Although we readers sense that certain experiences will remain forever inscrutable, Adam’s father realizes an emotional connection with his son by piercing the silence
that had defined their relationship. Before he dies, he exposes his heart to his son, who embraces it symbolically as he clutches his father’s nitroglycerin pills. … Adam’s father bridges the chasm between himself and the son he initially abandoned … (Furman 2000: 68)

At a certain point, Adam’s father invites Adam to ask him whatever he wants to know, to which Adam asks if the moratorium has worn off yet (50). His father does not know but he is willing to give it a try. As Adam asks one question on top of the other, his father wants to slow down a bit. He is still not convinced that hearing these horrendous stories will help his son. He argues that Adam thinks he needs to know but he wonders what mystery that will answer (51). On the whole, however, a better balance is found in the parent-son relationship. After the death of Adam’s mother, father and son would hang up the phone by saying “I love you”, which would have been “an unheard-of sentimental exchange” before her death (48). As Adam realizes: “suddenly an altogether new pattern of relations evolved” (48).

In “An Act of Defiance”, the problem of communicating is also brought up as “Rosenbaum further contemplates the bridges that can and cannot be crossed” (Furman 2000: 68). Here, it is not the parents who want to re-establish the bond with their child. Adam Posner is now an adult orphan, with no near-relatives in sight. It is his uncle Haskell who wants to bridge the gap between the first- and second-generation witnesses. Adam is a teacher on the Holocaust, which shows his great interest in the subject. In fact, his interest may exceed the boundary of what is healthy: “he was surrounded by bookshelves, not an empty space to be found … The historians, philosophers, the psychologists, the theologians, the novelists, the poets, the playwrights – all had appropriated the Holocaust” (65). However, personal first-hand knowledge of his parents’ experiences is lacking from his collection:

As much as he strives to learn about the Holocaust experience, he knows that it will always remain a product of his imagination, which continually reinvents and revises his parents’ European lives. “My imagination,” he reflects, “had done all the work – invented suffering, without the physical scars, the incontestable proof” (59). (Furman 2000: 68)

Adam feels that he has to turn to his imagination to make the picture complete. Although Haskell is essentially against nourishing his nephew’s hunger for the Holocaust, he does agree to visit Adam’s class. Unannounced, Adam presents him as a guest lecturer with very special acquaintance with the course matter. Haskell confronts the class with some of the horrid truths surrounding his family’s Holocaust experience. Haskell narrates how Adam’s grandparents were brutally murdered in the ghetto because their son, Adam’s father, had smuggled guns
into their flat. Because, like his students, Adam has never heard the story before, he remains speechless afterwards, contemplating that there was more to the mystery of his silent father than he had dared realize (85). Horrid as the story may be, it does present a major breakthrough in intergenerational communication as a “period can replace one of the many ellipses of Adam’s imagination, offering him, one hopes, a modicum of peace” (Furman 2000: 70). This restoring of communication is a first step towards durable remembrance of the Holocaust legacy. Moreover, only through transmission of the family’s stories can a sense of origin be re-established.

3.4. Flawed Parenting

Although no parent is perfect, concentration camp survivors seem particularly unfit to raise a child. According to Berger, flawed parenting is a key second-generation concern (80). Many survivors were unable to mourn their losses adequately, others fought against an irreversible inferiority-complex, most survivors experienced what was later termed “survivor guilt” because they survived and left numerous others behind helplessly, etc. Survivors carried with them a heavy psychological baggage, which they could only try to conceal from the outside world. It was much harder to conceal their agony from their children. Tensions of all kinds were generally greater in survivor households and many children of survivors knew that they had to be on their guard. Aaron Hass has observed two divergent tendencies in the way in which survivors handle their children:

Survivors evidence a wide range of involvement in their children’s lives. On the one extreme is exaggerated attachment, excessive hovering, and vicarious participation in their offspring’s developmental milestones and crises. On the other hand, some survivors are emotionally unavailable to their children, preoccupied with their continuous mourning process, coping with what they perceive to be seriously depleted physical and psychological reserves. (54)

Rosenbaum has put some of both approaches in his stories. In the last story of Elijah Visible, “The Little Blue Snowman of Washington Heights”, Adam is a child in Kindergarten. Adam is a very constrained, suspicious young boy who has been raised according to very strange “methods of tutoring”. He was taught to always be strong, to look out for the bad men, whoever they were. His parents even taught him what to do and whom to call if something bad happened to them because they were so sure of their imminent deaths. Adam learned
some of life’s hardest lessons when he was much too young. Therefore, Adam is not what one would call a joyous child. The nurse of the school tells Adam’s teacher that the kid is the strangest thing she has ever seen: “[t]he parents have turned this poor little boy into a concentration camp survivor, and he wasn’t even in the camps! You’d think they’d want to spare him all that” (200). However, the Posners did not spare their boy their gruesome stories. Adam knows but he is sworn to secrecy. The boy is terribly anxious, “willing to do anything to distract himself from those yelping demons inside” (202). His problem is not so much too little parental involvement, quite the contrary, “here there was simply too much – of everything” (201). Adam’s parents have transferred all their anxieties, fears and inhibitions onto their child. In their struggle to make him strong, they have forgotten to make him feel safe and warm. Constantly testing his survival skills, his parents failed to teach him how to be young and joyful. They ignore the fact that Adam is still a boy, too young for their harsh truths: “the child, bound by their as yet unread scars to his own ordeal, still too young to understand or to take up the work of mourning” (Burstein 68). The story exemplifies how survivors often “displayed an acute lack of empathy for their children’s problems and emotional needs” (Hass 61). Adam’s parents’ over-involvement concerns his exterior, material life rather than his psychological well-being.

A very similar method of upbringing is described in Rosenbaum’s debut novel Second Hand Smoke. Mila, a survivor mother, is unable to raise her second son Duncan lovingly because she is “guilt ridden over her abuse and abandonment of an infant son she conceived just after the war” (Furman 2000: 77). Instead of offering him love and affection, Mila spurs Duncan to learn karate, get into street fights and go on survival training: “we invest in you,” Mila said, her eyes burning a scar right into the soul of her son. “You must avenge our deaths” (32). Mila, too, forgets that a child above all needs emotional involvement. Instead, she “trains” her child to protect himself and to become an avenger of their shattered lives (Furman 2000: 77).

In “Lost, in a Sense”, Adam is overrun by warnings and cautions not to trust anyone, as his parents’ “litany of precautions abounded” (170). Importantly, here Adam’s parents do realize that there are limits to their parenting, which has been “shaped and defined within the dark side of man’s crudest hour” (170). Unless there is an impending war, Adam’s mother and father are essentially unfit parents (170).

In “The Pants in the Family”, Adam’s father realizes what an inadequate parent he is:

Nothing I tell you will change the fact that I could never have been a normal father. I came to you with a heart filled filled with loss. Not the best credentials for a parent. Maybe I
had no right to have a child in the first place. … I was lost, and then I gave it to you. (51)

This story also exemplifies another second-generation concern, namely role reversal in the parent-child relationship. Studies have shown that “many children of survivors acted as caretakers to their parents” (Hass 61). Survivors are often emotionally distressed to the extent that their children have to care for them instead of the other way round. Many survivor children want to keep their parents far away from any difficulties, because they feel that their parents have been through enough already. When, In “The Pants in the Family”, a doctor comes with news about Adam’s mother, Adam does not hesitate to present himself as Mr. Posner because he knows that his father is not capable of hearing bad news. The task of talking to the doctor falls to Adam and the “obligations of fatherhood passed on to the son before either had the chance to settle into their more conventional assignments” (40). Adam is like a parent to his father when he is trying to shield him from any more pain and anxiety.

However, for the outside world, Adam’s claims to parenthood are sorely unconvincing as the “mister” in him “was there – nurtured by an accelerated childhood” – but the outward appearance of adolescence betrayed all other sources of development” (40). Issues of upbringing are anything but straightforward in survivor homes.

In “Bingo by the Bungalow”, parental overprotectiveness takes on even greater proportions as raising Adam becomes a communal affair in Cohen’s summer village. Because he is the only child at the colony,

The refugees in the colony sense that Adam misses guidance and protection from his father and thus take on some of the parental tasks themselves. All of them, including Adam’s father Morris, are very sensitive to problems. Morris was “perpetually on guard, expecting the worst” (118). When Adam hurts his wrist during a game of catch, everyone rushes out because they intuitively sense that something is wrong. This shows that Jews, especially survivors, are a “people … sensitive to rescue”, driven by “the urgency to protect one of their fragile own” (118). Understandably, when a child is raised in the way that Adam is, it is

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7 My emphasis
bound to be unstable. When it is taught that danger is everywhere, it will be incurably anxious and nervous. When one looks more closely at survivors’ ways of raising children, it is not surprising that some of the survivor pathology is transmitted so easily onto the next generation. The second generation can indeed come to feel that their Holocaust legacy is genetically determined if that legacy is so all-determining in their parents’ lives.

If these survivors were so unfit to be parents and often knew this themselves, why did they want to have children anyway? Maybe it would have been wiser if these trauma-bearers chose not to procreate. The truth is that many survivors saw children as a possible means of re-living the joyful life they never had. As many survivors lost all hope for a nice life in the aftermath, they chose to focus all their attention on creating a next generation that would keep their people alive. Maybe reproducing oneself was also a last act of defiance for survivors. Bukiet knows how it feels to be given a distinct “cosmic responsibility” by parents: “[o]ther kids’ parents loved them, but never gazed at their offspring as miracles in the flesh. Most of us weren’t born in mangers, but we might as well have been. Other kids weren’t considered a retroactive victory over tyranny and genocide” (2002a: 14). Hass has interviewed several survivor children who had similar feelings of responsibility. One of them spoke of the pressures he experienced in the following way: “I have a tremendous need to succeed. I feel like I always have to prove myself. My parents had to kvell (shake with pride). They were always speaking of other children of survivors and compared them with me” (41). Children of survivors often embody their parents’ hopes for the future.

Psychotherapist Dina Wardi has also explored the intensity of survivor parents’ expectations towards their children: the “little children were given the role of lifesavers for the confused souls of their parents” (27). The children had to provide meaning to their parents’ lives. Tragically, however, “[t]hey were not perceived as separate individuals but as symbols of everything the parents had lost in the course of their lives” (Wardi 27). Survivor parents believed, or desperately desired, “that [their children] would infuse content into their empty lives and serve as a compensation and a substitute for their relatives who had perished, their communities that had been wiped out and even for their own previous lives” (Wardi 27). Therefore, Wardi designates children of survivors as “memorial candles”. Typically, only one child of the family, most often a girl, was burdened with this role of “memorial candle” (Wardi 31).

In Elijah Visible, the theme of survivors’ expectations towards their children is touched upon several times. Since Adam is the only child at Cohen’s Summer Cottages, all
the refugees see him as the embodiment of their hope for the future in “Bingo by the Bungalow”:

One generation removed from the awful legacy, he was their uncorrupted hope, the promise of a life unburdened by nightmare and guilt. Such a delicate compromise they were all forced to accept; all so aware of life’s cruellest impulses, and yet they so desperately wanted to trust in the possibility of their renewal. (115-116)

Because he represents their hopes and dreams, the renters at Cohen’s are overly protective of Adam. They fear that they would have to “start all over, amend their expectations” if something happened to Adam (116). For these troubled survivors, Adam is the only member of the community who can ensure continuity. He is perceived as a substitute for the survivors’ lost youth and innocence. In a way, Adam is the “memorial candle” for the entire community.

In “The Rabbi Double-faults”, Adam’s congregation is introduced with the twin brother of their Rabbi. This brother, Joseph Rose, is also a Rabbi, who lives in Tel Aviv. When he meets Rabbi Rose at a tennis match, Adam tells him that his parents were in the camps too, just like Rabbi Rose himself. Rabbi Rose can imagine what a strain this must put on Adam: “[i]t must be difficult to be their son. You are their one hope, their answer to the world. They are living through you. A difficult burden for a young boy, I’m sure” (144). Adam answers that he has never thought of the matter that way. He only knows that they are very nervous and scared and that it is hard to feel safe around them (144). He does realize that his parents are “not like other parents” but he has not really considered where that puts him as their child. Apparently, he does not feel that he presents his parents’ greatest expectations, although this is the case. As Furman observes, “[t]he name Adam suggest rebirth and regeneration, and throughout the collection, Rosenbaum scrutinizes the possibility of such continuity” (2000: 64). Adam has to take on the burden of his “unwanted legacy”, and thus reconstruct and remember his survivor parents’ experiences, while also fulfilling their expectations by making his life as significant as possible.

3.5. Maintaining Religious Faith

Second-generation writers raise doubts about the existence of divine authority – placing redemptive work, instead, into the human hands of writers. … As these works probe the absence (or impotence? or withdrawal?) of a transcendent power who might render meaningful
Jewish suffering and loss in the Holocaust, they raise the possibility of disconnection from the spiritual posture of our ancient sources. (Burstein 11)

For camp survivors, it was impossible to hold on to Jewish religion in its pre-Holocaust form. Understandably, their children adopt some of their spiritual doubts. In America, the second generation is also confronted with very different religions than their own. Therefore, the need to assimilate has caused these children to experience their religion differently. Berger observes that many second-generation children feel that their Jewishness marginalizes them while they also have a heightened sense of commitment to that Jewish identity (20). Second-generation artists give shape to a very specific post-Holocaust genre that incorporates both the American and the Jewish part of their identity (Berger 20). The religious doubt that is so present in first-generation memoirs like Wiesel’s, is not yet resolved in the minds and works of the second generation: “[o]nly a handful of subjects found their faith completely intact, unshaken by the events of the Holocaust” (Hass 151). However, few resolutely denounced Judaism. The second generation does not put the blame exclusively on God. They are the first to wonder not only where God was during the Holocaust, but also: “[w]here was man? (Hass 149). Rosenbaum has tried to capture the religious doubts of the second generation in his depiction of how Adam’s personae experience Judaism.

