

HOLOCAUST LITERATURE: THE LANGUAGE OF MEMORY

Literatura del Holocausto: el lenguaje de la memoria

CAROLINA SIMON*

Zachor Shoah Organization

Zachorshoah@gmail.com

Abstract

Holocaust literature is an artistic expression, which in many ways sits outside the established understandings of literature and its purpose. The Holocaust itself was an event so unique in its complexities that it separated from other historic atrocities. The Holocaust is not just a historical event. It affected psychology, sociology, politics, innovation, medicine, engineering, ethics, morality, and artistic expressions. Throughout this essay, I will argue the case for Holocaust literature: what exactly is it, what unique challenges does it face as a genre, how it is evolving, and how best to read it. Authors in this genre have a great responsibility to present factual information through the use of prose. This is particularly of concern as survivors die and new voices emerge, whether they are the children of survivors or not. The telling of the many stories of the Holocaust can help us all become witnesses of a human tragedy that, although highly secretive and manipulative of language, emotions, and events, affected the entire world.

Keywords

Holocaust Literature;
language of memory;
witness;
survivor

Resumen

La literatura sobre el Holocausto es una expresión artística que se encuentra, de muchas maneras, fuera de lo que entendemos por literatura y