In “Cattle Car Complex”, Adam has not yet reached the stage of scepticism towards humankind as he contemplates the voice of God, which was “[s]o silent at Auschwitz” (7). For him, God is still the easiest scapegoat. He has not yet found a personal way of addressing religion. Before he can achieve this, Adam will have to realize that Judaism can and must be detached from the Holocaust.

Americanization plays a crucial role in Adam’s life. He is born in America and assimilates to the country’s modern way of life:

Rosenbaum’s work also explores the corrosive effects of modernity on Judaism. Post-Holocaust Jewish life in America teeters on the edge of oblivion. The attenuation of the tradition is seen in a variety of ways: the loss of God; ignorance of Hebrew; and not knowing how to pray. However … the author links bearing second-generation witness to the revitalization of Judaism. (Berger 81).

In “Romancing the Yahrzeit Light”, Adam is completely alienated from his religion. He never follows any Jewish rituals although his mother “had raised him in an Americanized kosher home” (17). Within the threshold, there was observance, while outside of it there was “nutritional anarchy” (17). After the death of his mother, Adam slackens “the already compromised routine well beyond the acceptable limits” (17). When Adam finally wants to
pick up the thread again and commemorate his mother’s death in the prescribed Jewish way, his Swedish girlfriend spoils it all. Adam does not have the strength to resist her. He even allows her to bring a Christmas tree into his flat and just repeats to himself “she’s so gorgeous, in rhapsodic justification” (32). Toward the end of the story, Judaism seems irretrievably lost after some initial hope of commemoration and renewal (Furman 2000: 73).

In “The Pants in the Family”, both Adam and his father have forgotten how to pray or how to speak Hebrew, because they have been too busy trying to shape their lives according to American culture. Only when they find out that Adam’s mother has cancer, father and son go to a little shul to address God. Adam’s father knows only to roar “like a wounded lion”. This shout is a protest, but “one that comes from within Judaism” (Berger 81). The Posners search for a meaningful way to reconnect with their religious roots.

In the title story, “Elijah Visible”, the waning of religious observance is one of the central themes, although Rosenbaum somewhat lessens the cynicism of “Romancing the Yohrzeit Light” (Furman 2000: 74). At a Passover Seder with his cousins, Adam suddenly realizes that their religious observance is ridiculously insincere. His cousins Miriam and Sylvia play Elvis Costello songs, yarmulkes lay folded on the table unworn, occasional mistakes inspire no alarm and the four traditional questions are not asked. Although this is in fact the typical Posner family Seder, this year, Adam objects and calls the ceremony a sacrilege, a disgrace, a shande (91). The second generation’s behaviour is a “far cry from the family’s origins in Poland. Rabbinic grandfathers, observant fathers – now a generation of fragmented legacies, American torchbearers skilled in the art of cultural compromise” (89). Adam and his cousins are born and bred in America and have lost touch with their religious roots. Although for their parents, Jewishness determined their life and the cruellest turn in that life, the children have very little affinity with their religion. Adam suddenly realizes this and wants to make his cousins aware of it as well. Sylvia does not understand what the fuss is about, she feels no guilt for having reduced the originally “solemn and sanctified event” to a “carnival” (92). Adam rages that “[i]t’s all this mockery” of making the Seder meaningless. For Adam, the Seder shows that they are not really Jews (93). The feast turns into a fight of reproaches from one to the other. The past and the cousins’ parents are raked up and the old feuds are continued. The letter from cousin Artur enhances Adam’s feeling of disgust towards their ongoing disregarding of Judaism. In Artur, Adam sees an opportunity to know the truth

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8 The Jewish holiday of Pesach, or Passover, is the eight-day observance commemorating the enslavement and Exodus of the children of Israel from Egypt. The Seder, a time of family gatherings and lavish meals, is the focal point of the Passover celebration. During the Seder, the story of Passover is retold through the words of the Haggadah. (“Passover on the Net”, Holidays)
about the past while the others suspect Artur of taking advantage of them. The family has not only become estranged from their religion, they have also become strangers to each other. The generation of Posner Holocaust survivors have never discussed their Holocaust experiences, nor have they educated their children in Torah Judaism (Furman 2000: 74). Both the children’s upbringing and their assimilatory tendencies have made their Jewish identities “near vacuous” (Furman 2000: 74).

The family’s indifference to ritual is not the only reason for tension. The letter from their cousin Artur, a survivor too, causes friction as well (Berger 82). According to Berger, both the biblical prophet Elijah, who is believed to visit families during Passover, and Artur the Auschwitz survivor bear a salvific message (81). While Elijah does not come to the Posner’s Seder that night, Artur has bought his ticket to America and to their house. Artur is the one who can ensure continuity of the transmission of the Shoah, by making his cousins second-hand witnesses. Moreover, Artur, like a prophet, has a liberating function:

Rosenbaum intentionally sets the tale at Passover, a time of liberation from oppression. In this case, it is the oppression of silence about, and ignorance of, the Shoah from which the cousins are to be liberated. … For one thing, Rosenbaum’s story suggests that through silence and ignorance the chain of transmission of the Shoah is in danger of being broken. Therefore, owing to the precariousness of the situation, it is necessary that Elijah, or Elijah-like figures shed the traditional role of invisibility. (Berger 82)

Finally, listening to the tales of survivors is of paramount importance since bearing witness to these tales is no less than an act of holiness for bearers of the Shoah inheritance (Berger 82). Thus, the Posner second generation can throw off their paganism and reconnect with their spirituality.

Lastly, “The Rabbi Double-faults” is concerned with the waning of religious observance as well. Rabbi Sheldon Vered is the epitome of the decline of religious faith among the Jewish community in America. He is the model of pagan assimilation: “Rabbi-about-town, dapper, handsome, with pressed silver hair … beardless and unscholarly, dressed in tapered Italian suits … manicured nails” and “[h]is pale blue eyes always seemed clear and untroubled, not at all capable of the kind of piercing, metaphysical investigations of an all-knowing rebbe” (129). In short, he looks more like an “investment banker” than a religious man. The sun seems to be more holy to him than his God, which is the case for many of Florida’s faithful. The Rabbi loves tennis and women. In his services, Rabbi Vered touches upon all the subjects of the day, from the Miami Dolphins to movies. Much to the
dissatisfaction of the more observant members of the congregation, his services “featured virtually nothing in the way of straight Scripture” (134). He provokes God and justifies himself as an appropriate leader for a people that has become hypocritical. One day, Rabbi Vered introduces his twin brother, Rabbi Joseph Rose, who attends one of his brother’s services. Rose does speak Hebrew and cites the Talmud, and most importantly, he tells the congregation about his family history. As it turns out, Sheldon was the deeply observant child while Joseph aspired to political activism. After the war, their lives changed dramatically: Sheldon became a cynical, sceptical Rabbi because of his experiences in Auschwitz, while Joseph also studied to become a Rabbi, though a very different one. Rabbi Rose left Poland for Palestine years before the war and thus escaped the horrible faith that his brother underwent. For Rabbi Vered, deity has been weakened by the Holocaust (Berger 83). In a tennis match in which Adam is included because he is the young upcoming talent of the area, Rabbi Vered and Rabbi Rose decide to play a game with God: “[t]he agreed upon wager deals with the role of theological skepticism after Auschwitz” (Berger 83). In the match, the vast differences between the brothers are unveiled:

The survivor is set apart from his twin by virtue of the Holocaust. He no longer believes in God, and rejects the Jobian model of unquestioning obedience. He taunts both God and his brother, telling Rabbi Joseph: “You speak as a rabbi who knows God but doesn’t. I don’t speak of God because I’m afraid I do know him” (146). (Berger 83).

Both brothers want the other to “re-vision” God (Berger 83). Rabbi Sheldon wants his brother to introduce a healthy amount of scepticism in his sermons, showing his congregation another kind of God, the kind that Sheldon saw in Auschwitz. Rabbi Joseph, on the other hand, wants his brother to reintroduce deity and the Torah in his synagogue. Rabbi Vered wins the tennis match after his brother double-faults. Moments before, Rabbi Vered’s arm brace had fallen off, displaying the numbers tattooed on his arm. Rabbi Rose is so horrified that he cannot concentrate on the game anymore and loses. Berger asserts that in Rosenbaum’s exploration of the possibility of faith after the Holocaust, both brothers have an epiphany, namely “that God must never be justified at the expense of humanity” and that “deity must be constantly interrogated” (82). Although Adam is too young to understand all the intricacies, he has learned that one must try to find a personal way of incorporating Judaism in one’s life. After Auschwitz, Jews are free to chose and criticize.
3.6. Longing for Normality

Survivor children have a specific sense of being different. This feeling is caused by various factors:

Feelings of marginality have also been observed in children of survivors. One factor contributing to these feelings may be the constant reminders of their families’ immigrant status – their parents’ difficulty with English, the immigrant friends and relatives with whom their parents almost exclusively socialized, the different norms and expectations present in their homes as compared with those of their American peers. (Hass 30)

Moreover, many survivor parents attributed a special status to their children. Children of survivors know things that no one else could ever imagine. Often, they are suspicious and afraid. They carry rage and hatred against people they have never met. They are trained in scepticism. Inevitably, survivor children know that their lives and characters are not like those of their average American peers.

In “Cattle Car Complex”, Adam tries to avoid his legacy by becoming a successful lawyer working his way into society. Although he is relatively successful in the professional domain, his relational life is a wasteland: at his apartment, “[n]ot even a pet greeted him, just the hum of an empty refrigerator (4). His quiet lawyer’s life is disrupted abruptly, as the stuck elevator produces “a flood of memories he had buried inside him”, memories that are not even his own (3). In “Romancing the Yahrzeit Light”, Adam is equally unsuccessful in living a conventional life as his mother’s memory haunts his every move, while in “An Act of Defiance” Adam’s obsession with the Holocaust prevents him from teaching in a way that does not scare his students off. In “The Pants in the family”, Adam has to take on some parental responsibilities at the age of sixteen. “Normality” seems inapplicable to Adam’s life.

From the stories in Elijah Visible arises a deep desire to be normal. Adam realizes that his legacy sets him apart from his contemporaries. In “Lost, in a Sense”, Adam as a child constantly runs away from his parents’ invading dreams. He strikes up a tight friendship with Brad and spends so much time with him that he almost becomes part of Brad’s family. Brad’s father, Mr. Isaacson, offers Adam a sense of place (171). Brad and his father often “rescue” Adam from his parents for a while: they play a game of catch or get up early to witness the sunrise on the beach. Adam feels at ease with a “father” who is not distorted by some dark past. Adam’s parents “were creatures of the night, of darkness, of another world” (170). About his constant desire to be with the Isaacsons, and thus, away from his parents, Adam
realizes: “[i]t must have pained my parents to realize that their only child longed for the normal life of a small boy” (170). Adam had often thought, or wished, that he had been adopted or “mistakenly taken by the wrong parents at the hospital”:

The Holocaust survivor’s baby wound up with parents of unconflicted pasts, and me, away I went to the land of remorse and apocalyptic preparation. I wanted, at times fervently, to link myself with the fictional parents who had abandoned me at the door of these misery-struck immigrants. I would have forgiven them had they come back – had they ever even existed. (174).

Adam is disappointed with his home situation. Moreover, he does not understand his parents and does not even think much of them. He wants to be in Brad’s shoes, with the cool father and uncomplicated family life. When Brad’s father dies suddenly and too early, however, Adam realizes that no life is perfect. The Isaacson family moves and Adam does not meet Brad again until decades later, when Brad, who now lives in Israel with his family, is on vacation in America. Adam sees that Brad is still tormented by his father’s death. There is a lot of mourning to be done before Brad will be able to come to terms with his childhood years again. The drama came too early: “it was like a time of lost innocence … The clocks just seemed to stop and our laughter went away, the whole thing was crazy. We were too young to figure it out” (177). In this story, Rosenbaum shows that survivors and their children do not hold exclusive claims on suffering. Lives can be ruined in wholly different and equally devastating ways. Adam craves for a normal childhood, while Brad cannot accept the fact that his father died prematurely of disease. Brad’s quiet, happy life is disrupted, which makes Adam realize that his survivor home was not hell after all. There is no guarantee that he would have been a happier child if his parents had not been Holocaust survivors. Being completely “normal” is never possible for Adam. The question “Lost, in a Sense” raises is whether normality is even desirable. Adam’s life is not all bad and the time has come to emphasize the uniqueness of his experience rather than the abnormality. Acceptance might make him a happier man.

4. CONCLUSION

In each story, Adam Posner is a deeply troubled individual who has problems coming to terms with his origins. He has received a legacy that is almost too hard to bear. Adam struggles with his individual memories as well as with the postmemories passed on by his parents. He is also
responsible for collective memory, because he represents an important link in the chain of Holocaust remembrance. The Adam of “Romancing the Yahrzeit Light” wants to get lost in oblivion, while in “Elijah Visible”, he desperately wants to remember and reconnect with his legacy. Rosenbaum has attempted to depict this struggle in subtly varying ways, drawing on his own experience for inspiration. *Elijah Visible* is therefore a very credible account of the pain and strife of the second generation.

For many years, survivors of the Holocaust were unable to confront their past. Subsequently, they were unable to mourn:

> the literature of the second generation suggests that people who survived Hitler’s effort to exterminate the Jews could not mourn while they struggled back into life. Their struggle gave birth to children who inherited a traumatized past, unmourned, as a legacy. (Burstein 49)

It is the children’s responsibility to take up the work of mourning that their parents were unable to perform (Burstein 49). Many members of the second generation became writers who hoped that their creative apprehension of the Shoah would help them cope with and understand the trauma of their parents, transmitted onto them. Stephen C. Feinstein speaks of the ever-present question of “absence” in the works of the second-generation, and the impact of that absence on their lives (202). Berger too, is convinced of this *presence of an absence* in the works of the second-generation witnesses (2). The event that mostly shaped their lives happened before the second generation was even born. However, the Shoah is excruciatingly present in the lives of their tormented parents. The second generation has no extended family, except perhaps some pictures, and no family stories waiting to be told. Their life is marked by absence, and they are constantly made aware of it. In *Elijah Visible*, this theme of absence is touched upon constantly: “[v]iewed through the eyes of Adam Posner … the continual *presence* of the Holocaust *absence* is portrayed at various stages of Posner’s life cycle and in different geographical locations” (Berger 79). Adam wants to confront this absence by learning more about his parents’ experiences and reconnecting with his family history. Only then can he start mourning the family’s losses and his own.

Rosenbaum confided to Alan Berger that “writing *Elijah Visible* was an attempt to know his deceased parents better” (80). Through Adam Posner, Rosenbaum recalls the search for origins and explanations:

> the contemporary children of Job who pursue a particularist response to the Shoah seek to clarify their own relationship to Judaism and their Jewish identity. All had undertaken an odyssey that led them to more fully explore the Holocaust and their
parents’ experience during the Shoah. … [every survivor child] began with the knowledge that his or her parents were survivors. (Berger 84)

Rosenbaum has learned from his own experience that the Holocaust can only be known little by little. The process of mourning is a slow one. About the complex relationship between art and atrocity, Rosenbaum says that “sitting with the sadness and listening to the silence – anathema in a culture seeking instant closure – are necessary preludes to any attempt at an aesthetic of atrocity” (Berger and Gronin 8). An aesthetic appropriation of the Holocaust thus requires a lot of time and patience, and above all, serious contemplation. However, as a member of the second generation, Rosenbaum does realize the unimaginable nature of the Holocaust: “[t]hat he can never truly comprehend the horrors experienced by his parents is both his burden and his muse” (Furman 2000: 76). He shows the reader that contemporary Jewish American identity has to confront the Holocaust, because the event was such a watershed moment in history. Many people were affected by it, and still are. Works of the second generation provide “both a means of coping with the enormity of the Shoah and a refusal to permit its becoming mere literature” (Berger and Gronin 4). Second-generation writings want to activate strategies against oblivion and for constructing meaning out of memory (Berger and Gronin 6). Rosenbaum acknowledges that there is still a lot of work to be done. Moreover, he knows that some things have gone wrong already.

The overall tone of Elijah Visible is elegiac, as Rosenbaum mourns the losses of the war, parental inadequacy of survivors, forced maturity, the waning of Jewish ritual, etc. His work is both a lament and a hopeful plea for remembrance. The work tellingly depicts the struggle of second-generation witnesses to establish a firm Jewish American identity that leaves out none of the vital parts.
Like Thane Rosenbaum, Melvin Jules Bukiet was raised in a home that breathed the Holocaust, since his father was also a camp survivor. Bukiet, too, inherited a legacy of suffering. He decided to become a writer and thus answer the “cosmic responsibility” that his father had imbued him with.

When reading Bukiet’s novel *After*, one easily recognizes that this is no ordinary Holocaust book. It seems hard to place the novel in the long line of Holocaust literature. As Pinsker argues, “Bukiet upends the apple cart of piety that has until now attached itself to hushed discussions of the Holocaust” (qtd. in Furman 2000: 53). Can the novel be seen as a continuation of the classical First Generation, often testimonial, works? Literary conventions and genres have changed during the past half century. The shift from modern to postmodern has taken place in the arts, not in the least in the area of literature. Thus, it would be interesting to read Bukiet’s book from the perspective of that controversial and much disputed phenomenon of “postmodernism”.

1. CONTROVERSY

Insofar as the Holocaust … fuels Bukiet’s creative enterprise in *After*, the novel is a decidedly Jewish work. That said, though, when one of the American “liberators” pops out of his tank in the middle of Aspenfeld asking, “Hey youse. Is this the way to the Grand Concourse?” (*After* 4), we know that we are in store for a Holocaust novel markedly different from what we have come to expect …. (Furman 2000: 53)

The novel tells the story of three seemingly petty camp survivors in the immediate aftermath of the war: Isaac who survived Aspenfeld, Morgenstern who was liberated from Dachau and Fishl who survived Mauthausen. By chance, these three young men come together and find a way to establish themselves in society again. When they pool their skills, they earn their place in the immediate post-war black market. The novel focuses on the little town of Regensburg, next to the Nazi work camp of Liebknecht. The novel comprises five books, entitled “Freedom,” “Opportunity,” “Civilization,” “Celebration,” and “Reparation.” These titles denote the stages of the survivors’ readjustment to society. Isaac and his fellows are not the type of characters one would expect in Holocaust literature. On the contrary, they are
resourceful, ambitious and greedy. Empathic qualities have been left behind in the camps, where those emotions were useless and sometimes even harmful. Bukiet does not confront the reader with stereotypical camp survivors who “search tirelessly for lost relatives” and who, above all, want to live a quiet, ordinary life (Furman 2000: 54). The style that Bukiet adopts to narrate his story is even more provocative: “Bukiet’s distinct brand of mordant humor pervades the work in ways that would assuredly make … several contemporary Jewish and even non-Jewish readers squirm in their reading chairs” (Furman 2000: 53-54). The irony, grotesquery and cynicism of After further enhance the reader’s feelings of outrage. Upon a second reading, however, the reader, “now inoculated against the sting of Bukiet’s caustic humor”, can begin to realize the seriousness and depth of Bukiet’s concerns (Furman 2000: 55).

Like Efraim Sicher, Susanne Rohr argues that there has been a paradigm shift concerning the Holocaust. Over the years, she has observed a process of “Americanization of the Holocaust” that has brought about radical shifts concerning the event’s representation. These shifts are mainly caused by the second-generation witnesses, who are concerned with passing on their parents’ legacy in a critical way. While their parents found it impossible to find adequate words to describe the Shoah, the second generation has found new ways to do so. Rohr suggests the following about the work that After does:

die Frage der Authentizität und Autorität des Erzählens des Holocausts ist nicht nur gestellt, sondern entschieden. Der Holocaust ist ein eigener Imaginationsraum geworden, ein eigenes fiktionales Universum der literarischen Imagination, dessen Elemente nun gewissermaßen frei verschoben werden können. (2002: 549)

Bukiet’s novel offers a radically different approach to Holocaust representation. Here, the emphasis is not so much on the Shoah as a historical event. Rather, the novel focuses on the event’s “medialization” (Rohr 2002: 549). After suggests that this medialization started the very moment that the war was over: “[a]s for the media, the American tanks have barely entered the grounds of the concentration camp when master interpreters, the journalists, follow in their wake” (Rohr 2006: 247). Elizabeth Smith Moss, “First Lady of the Front Lines”, is the first journalist to enter Isaac’s camp (10). Shamelessly, she asks him to pose next to the gallows. The photographs are intended for the American public, who “exhibit a voyeuristic rather than humane fascination with the European atrocity” (Furman 2000: 55). From the beginning of the novel, it becomes clear that Bukiet intends to show a different picture of the American liberators, of survivors, and of the Shoah aftermath in general. A
quote on the cover of the book summarizes: “After is a scathing, thoroughly offensive novel that hunts taboos like a heat-seeking missile”.

2. POSTMODERNISM

Wendy Wheeler says that

when people think about postmodernism, what they will have in mind are ideas of fragmentation, decentering, pastiche, depthlessness, loss of a sense of history and/or a radical questioning of both historical narratives and also big explanatory stories about humankind’s place in the world. (qtd. in Bertens and Natoli 297)

However, postmodernism is a concept that has only been defined vaguely. Every book consulted concerning the notion of postmodernism begins with a discussion of the doubtfulness of the term’s validity. Theorists like Brian McHale argue that nobody likes the terms “postmodernism” or “postmodernity”, but that they continue to use them because of a lack of good alternatives (1987: 3). The problem starts with the prefix “post”. Does postmodernism simply come after modernism? Some people argue that postmodernism is indeed just a continuation and reinforcement of the principles of modernist literature, while others see more of a rupture than a continuation between the two. As Linda Hutcheon has suggested, “there is little sense in trying to find a definition of postmodernism that would encompass all the varying usages of the term” (1989: 16).

In any case, in postmodernist literature a radicalisation and critique of modernist principles can be observed. Modernist concerns with linearity, the notion of time, the inner workings of the mind are also postmodernist concerns. Modernist writers started to doubt the validity of a linear chronological storyline because people simply do not experience life in that way. They wanted to construct a fictional world view that resembled the way in which people experience the world.

Postmodernist writers build on these principles but also introduce their own ideas. Postmodernists are no longer concerned with constructing a certain world view, instead they doubt whether the world can be accurately described at all. For Jacques Derrida, universal truth is impossible since everybody constructs his own reality out of personal standpoints and ways of seeing the world. Moreover, for postmodernists, the trusted relationship between language and the world is no longer self-evident. They realize that there are limits to mimesis.
Derrida starts to doubt language as a means of representing the world adequately since he cannot find a clear link between a word and the reality which that word refers to (Butler 17). Efraim Sicher states that “the word is compromised” and “that representation is impossible”, which makes the postmodernist novel recognize “the unsayability of the unspeakable” (Sicher 1998: 305). In the postmodern world, everything is questionable: the “condition postmoderne” – a phrase coined by French philosopher J. F. Lyotard – is characterized by a radical ontological and epistemological doubt (van Gorp et al. 348). Postmodernists argue that we only know the world through socially established meaning systems and that our sense of meaning is culture-mediated (Hutcheon 1989: 34). Postmodernist thinkers start to resist these legitimizing meaning systems which Lyotard named “Master Narratives”. Our way of seeing the world is determined by religion, politics and any other kind of dominating ideology. Therefore, it is impossible to truly know reality, let alone represent it. Postmodernism wants to do away with these limitations and wants to show another side of reality as it is usually presented to us. The problem of representation is ever-present in postmodernism. Representation is also a central problem in literature about the Holocaust: how can an event so horrendous and unspeakable be represented?

3. THE HOLOCAUST IN POSTMODERNISM

In the past five decades, literature about the Holocaust has greatly increased. People feel that they must tell this horrible story in order for the event to be remembered. Memory and remembrance are very important for writers who want to engage the Holocaust. Bukiet himself, however, argues that “memory is an inaccurate term” and that “[f]or anyone who wasn’t there, on either side of the barbed wire, Jew or German, thinking about the Holocaust is really an act of the imagination” (2002a: 16). Apparently, the only ones with a claim on memory are survivors. Since memory is not sufficient, Bukiet, like Rosenbaum, has to turn to the imagination when he addresses the issue of the Holocaust. Because of the scarce information of what happened during the war, a picture with many gaps and black holes emerges. Thus, Bukiet argues, it is simply impossible to realistically render the Holocaust (2002a: 17). For Bukiet, the question is no longer whether the Holocaust can be represented. Instead, he focuses on how the event can be, and is actually being, represented (Rohr 2006:
M. J. BUKIET’S AFTER

He leaves the question of authenticity and truthfulness behind and examines the Holocaust from a new perspective (Rohr 2006: 240).

Bukiet and his generation do not agree that the Holocaust must remain forbidden territory for those people who did not experience the tragedy personally. It has taken survivors too long to break out of their “conspiracy of silence”. It would be a shame if the stories disappeared into the grave together with the last survivors. Many survivors told their stories to the only ones who listened and who, in fact, “had no choice but to listen: their children” (Bukiet 2002a: 13). These children either heard the same stories over and over again or had to find out things for themselves because their parents stubbornly kept their mouths shut. Rosenbaum exemplified both tendencies in Elijah Visible. In any case, the second generation appears to be best equipped to keep the legacy alive.

Auschwitz is a great divide, and in a new era, new representational forms are required. Hayden White argues that the problem of representing the Holocaust is closely related to “the changing notion of history and the Holocaust’s incompatibility with previous modes of narrative, such as realism” (qtd. in Sicher 1998: 307). There is no need to think that one cannot write meaningfully about the Holocaust. However, conventional modes of representation are no longer adequate (Sicher 1998: 311).

The Shoah, which itself emerged from a humanist philosophy “nothing short of a meta-narrative”, is reflected upon differently in the postmodern era (Martin 44). Bukiet embodies the postmodernist belief that there is no universal truth, not even with regard to an event as awesome and historical as the mass extermination of the Jews during the Second World War. After is an example of what Hutcheon calls the postmodernist decentred perspective (1988: 57). What is treated in Bukiet’s book is not the conventional tragic after-effects one would expect. On the contrary, the picture created is one of three slightly crazy men who are very much interested in earning money. Bukiet gets rid of the traditional perspective of the heroic survivors on great quests for their beloved lost ones. Instead, he creates amoral men who worm their way into chaotic, anarchistic post-war society. Bukiet does this in a style that is interlarded with black humour, a “comic mode” which paradoxically underscores the rage of the author and the seriousness of his work. Suzanne Rohr describes After as “arguably the most radical Holocaust comedy, an angry satire that displays truly sardonic humor” (2006: 245).

After could be described as an anti-trauma, even anti-Holocaust novel in its rather estranging depiction of survivors in the immediate Holocaust aftermath. Bukiet’s novel is just
one version of reality and makes no claim to being universally true. To make us aware of this, Bukiet employs techniques that may undoubtedly be called postmodernist.

4. POSTMODERNIST TENDENCIES IN AFTER

4.1. History of the Post-War World

Postmodernism has often been called ahistorical because it provides unconventional accounts of the past. History is not presented in the usual way; it is mixed with stylistic elements such as parody and pastiche. This makes one doubt whether postmodernist versions of the past can be accepted as true to reality. Some postmodernist writers do falsify history in their books, but this is always done with a particular purpose. Postmodernism is all about resisting the “grand narratives” that mediate our view of the world. For postmodernists, history is equally predetermined by fixed views. Everything is cultural, that is to say, “mediated by representations” (Hutcheon 1989: 34). So, when postmodernist writers distort history, they do this only to show us that history is just another human construct, a construct we know only through documents and second-hand information. Butler asserts that before the postmodernist era, history was written from the hitherto dominant positivist or empiricist point of view. This is now called into question, and history is seen as simply another narrative, its sources an interplay of already existing texts (Butler 32). Moreover, everything seems to have been written already. Therefore, the need was felt to renew the genre of the historical novel, and to renew the way in which history was being treated in literature.

Bukiet’s novel shows an awareness that its audience has become less naïve. People in the current postmodernist, mediatized world find it hard to accept an unproblematized and dogmatic representation of the past. When Isaac, the main character of After, is liberated from Aspenfeld after years of imprisonment, “He felt as if gravity or magnetism had ceased to operate. All his ideas about life were no longer valid” (12). Bukiet has tackled one of the most significant historical events ever, which makes his work controversial on two levels. Firstly, he questions the way in which the Holocaust has been rendered up till now and has chosen to present an alternative picture. Secondly, the event itself which he focuses on has been taboo for decades and still presents a tricky problem when it comes to its representation.
Bukiet feels that our ideas about history and historical fiction are no longer valid. He looks at these few tormented victims from a wholly different perspective. Instead of depicting helpless and traumatized characters, Bukiet shows crafty people who have been hardened during the war. Moreover, whereas big narratives about the immediate aftermath of World War II focus on the Nuremberg trials or on famous and notable persons like Otto Frank, Bukiet chose to focus on fictional – but very real – and insignificant characters in an equally insignificant geographical setting. The past is re-presented so that “we now get the histories (in the plural) of the losers as well as the winners, of the regional (and colonial) as well as the centrist, of the unsung many as well as the much sung few...” (Hutcheon 1989:66). The book presents a sort of apocryphal history with a focus on usually neglected people.

*After* begins in medias res in the camp of Aspenfeld. From the beginning, Bukiet presents a chaotic picture of an anarchic post-war world in which everything seems to be allowed:

> Between trade and manufacturing and travel, Aspenfeld took on the airs of a small city. It had a government in the form of the Military Police and a church in the body of Chaplain Duane Campion and it had a fourth estate to rival London’s. ... As in any boomtown, however, the manners at Aspenfeld were subject to a swift degeneration from discipline to anarchy. (18)

Bukiet feels no need to present an elevated, superior kind of new society. People are even greedier than before the war, since they have learned to fight for their possessions. “Isaac comes to realize that for all that the war changed, the belief that money equals power and freedom remained” (Martin 48). Undoubtedly, many of the situations described in the book were common in the immediate aftermath. Prostitution was rampant, the black market lucrative, and the bigwigs corrupt. In fact, the gloomy picture that *After* presents is in many ways very realistic.

One’s discomfort at reading *After* clearly indicates that there is still an atmosphere of taboo around the Shoah, especially when it is represented in such a base, unheroic fashion. The West still feels guilty about its reluctance to open its eyes to what was happening in the forests of Buchenwald and Majdanek. Bertens and Natoli have argued that the postmodernist acceptance of difference and celebration of heterogeneity has constituted “an intense self-examination of the part of the postwar West” (xiv). According to them, this self-examination has led to a new interpretation of the Holocaust, in which the responsibility of the West is stressed. By means of irony and sarcasm, Bukiet shows the hurt of the Jewish people and their grudge against the world for not helping them. The author’s “sardonic take on human motives
permeates the novel”, so that “there are decidedly few good people in After” (Furman 2000: 55). Bukiet judges the Allied Forces, the American newspapers craving for “graphic photographs of the dead and near dead”, and publishers who want to produce bestsellers written by survivors (Furman 2000:55). In the following passage, Isaac comments on the Joint Distribution Committee, the Joint, an American charitable institution which helps Displaced Persons to get re-established:

“There’s an office of the Joint everywhere,” he said. “There’s also a pissoir on the corner, but I don’t feel like peeing.”

“You’re right... where were they when we needed them?” the delivery man agreed to Isaac’s unstated comment with a universal bitterness that may or may not have been feigned. (89)

The Jewish volunteer relief workers are hopelessly naïve “and, above all, late” (Furman 2000: 55). When Isaac insults Miranda, who works for the Joint, by saying “[i]f you worked for the Germans, we wouldn’t’ve had a chance”(70), he points a sarcastic, somewhat blaming finger at her. The Allied Forces are a scapegoat for the embittered victims, even though they had no knowledge of the horrors of the war. When the Americans cross through Aspenfeld on their way to the Grand Concourse, they are initially too stunned to grasp the enormity of the crimes committed (7). For Isaac, however, this is sorely unconvincing.

Bukiet violates numerous taboos concerning the Holocaust and its representation by adopting a critical, questioning perspective.

### 4.2. “Historiographic Metafiction”

The mixing of history and the imagination is not a postmodernist phenomenon in itself. This mixing was already present in the late eighteenth century, viz. in classical historical novels like Sir Walter Scott’s *Ivanhoe*. It is the way in which fiction and fact is mixed that is new. Hutcheon has proposed the term *historiographic metafiction* for these new historical novels. By this term, she wants to denote “those well-known and popular novels which are both intensely self-reflexive and yet paradoxically also lay claim to historical events and personages” (1988: 5). Although *After* is neither well-known nor popular, the novel does meet some of the requirements in order for it to be called historiographic metafiction.

In Bukiet’s novel, the Shoah is presented in a new and unconventional light. This new representation is constructed, just as former representations of the Holocaust were. The
awareness that history is a human construct, is stated explicitly in the book. When Isaac asks “Der Schreiber”, a survivor named Benja who is writing a book about his experiences during the war, why the syndicate wanted to buy the rights to his book *Farmaikt Oyg’n*, Benja answers “I don’t know. They’re trying to corner the market on history. They can have it” (376). Higher authority decides which books about the war are being published. History is being written by human hands, as people decide what the world should hear and what should be kept silent.

Just as the term “historiographic” points to the fact that history is a human construct, the term “metafiction” shows the postmodernist awareness that fiction is constructed by people as well (Hutcheon 1988: 5). Fiction is indeed a medium determined by conventions about how to write, what to write, whom to write about. Postmodernists are acutely aware of this and seek to undermine some of the conventions about writing by searching new ways to express themselves. One literary lexicon describes metafiction as “the practice and different procedures of textual self-observation and autoreflexion within the narrative genre, more specifically in the postmodernist novel” (van Gorp et al. 273)⁹. Metafictional texts are highly self-reflexive and demonstrate the problems of representing reality. Often, the boundaries between fact and fiction are intentionally blurred. Bukiet scrutinizes this relation between reality and fiction more than once in his novel:

Yes, there were the mountains of hair and teeth and toy dolls, the impromptu graveyards, the daily deaths, but that their experience in one camp could be extrapolated to a universe of camps, killing nations of friends and cousins, was too intolerable a fact to grasp. It had to be fiction.

The War must have been a novel written by a Jew in a basement in Prague. … Who else could imagine that theirs was not a sole idiosyncratic catastrophe, but the shape of Jewishness in their age? (72)

Although the reader knows that nothing about the Holocaust is invented, and the narrator knows this as well, the enormity of the event is unbelievable. The characters in the novel similarly seem to doubt the reality that is presented to them. Isaac “worried that time Before was merely a tantalizing fantasy”, that “life began in May of 1945” (197). “Fact mingled with fiction; it was all too strange. There was no sense, no proportion” (256). As Hutcheon argues, “historiographic metafiction refutes the natural or common-sense methods of distinguishing between historical fact and fiction” (1988: 93). Towards the end of the book, the narrator

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⁹ My translation from the Dutch: “de praktijk en de verschillende procédés van tekstuele zelfobservatie en autoreflectie binnen het narratieve genre, meer specifiek in de postmoderne roman”. (Wolters Plantyn)
sums up some of the recent revelations and events in the novel. The narrator says: “[p]ut them all together and the plot would had been evident from the first page.”(306) This is a clearly self-reflexive remark, stressing the constructed nature of the novel. With this one sentence, the reader is suddenly aware again that he is reading a book, the creation of an author who offers his own take on the Shoah.

Although Bukiet seems to doubt the universal validity of history, he does insert certain historical facts that no one doubts or finds hard to believe. Bukiet does not reject history completely. He mentions historical figures ranging from Churchill and Stalin to Baron Rothschild. A case in point is the reference to Mussolini being “strung upside down in the Piazza Loreto in Milan” after his execution (189), which is an actual historically verifiable event. Furthermore, the Joint, omnipresent in the book, is an existing institution, of which its website states:

Since 1914, the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, Inc. (JDC) has served as the overseas arm of the American Jewish community. Our mission is to serve the needs of Jews throughout the world, particularly where their lives as Jews are threatened or made more difficult. (“Joint Distribution Committee”, UJC)

However, the historical facts are never presented objectively, as scepticism pervades the historical panorama. As Christopher Butler writes, objective reconstruction of the past is just a myth (33). The Joint is no longer presented as wholly effective or even truly charitable. A character like Alan Foyle, Deputy Director of the Joint, is crazy about papers and files. He is presented quite mockingly as a bureaucrat, not exactly the most competent person to run the organization. To take another example, Bukiet inserts a character in *After* named Pinsker, who is also an important figure on the black market and thus a competitor to Isaac. Could this character be a reference to Leon Pinsker, who struggled with finding a solution to the Jewish problem all his life? If this were the case, Bukiet is undoubtedly being ironical. Unlike the idealistic Zionist historical figure, the fictional character is superficial and concerned with money and gambling. It would appear that the two Pinskers have nothing in common except their name. Furthermore, there is mention of the Egyptian God Anubis in an encyclopaedia-like paragraph (245). It seems a very acceptable factual explanation of the God, had it not been followed by a similarly encyclopaedia-like explanation of the village of Liebknecht. This second paragraph is so estranging that it immediately casts doubt on the validity of the former passage. Bukiet constantly undercuts his own claims on reality and verisimilitude. He, like many postmodernist writers, seeks to show that realism and mimesis are no longer possible or even desirable.
To summarize, problems of reality, history and fiction appear to be pivotal after a closer examination of Bukiet’s novel. Linda Hutcheon writes that particular postmodernist works “juxtapose what we think we know of the past (from official archival sources and personal memory) with an alternate representation that foregrounds the epistemological questioning of the nature of historical knowledge” (1989: 71). Bukiet’s novel is an excellent example of this.

4.3. The Postmodernist Textual Universe

As Butler puts it: “if direct access to the past is denied, all we can have are competing stories” (35). A postmodernist novel is about the recognition of the fictional world as fiction. Representations are “cultural narratives that worm their way into our consciousness and continually regulate our experience of the world” (ed. Bertens and Natoli 94). In a similar manner, previously written texts regulate more recent texts. Postmodernist fiction cannot deny the existence of a literary heritage. The world in postmodernist fiction is grafted onto older fictive worlds. Famous postmodernist writer Umberto Eco is the prime example of this. In the metaphor of a library, he explores the literary past. This is done by means of postmodernist devices like parody or pastiche (Bertens and Natoli 127). In postmodernity, everything appears to be textual: history is known to us only through textual evidence, reality seems very much language-based, fiction incorporates former texts, etc. However, “this parodic reprise of the past is not nostalgic; it is always critical” (Hutcheon 1989: 93). Intertextuality places a novel in a literary tradition, among a great variety of already existing texts. In postmodernist texts, an intertextual web is woven. Many postmodernist works are considered unreadable because their structure is too complicated and dense and because they require too much foreknowledge from the part of the reader.

*After* cannot be called an intertextual universe. However, the book does incorporate some references to previous literature. Bukiet has drawn on one thoroughly postmodern book in particular:

in “Celebration,” the fourth book, the novel celebrates its close intertextual relation to Thomas Pynchon’s post modern classic, *Gravity’s Rainbow* (1973), with a festive orgy aboard the ship Anubis, where “excess was the only principle”. It is here that Rocketman makes his intertextual return … (Rohr 2006: 246)
Rohr also spies the influence of Pynchon in the overall setting of the novel: “a post-Holocaust Europe depicted as a timeless “zone” with dissolving borders, where geographical, cultural and political systems of order are constantly being renegotiated and people are in constant motion across “the new, borderless continent”” (2006: 253). Nevertheless, *After* is far from a rewriting of Pynchon’s text and the intertextual clues are relatively few.

*After* is not written in a vacuum, however, and Bukiet shows that he is aware of his literary heritage. To begin with, there are some religious references. A survivor from Aspenfeld, Chaim from Chelm, travels all around Europe in search of his brother. He is sent from pillar to post in vain. Disappointedly, “The wandering Jew thus returned to the one home left to him on the third bunk in the fourth barracks in D Block at Aspenfeld” (74). The Wandering Jew is a legend from Christian folklore, presumably based on the Bible – though not mentioned in it. According to the legend, the Wandering Jew is a man who taunted Jesus on the way to the Crucifixion. As a punishment, the Jew must walk the earth until Christ returns. Although in *After* the phrase is used literally, Bukiet is also referring to the legend. In doing so, he implicitly compares the wandering Jew with the homeless and lost Holocaust survivors. To take another example, there is a referral to “Elijah’s Seat”, a seat reserved for the prophet during Passover Seder. When Isaac, Morgenstern and Fishl are put on trial, there is a seat left open for Fishl who has disappeared with gold stolen from the Liebknecht camp. Marcus Morgenstern dubbed the seat “Elijah’s seat”.

Chapter six of the novel begins with a fragment referring to Daniel Defoe’s famous *Robinson Crusoe*:

> Crusoe washed up on shore, woke with sand-covered lips, salt-caked shirt and trousers, crazy, hungry, bruised by the waves, curled into a question mark beside a dead crab on the sandy crescent of the new world that was, above all other qualities, his, his absolutely …

> a few goods of civilization rolled in with the tide: a nautical compass, a sheet of diamond-stitched rigging, a barrel of nutmeg, and one of gunpowder. (97)

The next sentence casually continues to tell the story of Isaac and his enterprises: “[f]ood and armaments had already attained prominence on the black market …” (97). When reading the Defoe-inspired passage, one would expect that there is a link with the story of the Shoah survivors. However, the passage appears to be irrelevant to the whole. The only obvious link between this Crusoe-intermezzo and the subsequent storyline is that between “gunpowder” and “armaments”. This example illustrates the fragmentary nature of postmodernist fiction, in which seemingly unrelated fragments are assembled to form an eclectic whole.
Bukiet also incorporates a famous scientific thinker in his novel and illustrates the applicability of the scholar’s scientific findings to the modern, post-Holocaust world. Count Geiger, an old hermit living in a giant mansion near the entrepreneurs’ flat, hands Marcus a copy of Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species* after he has discovered that the marketeers have simply entered his house through the window. Isaac remembers how his older brother Alter once tried to explain this scientific statement on evolution to their father and he remembers the most famous phrase:

“Survival of the fittest.”

Marcus nodded.

“Is that why Jews survive?” the old man asked from his perch.

“Pardon me, but you don’t look so fit.”

“Hey, you should have seen me Before,” Isaac laughed. (156)

Immediately after this jocular remark, Isaac wonders if any Jews really did survive. He ponders the changes that the Jewish people have gone through and concludes that the war has made them all into different people. In fact, he does not know what a Jew is anymore. In this scene, the reader catches a glimpse of the all-pervading scepticism in the novel. Isaac only knows that, despite continual persecution, Jews persevere. His musing is also an example of survivors’ radical ontological doubt about their Jewisness.

The postmodernist exploration of boundaries of genre, too, is exemplified in *After*. Bukiet adopts the medium of the fairy tale twice in his novel. Isaac is an ardent collector of maps. He has a map of the subways of New York and discovers “a seashore resort called Far Rockaway located at the farthest extremity of the municipality” (227). He dreams about what the place looks like. The result of his musing is a passage resembling a description one would normally find in a fairy tale:

Crowning the tallest peak, amid the outcroppings of granitic schist, sat a multiturretted castle with a pink slate roof that reflected the sunrise. The castle was guarded by crimson-uniformed hussars whose helmets sprouted soft egret plumes as they stood at attention, stiff as a dukeling’s lead toy infantry. (227)

The language is soft and evocative and conjures up the feeling one usually gets when dreaming. The abundant colours, numerous adjectives and visual wording resemble the language of poetry. The language use in the rest of the book is more straightforward, harsher and often ironical. Far Rockaway is so exotic and idealized, being far away from the atrocities of the war, that only poetic language and a fairy tale-like description can account for the place. However, Bukiet breaks the spell a few sentences later. When Marcus says he would go
to Australia if he was to go away, Isaac asks him what is keeping him here. “Inertia” is his answer (228). At this point, the reader is thrown back into the numb world of the survivors who have no desires but to be left at ease. If they have any dreams at all, they are unlikely to pursue them.

A second instance of the fairy tale theme is found at the beginning of chapter fourteen. Bukiet presents an adaptation of the Cinderella story. Not surprisingly, the original tale is not followed slavishly. In a way very similar to the one in which historical facts are treated, the well-known fairy tale is presented with a parodic twist. There is the casual insertion of “a gas chamber” and “shtetl rags” which already shows that this is not the conventional story (243-244). On the stroke of midnight, the tone shifts beyond repair:

\[ \text{Gong. Gong.} \]

The door was locked. Cinderella didn’t have passport, a visa, a boat ticket to Far Rockaway.

\[ \text{Gong.} \]

The magic disappeared in a flash. Her gown turned to shreds, her prince to a poor yeshiva student, the castle to a shul, and the colourful court orderlies to panzer troops. Blitzkrieg. The glass slipper slipped off and smashed into a thousand shards, and Cinderella was barefoot, bleeding. (245)

Here, the fairy tale is grafted onto Jewish reality. That reality is ironically unglamorous and poor. “Yeshiva” and “shul” are used derogatively. And there is the reference to the very topical subject of the Shoah. Maybe the slipper being “smashed into a thousand shards” could be read as an allusion to Kristallnacht. In any case, the fairy tale leaves a bitter aftertaste and a nauseating feeling. Bukiet shakes up our expectations time and again, forcing us to re-evaluate our predetermined convictions and assumptions.

4.4. Identity

Alan Berger asserts that in the postmodern era, questions of memory and ethnic identity appear paramount (9). Issues of identity are also quintessential in second-generation writings. Both survivors and their children struggle with their Jewish identity in particular.

In postmodernism, identities are unstable and fragmented. Postmodernist characters find it hard to establish a satisfactory sense of themselves and of their place in the world (Bertens and Natoli 22). The process of relating the self to that world is problematic. The
postmodernist self is constructed out of many different personae. In this respect, Rosenbaum’s protagonist Adam Posner is undoubtedly a postmodernist character. The postmodern, post-war world is so fragmented and overpowering that it is hard to find one’s place in it. As a result, identities are fuzzy and decomposed. Janet Handler Burstein states that in second-generation literature “the postmodern, post-Auschwitz, now highly theorized sense of the individual self as fractured, strange, unrecognizable to itself in its ceaseless changes” is a much-debated issue (9). Reconnection with the “little secrets” of the collective Holocaust past undoubtedly changes how members of the second generation think about identity (Burstein 9).

As Sicher states, after the Second World War, “our concept of the human condition has been badly shaken, and it should not be surprising that postmodernism refers to the Holocaust as theme and argument for the loss of meaning, loss of faith, and loss of humanity” (1998: 305). According to Wardi, “the giving-up of the self was a type of self-defence” for camp inmates (17). Since these defence mechanisms, including emotional emptiness and the creation of a “false personality”, did not disappear immediately after their liberation, survivors remained “emptied of vital feelings” and alienated from themselves (Wardi 16). In After, the characters have changed so fundamentally because of the war that they find it hard to establish a firm identity again. Moreover, the utter meaninglessness of the Nazi cruelty has made them sceptical about the meaning of life. Their emotional numbness has made them different persons. Partly, the novel expresses the changes in the identity of the characters by means of bodily changes: Isaac’s teeth are broken because of a cruel Kapo whereas Morgenstern has bad eyesight because he had to wear glasses which were too strong. “The damage done by the lager will persist in embodiments of its survivors in second-generation writing, but also in images of Jewish men throughout the writings of the new wave” (Burstein 57). Less visibly, on the level of the soul, survivors bear even worse scars. The changes that the war has caused are so fundamental that they are simply irreversible. Consequently, the survivors will have to learn to live their lives differently. Miranda characterizes Isaac and his men as “[i]gnorant, rude, inhuman”, she even adds that they “know nothing” (281). What Miranda is referring to here, is knowledge of how to behave around people. The survivors in After lack social skills because they have been in abnormal social relationships for years during the war. Therefore, taking up a “normal” life again as a stable individual seems almost impossible. Isaac and his fellows have lost faith in humanity and any hope of redemption.

Ironically, the main income of Isaac’s group of entrepreneurs comes from the forgery of all kinds of identification papers. Such papers are usually seen as stable and reliable referents to someone’s identity. The flourishing trade in forged identity papers questions the
stability of identity. In the aftermath, identity has become transient and exchangeable. The group’s forging business doubles the changes in the survivors’ identities. The counterfeiting can be seen as a metaphor for the loss of identity of survivors. The survivors in After have acquired new identities, both literally and figuratively, and find it difficult to mould everything into a consistent unity. For the Allied Forces, “[p]apers functioned as maps of identity” in a very straightforward way (104). Isaac and his fellow-sufferers, however, feel that papers are not at all clear links to identity: “The bureaucracy to check papers consequently grew to rival that of the horde whose papers were checked, but even the most bureaucratic of minds could see the irrelevancy of paper in a broken world” (104). In the post-war “broken” world, identities are shattered and papers have no referential value.

Most importantly, the attitude towards religious identity has changed dramatically for survivors. Berger says that the Holocaust shapes contemporary (post-Auschwitz) Jewish identity and that this is the reason why so many “children of Job”, children of the second generation, have written about the event (7). The Holocaust was indeed a turning point for the Jewish people. As exemplified in Elijah Visible, one of the central questions of the second generation is how one can live the “Jewish Way” in the aftermath (Berger 23). For centuries, the covenant\(^\text{10}\) has been the cornerstone of Jewish identity (23). Berger asserts that a new, distinctive post-Auschwitz covenant theology emerges from second-generation texts: there is a struggle with the biblical God, who is no longer credible because of the fact itself that the Shoah happened (21). The covenant must be reformulated, but not rejected, because it is so determining for Jewish identity. Remarkably, religion is not renounced in spite of the disappointment of the war. Nonetheless, as the narrator of After remarks, being Jewish is experienced very differently by “the Jew now, After” (294).

The traditional covenant was broken during the Holocaust. The Shoah punished Jews rather than making them the “chosen people”. Therefore, the Sinaitic covenant is no longer coercive “in a world that saw Hitler’s murder of six million Jews” (Berger 27). Rabbi and scholar Irving Greenberg has proposed a voluntary covenant which is concerned more with behavioural issues than with explicit theological formulations (Berger 25). The message of redemption is carried on but there is a belief that Jews must perform life-enhancing deeds instead of just studying the Torah and memorizing the Ten Commandments (27). Strict Orthodox Judaism has given way to an all-embracing mode of living, which is concerned

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\(^{10}\) The original Sinaitic covenant was a one-way contract between God and believers, God and humanity or God and Israel. “God's covenants with the Israelites are foundational to the Torah, as well as to the Tanakh in general, and form the grounds for the claim that the Israelites were God's 'chosen people’”. (“Covenant”, Wikipedia)
more with general well-being than with strict adherence to the Jewish law. In Rosenbaum’s short stories, Adam, too, is confronted with the fact that “after Auschwitz, Jews cannot be compelled to accept the covenant” (Berger 84). It became clear that even Adam’s parents are not strict, observant Jews anymore. Adam himself is even further removed from the traditional covenant. He exemplifies the struggle of many second-generation witnesses to come to terms with their inherited Judaism. In *After*, a new kind of “voluntary” covenant is not yet under discussion. Consternation at the immediate past is far from over and anger and utter disappointment are still smouldering. This initial abandonment of religion is also present in the writings of the first generation, where figures like Wiesel’s Moishe the Beadle, who was once such an observant Jew, turn their backs on a God in which they can no longer have faith. A reinterpretation of Judaism is not yet imaginable for the disillusioned survivors inhabiting the immediate post-Auschwitz wasteland.

In *After*, religion plays a substantial role in the shaping of the identity of one character in particular, Fishl. Fishl is a deeply religious Jew who is incomplete without a Torah. He remains devout throughout his life despite all his trials and tribulations. Symbolically destroying a whole religion, the Nazis burned thousands of Torahs during the war. Fishl’s religious flame didn’t die with the destruction of the precious books, however, and Judaism continues to provide meaning to his life. During the war, faith was the one strength that kept Fishl going. Together with his camp partner, the equally devout chemist Salidano, Fishl made a pact: “I would try to recall as many pages of the text [the Torah] as the number on my arm, while Salidano would compile the stories of our peers, as many as the number on his arm” (118). They believed that, in doing so, they might keep the Jewish community alive and ensure a sense of continuity. On the next page, Fishl’s biggest concern is expressed:

> “And then Salidano died. … Of course, his life was entirely insignificant, like all of ours, but what about his memory? Did all of those stories die with him?”

The logical extension of his thought was obvious. Fishl wondered if the Torah and its sages would die with him. (119)

Fishl fears that the Jewish scriptures will die together with the last convinced Jews. Therefore, his task is to remember and pass on his religious knowledge. But even for Fishl, unconditional faith in God is difficult. At one point, emboldened by wine, Fishl expresses a feeling of inequity: “[t]ell me about a God who gives the world to the German murderers and to us, who bow and pray, he gives worse than nothing” (121). Further on, he tells a tale, “the legend of the last Jew” (339). In the legend, the last Jew, a shoemaker, expires. This happens after his realization that the Jewish people “are chosen to be eternally bereft”, that “God must help
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others” (342). Fishl and his audience feel that this is the “icy truth” (342). So, while Fishl does want to return to theology, he struggles with God as well. This illustrates Fishl’s new, yet unstable, relationship towards theology (Martin 5).

Isaac, on the other hand, feels no need to incorporate Judaism in his identity, since Judaism is the reason why he was tortured in the first place. “[H]e had long since forgotten what his ancestors texts really meant. He knew the letter but not the spirit of the law” (281). Judaism has become an abstract entity for Isaac. As Furman observes, Isaac is not at all interested in the Zionist struggle (2000: 54). “Eighty million Arabs and a desert: who needs it?” (237). He feels no affinity with other Jews: “[f]or Isaac, the whole idea of a Jewish state was nearly as foreign as a forest” (279). He does not understand why so many survivors are going to Palestine and he wonders what they expect to find there. Jewish identity is shattered, Jews scattered all over the Diaspora. In his attempt “to rid himself of the Holocaust and his status as survivor”, Isaac reinvents himself (Martin 49). This reinvention includes ignoring his Jewish side, since this side is a constant reminder of the injustice he experienced. For Isaac, “the lager, the most insane place in the world, made sense to him because he did not question who he was or what he needed” (Martin 52). In the lager, inmates had no identity except for the number on their arm. Moreover, they knew their place in line. When Isaac has to address and renew his sense of identity after the war, he decides to ignore religion as a shaper of personality. Since religion did not help him in the camps, Judaism will be of no use to Isaac in the free world either.

In studies about survivors, problems with regard to religion are recurring. However, Jewish survivors are reluctant to give up their Judaism completely. Moreover, many found their religion important enough to pass on to their offspring. Aaron Hass argues that even survivors who did struggle with religion severely, urged their children to continue the Jewish tradition: “[h]aving experienced so many losses, they refuse to disengage from this anchor, this source of support, this connection to their parents and grandparents” (Hass 147). Their children can now choose whether or not they want to live according to Jewish religious tradition. So, as desperate as the situation may seem in a profoundly dark novel like After, the truth is that Judaism is becoming an important part of many Jews’ identity again. Hass even concluded that children of Holocaust survivors are often more strongly identified Jews than their peers (116). Nevertheless, religious scepticism as depicted in After was the state of mind of many survivors in the immediate aftermath. It would take years for them to come to grips with their religious anchorage again.
4.5. Stylistic Features

Bukiet believes that virtually every book he has read to some extent involves the Holocaust: “the Holocaust has become a talismanic touchstone that every writer must genuflect toward” (2002a: 15). However, there is no sense in trying to explain or understand the Holocaust, and realistic rendition is an impossible dream. Thus, Bukiet adopts a truly unconventional mode to narrate his version of the event. His style contains several features of postmodernism. This is not surprising, because “the second generation for the most part came of cultural age by reading Joyce, Proust, and the great shapers of modern literature,” and “[t]heir work thereby has a manifestly contemporary texture that could not exist in any other era” (Bukiet 2002a: 21). Whereas Rosenbaum’s style is lamentful and modest, Bukiet’s style is much more exuberant and experimental. Bukiet’s angry style magnifies the terror of the Holocaust and shows the writer’s deep involvement.

4.5.1. The Grotesque

The term “grotesque” was first used to refer to the dainty, innocuous frescoes that decorated the walls of Nero’s Domus Aurea (Harpham 23). In literature, the term was not used until the sixteenth century. In that century, Rabelais’ Pantagruel and Gargantua were the first works believed to have grotesque features. The term was used regularly in literary criticism from the eighteenth century onwards. The grotesque refers to unnatural characteristics, capriciousness, and aberrations of all kinds. The term comprises all that diverges from the classical norms of art. Everything which makes the ordinary extraordinary may be considered grotesque. The grotesque became a popular genre again in the modern era, with Kafka, Beckett and Ionesco as its most important representatives. Grotesque elements are found in caricature, parody, satire, and in the theatre of the absurd (van Gorp et al. 193). The grotesque has worked its way into postmodernist literature as well. The grotesque is well equipped to express a world of folly turned upside down.

After contains several elements which point to a grotesque angle. The people in the novel experience the postmodern, post-war world as chaotic and mad. Bukiet’s story in many ways is a satire of the immediate post-WWII world. The novel is also a parody, critical of canonical, eye-witness Holocaust literature. The parodic effect mostly stems from exaggeration. For instance, the characters in the novel almost resemble caricatures: Fishl is
wholly religious, Isaac ever sceptical, Benja fatiguingly mournful. Although they have some other qualities and do evolve in the course of the novel, the characters are shaped around one distinguishing feature. They are disfigured emotionally, spiritually, intellectually, and physically by their experience in the Nazi camps. This was of course a reality in the aftermath, but Bukiet lifts everything to a higher, fantastical level of exaggeration. This is a well-suited way of representing the Holocaust, because it underscores the enormity of the event. After is a parody of a world gone berserk, but it is never gratuitous play. There is always a critical undertone and an awareness of the reality of the world presented, deformed as that presentation may be. Grotesque writers feel an urge for estrangement, for disturbing everything natural or probable. However, this urge reveals a deep insight and knowledge of life. In grotesque writings, fundamental critique and resignation go hand in hand in a remarkable way.

Bakhtin was perhaps the most important early theorizer of the grotesque. For him, the grotesque was an expression of folklore. Medieval carnivals and other popular festivals were the breeding grounds for the grotesque. During those feasts, grotesque figures were introduced with emphasized bodily orifices and protuberances. “The human body was transformed by carnival representations from a classical into a grotesque body” (Burstein 128). Carnival motifs are central in Bukiet’s After:

Characters like Isaac, Marcus and Alter have been severely damaged. Before the war, they were “devout and simple Jewish boys”. After, they have become “grotesque versions of their former selves”, namely unscrupulous expert black marketeers (Burstein 130).

Equally grotesque is the Passover Seder in the newly liberated camp of Dachau. The Seder starts with the traditional recitation of the Passover story. The atmosphere changes rapidly however, when survivors begin to think of the war and express their doubts towards the Holy words that the rabbi is reciting. They want to skip the formalities and get to the food and wine: “The flow of liquor continued through the ostensible third glass and the fourth. That was the end of ritual consumption, but they drank a fifth that was actually a tenth” (36). Watching the Jews “giggling with the luxury of frivolity”, the rabbi declares that it is a shandeh (37). The Jews ignore him and they just party on. Moral decay is omnipresent. “[G]utted by the ignorance of an American rabbi as well as by the bitter cynicism of the
survivors”, the Seder “is a sad, satirical travesty of ritual” (Burstein 130). The liberated Jews are reduced to obscene eating, drinking and mating animals. Jews have lost their identity and “tradition and faith seem to have lost all referentiality” (Sicher 1998: 52). According to Sicher, “Civilization” and “Reparation”, the titles of book three and five of *After*, are empty words (1998: 52). In the fourth book, “Celebration”, every citizen of Regensburg is invited to a big feast on board of the ship Anubis. It is a costume party, a grotesque show where “[e]xcess was the only principle” (251). Emotionally, too, all inhibitions are shed as people express their regrets, their doubts and their utter pessimism. The only sparkle of hope is the birth of Fishl and Rivka’s child, which insures some continuity and hope for the future. “The actual physical existence of the babies that were born [in the immediate aftermath] had the power to spread some light in the middle of the chaos” (Wardi 27). Moments of reprieve like these are few in the novel. The contrast between these few flashes of hope and the utter desperateness that mostly typifies the novel is enormous.

4.5.2. Irony

Irony is a device one would not expect in a book about the Holocaust, the material of which is considered too serious to mock or doubt. This stylistic feature is partly responsible for the feelings of outrage and shock after a first reading of *After*. Irony and its even harsher counterpart sarcasm seem inappropriate in a novel about one of history’s most horrendous events. Rohr argues that Bukiet’s novel is actually written in the comic mode, “a mode which has hitherto rarely participated in the rhetoric of Holocaust representation” (2006: 241). However, *After* does not make us laugh at the victims of the Shoah, nor does the book “belittle the enormity of this crime against humanity” (Rohr 2006: 242). Rather, the novel wants to make the reader realize that a certain monopolizing Holocaust narrative has emerged over the years, one that “has been endlessly reproduced, circulated, and marketed” (Rohr 2006: 242). Hutcheon holds a similar belief when she says that irony (and parody and humour) has subversive potential in its contesting of the universalizing pretensions of “serious” art (1988: 19). Bukiet wants to show that other, equally genuine, representations are possible and that humour and irony should not be excluded a priori from writings concerning the Holocaust.

The novel’s overall tone is not at all jocular or funny. After a more thorough reading, the novel reveals its seriousness and rage. *After* expresses a belief that the past cannot be
revisited innocently. Furthermore, Bukiet’s sarcasm reveals an ever-prevailing anger in the mind of the second-generation writer. These writers “are viciously unredemptive, scoured of weakness as they look atrocity straight in the face with barely contained rage … the writers heal nothing and comfort no one … the writers prefer the open wound’” (Bukiet 2002a: 21-22). Because of this, After cannot be disposed of as sheer mockery. The novel must be considered as a serious, though sardonic, cry for awareness of the legacy of the Shoah. The irony in After underscores the seriousness of the tale instead of undermining it.

A significant amount of the irony in After springs from the cold, matter-of-fact tone in which the events are narrated. This tone mirrors the emotional numbness of the characters. Levi was able to capture the numbness of camp inmates very tellingly in If This Is a Man: “[b]y now we are tired of being amazed. We seem to be watching some mad play, one of those plays in which the witches, the Holy Spirit and the devil appear” (31). Numbness functions as a protective shield against the atrocities of the war and the inmates no longer distinguish between reality and nightmare. After shows that emotions can not so easily be switched on again after the war as the characters appear to be cold and indifferent. They are unable to find an appropriate emotional balance. Examples of irony arising from numbness are numerous throughout After:

“Come with me,” Schimmel said to Isaac. “I’m going to be processed.”
“It sounds like being turned into soap.”
“What a disgusting idea.”
“That’s what they tell me was done elsewhere.”
“Another lager?”
“Yes, I’ve heard rumors of lampshades, too.”
“How?”
“Skin. Finely ornamented with elegant tattoos.”
“Isaac!”
“Hey, I don’t make this stuff up. It’s just what I hear through the grapevine. Could it be true? Who knows?” He shrugged. (21)

The “processing” in this passage refers to the registration of inmates after liberation, a task done by the Joint. Schimmel is appalled by the idea of being turned into soap and assumes that Isaac’s remark is just another ironical observation. Isaac attends to the literal meaning of the word processing. He begins to list examples of processing practices to which Jewish prisoners were subjected. Isaac continues his commentary on the latest gossip in Holocaust business in a tone that shows no surprise or dismay. Ironically, for the reader as well as for the
ignorant Schimmel, this tone doubles the feeling of horror when they read or hear about these practices. Isaac’s indifference, reinforced by his “shrugging”, is astounding and incomprehensible for someone with no knowledge of the emotional state of survivors.

Equally incomprehensible is the vastness of the Holocaust. The Americans, after hearing the “story” of the war, state: “[w]e didn’t know what was happening”, to which “Isaac simply agreed, “[n]either did we”’’ (72). When Miranda tries to explain that they meant that they didn’t know until after liberation, the following exchange occurs:

“I still don’t know,” he insisted with a wilfully obtuse naivete.
“But…but…the ovens.”

They looked to the incinerators, still thick with the rendering of their tribe, and Isaac replied, in English, so that Miranda could not make the phrase any more palatable, “Bread today?” (73)

Isaac plays out an insincere kind of naivety immediately undercut by the sarcastic “bread today?”. His seemingly sincere naivety challenges the presuppositions of the liberators. Isaac unmasks their presumptions of being true liberators. In fact, the Allies came inexcusably late and can only try to heal some of the wounds now. In this tragic scene, Isaac is shockingly indifferent to the ashes still smouldering in the crematorium ovens. With the events so fresh in mind, he is unable to feel any grief for himself or the deceased.

Word meanings have changed during the war. An “oven” signifies more today than just a kitchen utensil. An association is added; from now on an oven can also be a ruthless killing-machine. When one is aware of the alternative meaning of a word but ignores this by attending to the literal meaning alone, irony lurks around the corner. The irony in the above passage works like this, yielding a painfully tragicomic scene. As a first-hand witness, Isaac knows much more about the war than the American liberators, and he mocks their ignorance by means of irony.

The problem of language corrupted by Nazism is mentioned several times in After:

Partisan Review was dedicating a special issue to “The Tragedy of Europe” and sent a commission full of shaggy intellectuals to convene and analyze. … Yiddish and German words were finally acknowledged to have entered the international lingua franca, the mamelosh’n of Heine contributing terms like “lager” and “musselman” to the contemporary polyglot. In any language, phrases like “cattle car” and words like “camp” acquired new meaning. “Gas” became a verb. (68)

Another example is found when Fishl steps on a train: “Fishl had only been in one train during the War, but it was very different, and he knew that railroads had already assumed a
vital metaphoric position in the iconography of Hell” (58). After Auschwitz, trains, cattle cars in particular, have assumed dramatically different meanings. Contemporary readers are painfully aware of this and know that attending to the literal meaning alone is not sufficient to fully comprehend.

At several moments in the novel, the humour is so provocative that even a chuckle would seem inappropriate. A striking example is the following performance of an entertainer:

the Emcee was warming up his audience, “So what did Hitler say to Mussolini when the Italian premier paid him a surprise visit?”

Pause.

“If I’d known you were coming, I would have baked a kike.” (262)

Knowing that “kike” is a derogatory word for Jew, the reader feels utterly uncomfortable because he does not know whether to laugh or to be offended. It seems unbelievable that jokes like these were told when the subject of those jokes was still so topical. Many of the characters presented in After appear to be heartless and numbed to the core. However, this attitude is just a way of protecting themselves. The immediate past is still too current for them to be able to deal with their rage and express their long suppressed feelings. When the reader realizes this, the irony is painful and nauseating rather than funny.

Nonetheless, in some instances the novel is genuinely funny, without the ironic undertone. Isaac and his band are involved in manufacturing and trading DPIOs, “Dead Person’s Identifications”, papers which they simply invented and sold under the pretence that those identifications are required for a burial. Lieutenant Necco, who serves as a link between the forgers and the Yanks stationed at Liebknecht, gives them a present “[f]or services rendered” (161). It is a tin with gallons of brown powder. Isaac and his men do not know what the substance is and “[i]t took several further experiments that smoked up the kitchen until Zimmerman contrived a simple recipe to render the bitter powder palatable for both men and flies” (168). Zimmerman kooks a brown pudding of the powder, which the men eat bowl after bowl, their survivor instinct having not yet left them. The pudding gives the men an enormous amount of energy. They are uplifted to the extent that they can work day and night, without even a minute of repose. Beside from insomnia, the gang also suffers from nervousness. Only when the last bowl of pudding is devoured, do the men find some rest again. Later, Necco, who is surprised that they have run out of the powder so quickly, blurts: “[w]here I come from, we drink coffee” (204). This situation is innocently funny, both for the reader and for

11 My emphasis
the characters. The laughter is relieving and takes the edge off things for a moment. At these rare occasions, After shows that the people presented in the book are still emotional beings, and not merely alienated people grown cold during the war. Their instinctive, almost bestial urge for survival is put in the background for an instant and they become the emotional, feeling men again that they were Before.

4.5.3. Cynicism and Scepticism

The physically and psychologically wrecked characters in After have grown extremely suspicious. Cynicism and scepticism are the modes of living. An attitude of scepticism suits the postmodernist cause as well, since this attitude rejects commonly held beliefs and ideologies.

Aaron Hass argues that “[c]alamitous events often provoke doubt about the presence or nature of God by the believers who suffered and those who observed their suffering”, and that “[s]urvivors have succumbed to this uncertainty” (146). Similarly, Berger argues that a Biblical God is no longer credible (21). As the works of the first generation have illustrated, the fact itself that the Shoah happened shook many persons’ religious beliefs. Religious scepticism is clearly present in After, as in many other second-generation writings.

Isaac’s attitude towards religion is bitterly sceptical. When Fishl says

“I want to stop remembering. I want an aide to recollection so I don’t have to keep it inside me. I want a Torah.”

Isaac was scornful. “One with a velvet cover and silver ornaments, two crowns and a shield hung over the top by a silver loop chain.” (122)

In Isaac’s opinion, religion is mere show, without significant content. He expresses this by merely paying attention to the exterior of the Torah. Religious symbols are ostentatious and superficial, with their velvet and silver ornaments. When someone says “Thank God”, Isaac retorts “Who?” (256). He openly doubts Judaism. Martin argues that “Isaac is the postmodernist who recognizes that theology is dangerous in that it is a meta-narrative that demands blind faith” (51). His religious scepticism expresses his barely contained rage and disappointment. Second-generation writings “reflect the sense of theological rupture caused by death camps and crematoria” (Berger 22). For many of these texts, the issue that “belief is no more”, is very persistent (Burstein 57).
A logical consequence of scepticism is relativism. If everything is doubted, an attitude of “anything goes” is never far away. Survivors’ primitive urges took over and overshadowed their moral consciousness in the camps. After such an experience, moral relativism was rampant. The process of becoming a just, compassionate person again was a slow one. In After, the unreligious black market exploiters find distraction in their forging practices. They have no moral objections regarding their business. Everything is justified, and everyone serves his own interests first. This is undoubtedly survivor legacy. Under the harsh conditions of camp life, the characters have learned to be selfish in order to persist. Elie Wiesel’s Night is a telling account of this self-protectiveness, describing e.g. children stealing a lump of bread from their very own parents. Wiesel narrates how he felt when his father died: “I did not weep, and it pained me that I could not weep. But I was out of tears. And deep inside me, if I could have searched the recesses of my feeble conscience, I might have found something like: Free at last!... ” (112). Morals and values were reversed during the Holocaust, and in the aftermath, compassion and altruism have not yet been found again.

Relativism is pervading in After. The survivors go as far as understating what happened: “[t]he Emcee giggled as he stuck his head out from the curtain for one last punchline, “so what say every twenty years we have a little excitement and then After, we have a lot of fun…”” (93). In this fragment, the war is played down as “a little excitement”. Although it may be the case that people did not fully grasp the enormity of the Holocaust in the immediate post-war years, this surely is an understatement. Every character in After seems to be hiding his hurt behind a mask of uncalled-for indifference. This indifference is an indicator of the bitterness of the war survivors. Michael Martin argues that the remark of the emcee “has opened a discussion of the modernist world-view”(49). Twenty years is a rough estimate of the time between World Wars. Subtextually, the emcee is referring to the rerun of history (Martin 49). History has repeated itself time and again and will continue to do so. For the Jews, the Holocaust, as a “rerun”, “is simply another instance of unending Jewish persecution that had plagued Europe for centuries” (Martin 49). Understandably, survivors are bitter when they realize this. Moreover, they try to shield themselves from this eternal rerun of history by adopting a relativist attitude towards what they encounter.

Cynicism shows people’s indifference and seems to hide all human emotion. Isaac is an extremely cynical character. He generally distrusts people, and does not believe in their good intentions. The one person he does trust, his brother Alter, turns up and leaves when Alter wants to. Consequently, he is perhaps not the best person to rely upon. Characters like Miranda, who happen to have good intentions, are mocked and hurt by the protagonist. Isaac’s
judging skills, or deficiencies, cause him to mistreat people and make the wrong decisions. He is too suspicious to give anyone the benefit of the doubt. At several points in After, Isaac is described as cynical. Neither Schimmel nor anyone else can mimic or equal “Isaac’s cynical authority” (231).

Benja, Der Schreiber, is despised by Isaac for his sensitivity and his conjuring up of the war in writing. Isaac is annoyed at Benja’s popularity and his ability to confront the Holocaust experience. However, towards the end of the novel Benja appears to be more than a silent, mourning writer. He even helps Isaac with his hitherto greatest project, the robbery of eighteen tons of gold made from fillings pried from the teeth of Jews. Isaac may have more in common with Der Schreiber than he wants to:

For all the animosity between them, the two men had a lot in common. Both expected the worst of any given situation, Isaac with cynicism, Der Schreiber with sorrow … but each also had the sense that he was able to weigh the odds subtly in his own favor. Their reflexes were honed to make decisions at each fork in the road… . (257)

In fact, Isaac may not be the only one who has made cynicism his motto. Benja has changed towards the end of the novel, the narrator comments that “[h]e sounded like Isaac”: “[t]here was a bitterness in his voice that had not been in Farmakht Oyg’n when he merely recounted history. Now he was judging it. Sadness disappeared under rage” (375). In the end, even the most peaceful person is governed by anger and he copes with, or masks this anger by adopting a cynical, sceptical perspective on the new world of the aftermath. Benja’s rage prevents him from ever being able to write the story of the aftermath (Burstein 59). Benja himself knows this too: “I seem able to describe, but I still can’t understand…The problem is that life is not a book” (259). While he tries hard to remember, Isaac merely wants to forget. Tragically, both coping mechanisms turn out to be inadequate and anything but life-enhancing.

Remarkably, a sceptical attitude can also be found in one of Bukiet’s other works, Stories of an Imaginary Childhood, although this work is thoroughly different from After. In this collection of short stories narrated by a twelve-year-old boy, Bukiet brings to life the Polish shtetl of Proszowice in 1928. These short stories have often been described as an “attempt to retrieve a world torn asunder by the Nazis” (Furman 2000: 43). The picture created is idyllic and peaceful. However, the young narrator is a contrary boy: “I do not know what there was within me that made me so contrary. I do not know why I could not accept the lot drawn for me at birth and gratify my parents’ and my people’s expectations” (19). He is sceptical towards the traditional modes of Judaic expression and towards community values. The “distracted, dissatisfied boy” seeks “omens of ill favor”: “I created images of my
discontent in the world about me” (121). Although Bukiet describes a very different world in *Stories of an Imaginary Childhood*, some of the scepticism and pessimism of *After* is present in these short stories as well. It seems as if the author cannot depict a wholly happy community because he anticipates what will happen to its inhabitants: “[t]o be sure, Bukiet carefully constructs the stories in the collection to evoke the Holocaust allusively” (Furman 2000: 43). Bukiet is writing about “a doomed people” and he can never completely cancel out the anger he feels about the Jewish people’s fate.

5. THE POST-POSTMODERN MOMENT AND BUKIET’S “CRACKPOT REALISM”

The form of *After* is not postmodernist. Mostly, the novel is built up chronologically and logically. It does not display the typically postmodernist fragmentary and eclectic make-up. The novel is not intended to confuse the reader on the level of plot, narration or temporal structure. However, many of the postmodernist problems of reality and representation, style and identity inform the novel, and in that respect *After* certainly can be called postmodernist.

Michael Martin argues that there is reason to believe that Bukiet has moved beyond postmodernism. He bases his hypothesis on a theoretical article by Bukiet himself, “Crackpot Realism: Fiction for the Forthcoming Millennium”, published in *The Review of Contemporary Fiction*. In this article, Bukiet develops an idea about a new literary genre emerging in the late nineties. Bukiet contrasts the work of the so-called “crackpot realist” with that of the more traditional postmodernist author. There is no strict rupture or divide, however. As forebears of crackpot realism Bukiet mentions authors as Pynchon, Márquez and Kafka, who can all be placed in the line of postmodernist authors as well. Inversely, Bukiet finds echoes of the crackpot’s worldview of chaos and disruption in postmodernist writings (1996b: 16). Martin argues that postmodernism is currently waning (45). He believes that postmodernism as a paradigm cannot answer all the questions of the new era, and therefore a new understanding must emerge. He refers to this new moment as the “post-postmodern” moment (45). Martin asserts that, although much of Bukiet’s work embraces the sensibilities of postmodernist fiction, the writer is perhaps the most important herald of this post-postmodern moment (46).

Bukiet argues that “the work of the crackpot realists takes us into an orbit where the imagination changes the political, the emotional, and occasionally, the physical ground rules of existence” (1996b: 14). This is demonstrated in *After*, where the author’s freely imagined
post-war world shakes readers’ expectations regarding ethics and moral standards, as well as their expectations as to how political and military figures should act after the end of a horrendous world war. Furthermore, the crackpot realist tries to find pattern and meaning and is not, like the postmodernist, concerned with sheer word play and problems of language. The crackpot realist is in search of an emotional truth and insists that what he depicts is life and not just *like* life (Bukiet 1996b: 16).

For both crackpot realists and postmodernist authors, the Holocaust is a popular theme. For the postmodernist author “World War II and the Holocaust, to varying degrees and for differing purposes, have been commonly adopted as historical vantage points or reference markers” (Martin 47), while “the crackpots dive into the underlying madness that created the war rather than the madness of the war itself” (Bukiet 1996b: 20). Considering *After*, Bukiet indeed seems to be a crackpot realist himself. His choice for the depiction of the Holocaust’s aftermath was deliberate. Unlike Levi or Wiesel, Bukiet is not concerned about what went on during the war, he is more interested in its underlying folly. In a sense, he is looking for human traits that made the Holocaust possible. These human characteristics, such as greed and indifference, are present to some extent in e.g. *Night*, but have been enlarged to the extreme in *After*. Bukiet presents a tale that borders on the unacceptable and in doing so, he enters the new post-postmodern moment while still adopting some features of the previous paradigm, that of the postmodern moment.

6. HOPE AFTER ALL?

Scepticism and sarcasm are rather pessimistic approaches to the world. Thus, the overall picture presented in *After* is very gloomy. It seems as if the characters in the novel have given up all hope for the future. The new world offers very few opportunities for its inhabitants. The war may be over, but the misery is there to last.

Both Levi and Wiesel have commented on how ridiculous and naïve hope may seem in the face of a tragedy as enormous as the Shoah. Both during and after the war, victims clung to the slightest hopes for survival and for the future. Many camp victims have sought for relatives who might have survived, and in this search, were disappointed time and again. Even Isaac, the incarnation of pessimistic hopelessness, is not completely indifferent to the possibility that his brother is still alive:
“I knew a Kaufman once.”
“I knew several,” Isaac replied. He didn’t want to get caught up in the game, but despite his contempt, even Isaac was susceptible to the fragile hopes that flooded him whenever he heard a strange voice. … It was that one in a million chance that lead the other 999,999 suckers to believe that miracles were possible. (88)

When Fishl tells Isaac that Alter is in Czechoslovakia, Isaac does not want to believe it. He is too vulnerable to surrender to hope. Still, his urge to know gains the upper hand and he travels to find his brother alive and well.

Whereas Benja is progressing towards becoming more angry and bitter, Isaac seems to be going in the opposite direction. He decides that life might not be so bad after all and “[r]iding on the ship of the doomed, he had decided to get off” (323). In other words, he has decided to take destiny in his own hands. Towards the ending, there is even a hint of happiness: “Miranda giggled. He had never heard such a sound, the sound of bubbles and lavender. He looked down at her face as if seeking the origins of that acoustics of heaven” (349). Upon hearing the Regensburg clock, one would even think that the war never happened (349). Inertia and eternal gloom have given way to lust for life. Isaac’s dreaming of Far Rockaway could be read as an early expression of this budding belief in the future.

The development towards more optimistic prospects of life is not without difficulties, however. From the beginning, Isaac has an eye on the massive gold ingot stored at the US military encampment. The Americans have also thought of a destination for the gold. Martin says that for all the parties involved the gold signifies a world of plenty that can change an individual’s life for the better (52). When the band is impeded in their quest for the gold by the American General Hank Smith, “Hammerin’ Hank”, the forgers’ dreams seem to have shattered. The progress towards a promising world After suddenly stops. “There went Far Rockaway. … so what? [Isaac] felt empty as a mouth without teeth responding to the tongue’s insistent probe. After was the same as During, and Before didn’t exist at all” (358). The survivors are disappointed one more time and their path towards restoration is delayed again.

Nonetheless, for the crackpot realist, nothing is hopeless or meaningless and

Such a worldview separates the crackpot realists from their literary contemporaries: beyond the welter of random, inchoate experience, they find pattern and meaning. … If crackpot realism begins with subversion and suspicion, it takes a spiritual journey in a secular rocketship all the way to salvation. (1996b: 15)

Even if understanding the Holocaust is impossible, the search for meaning might not be in vain. As Martin poses, the crackpot realist hopes to discover a new key to humanity (47).
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Task for people living in the world *After* is to develop a new ethical sense, an ethical sense which Bukiet believes is emerging at the end of the millennium (Martin 46). In the light of crackpot realism, *After* can be described as “a dark, sardonic, and yet hopeful interrogation of the world created after the liberation of the death camps” (Martin 48). Many survivors “hope to return to an untainted, pre-World War II, modernist world view” (Martin 48). Isaac and his fellow men are prime examples of this. They try to ignore the past war and lock up every memory that reminds them of the camps. They want to make money, pick up girls and return to normalcy. Fishl, again the odd one out, wants to remember and mourn, whereas the others just want to forget. Benja, too, wants to call the Holocaust back to mind in his writing. Martin argues that Benja is a step ahead of Isaac, since Der Schreiber realizes that something can be learned from history. Benja’s hope is that his readers can come to understand the lager and “thus work to end the possibility that it may occur again” (Martin 49). For Isaac and kindred spirits the rerun of history is inevitable and beyond their grasp (Martin 49). Their main goal is to live exuberantly in the years between those reruns, e.g. world wars.

Martin argues that Isaac is the antithesis to the philosophy of Bukiet, whereas Fishl exemplifies it (50). Isaac is stuck and does not believe in salvation of any kind. He must learn that the external world is the embodiment of his own discontent (1996b: 16). Fishl has already come to the awareness that one must help oneself in order to find the way to salvation. After the execution of the ambitious plan to steal the gold, Fishl goes off with the gold together with his wife Rivka, and buries the treasure at Auschwitz. Fishl wishes to honour the dead and in doing so, realizes that “he can no longer live in the moment of the lager, but must move ahead” (Martin 53). Fishl’s continued adherence to theology, in a more sceptical way than Before, however, also exemplifies that he tries to find a meaningful new relationship to the world and to God. Learning from past experiences is important, and one can only hope to do things better next time. Bukiet feels that

The crazed, wishful-thinking crackpot realist has faith in a nature that keeps procreating, renewing itself into further generations of lunacy and murder, trying again and again to get it right. If the last page of any one of these books announces “The End” with terrifying clarity, we turn immediately to the next page 1. (1996b: 22)

The author expresses this belief in the final passage of *After*, where the narrator has become a mouthpiece of the author’s philosophy: “the last Jew, wherever he was, was still breathing, and the whisper was sighing, “No, nein, not After,” but that other, age old, heartfelt, eternal resolution: “Again”” (384). Apparently, the last Jew is not so easily exterminated.
7. CONCLUSION

Seeing and thinking about the Holocaust may be as difficult as living it, not the hurt of the body, not in the specific searing memories, but in having to face a universe that will allow such evil. Life is not as it used to be once it contains Auschwitz. (Bukiet qtd. in Berger 73)

Bukiet understands that the Holocaust is more than just a dark moment in history. The Shoah is one of the major shapers of the modern world. Bukiet’s depiction of the immediate aftermath of the war as a bleak, chaotic wasteland illustrates this understanding. Instead of being elated by victory, the liberated camp inmates in After are cynical and apathetic. They experience difficulties finding an emotional and social balance again. They have been through the unimaginable and are ceaselessly haunted by “searing memories” and nightmares. Bukiet is aware of the enormous amount of pain and guilt that the first generation drags along. He also knows that for the second generation, life has been infinitely less dangerous and hopeless. As a member of the second generation, Bukiet is inevitably tied to the Holocaust, but he can chose how to incorporate the event in his life.

The characters in After “may avoid suffering only in remembering a past world, assuming their responsibility to speak of that world, and, finally taking a role in creating a new world” (Martin 53). Bukiet’s novel points towards the importance of remembering and passing on the Holocaust legacy. The second-hand experience that Bukiet’s father passed on to his son is too important and constitutive to forget. The task of After is to assess the differences that the war caused “so that losses may be clearly seen, adequately mourned” (Burstein 57). According to Berger, “[t]he second generation will have a societal impact by translating the survivors’ suffering into a salvific message” (6). For Bukiet, writing means remembering. However, Bukiet does feel that the time has come “to challenge the ways in which we currently write and think about the atrocity” (Furman 2000: 57). After exemplifies this need to challenge and provoke.

After expresses a deep feeling of anger and pessimism. However, “[b]leak as the novel may be, Bukiet intimates during several magical moments that the flame of the Jewish soul will never be extinguished” (Furman 2000: 57). So, as hopeless as the situation sketched in After may appear, Bukiet clearly feels that there is some hope of recovering. “Working through” the inherited trauma will be very difficult, but it is a worthwhile enterprise. Even if many first-generation survivors did not succeed, their experience will be passed on to their children who will try to continue the act of mourning. With the works of these children, the
legacy stays alive, eyes are opened and victims are mourned. Without some sense of hope or relevance, it is doubtful whether second-generation works would arise. Admittedly, their work expresses fury at the injustice done to their race, but in expressing this, people are instilled with the belief that a second Holocaust must be prevented at all costs. Martin argues that Bukiet and other crackpot realists must work to represent a world in which they might choose to live by developing a new post-Holocaust ethical sense:

Thus, the author must recognize the importance of the individual in the creation of this world: an individual who can recognize and critique ideology; an individual who can make his voice heard among the dissension and struggle to find a common ground; an individual who can look at and recognize the past, present, and future and while seeing repetition, maintain a desire to remain critically active and participatory in an effort to create a world where we will one day get it right. (55)
V CONCLUSION

The first wave of Holocaust literature, the writings of survivors, has paved the way for future generations. The major achievement of this first generation is to have overcome the conspiracy of silence surrounding the Shoah. They have shown that artistic appropriation of the Holocaust does not necessarily mean trivialization. In doing so, they have broken the first taboo around Holocaust representation. Also, they have shown the profound impact of the Shoah on its immediate victims, and on civilization at large. The memoirs of the first generation initiated the existential debate. Primo Levi and Elie Wiesel were among the first who openly reflected on God’s inactivity, or even absence, during the Holocaust. By extension, they were among the first to admit that they wavered between religious belief and disbelief. Also, they lay bare man’s capability for evil in the face of self-preservation. With the works of survivor writers, the Holocaust has become part of the public domain. Because of this, the fear that the Shoah will be forgotten has somewhat diminished. First-generation testimonial literature has established a precedent for contemporary writers, who by now have realized that writing about the Jewish near-extermination is acceptable, and indeed accepted.

The second generation has inherited a very distinct legacy that has profoundly influenced their identity. Many “2G’s” felt that they owed something to their disturbed parents. Once the objection against representing the Holocaust was out of the way, many of these second-hand witnesses have chosen to write about the event that shaped their parents’ and their own lives. Melvin Jules Bukiet believes that two major traits distinguish the second generation from the first, canonical, generation. Both style and genre are markedly different. Wiesel and his contemporaries resorted to the more traditional mode of rabbinical tale telling, while the second generation’s works have a manifestly contemporary texture (Bukiet 2002a: 21). The latter is exemplified strikingly in After. With regard to genre, the first generation usually draws on memoir, while the second generation has no option but to turn to the imagination as their knowledge about the Shoah is relatively scarce (Bukiet 2002a: 21). Obviously, the second generation has also inherited a very distinct literary legacy, one that brings obligations as well as opportunities.

Thane Rosenbaum has written a personal account which is yet representative of what the Shoah legacy does to a child of survivors. He brings his wide personal experience to the work, while also touching upon matters that concern all children born in a survivor household. The struggle to find a fitting way to incorporate the Shoah into one’s life has proven to be
long and difficult. For Rosenbaum, the act of writing is therapeutic, as it compensates for the stories that his parents never told. During his odyssey to self-recognition and unification, Rosenbaum mourns his own losses and missed opportunities as well as those of his parents.

In the second-generation tradition, Bukiet’s *After* immediately stands out. By use of postmodernist concerns and techniques, Bukiet attacks all the sacred cows that until now determined Holocaust literature. However, with a work like *If This Is a Man* in mind, *After* might not be so shockingly preposterous after all. Many of the abuses described in Bukiet’s novel can be detected in Levi’s novel in embryonic form. The psychological numbness, religious scepticism, grotesquery, black marketing in *After* are exaggerated extensions of some of Levi’s concerns. Moreover, Levi already used irony, thus showing that he had already acquired a more distanced perspective on the Shoah. In a sense, Bukiet’s novel illustrates continuity in Holocaust literature rather than a radical rupture. Bukiet has adopted many of the first generation’s concerns in a wholly modern, personal way.

The contrast with *Elijah Visible* could not be greater. An analysis of both books in their own right has uncovered thoroughly different works. Rosenbaum and Bukiet have walked very different literary paths, although their mainsprings for writing are essentially the same. Like many second-generation writers, they are driven by anger and guilt, as well as by the urge to remember the Shoah.

Although *After* and *Elijah Visible* appear to have nothing in common on the surface, they do display some mutual concerns. First and foremost, these literary works show that the second generation cannot stay away from the Holocaust. Although they could have written about a great number of different things, Rosenbaum and Bukiet have singled out the horrid event that turned their families’ lives upside down. Out of a deep desire to gain some kind of understanding, they have explored the event’s darkest secrets and implications. Moreover, their search is unlimited and never-ending, as all their other literary works to a great extent deal with the Shoah as well. As Furman observed, “the European catastrophe has thus far served to a definite degree as a ubiquitous referent around which [their] precocious artistic imagination whirls” (2000: 40).

*After* deals with the Holocaust’s immediate aftermath, while *Elijah Visible* considers the longer-cast shadow. This difference does not undo the common aim of both second-generation writers, however. Prying into the Holocaust and its consequences is a means of assessing the situation of Jews today. Berger asserts that “the contemporary children of Job who pursue a particularist response to the Shoah seek to clarify their own relationship to Judaism and their Jewish identity” (84). With their artistic experiments, Bukiet and
Rosenbaum investigate whether a meaningful Jewish life and identity are possible, and viable, after the Holocaust (Furman 2000: 40). Thus, the second common denominator that ties the two works together is the authors’ search for a firm and stable post-Holocaust Jewish American identity.

Beyond doubt, the ever-developing literature of the American second generation is a very varied contribution to the literary field. Nevertheless, this distinct literature has achieved a sense of unity and oneness as well, as the “genre” incorporates common motives and themes. As Sanford Pinsker appraisingly states:

Other writers … could easily have been included here. Each is distinctive, but taken together they represent a direction in Jewish American literature that promises to make the next decades at least as rich as the ones that gave us writers such as Saul Bellow, Bernard Malamud, Philip Roth, I.B. Singer, and Cynthia Ozick. (no pagination)
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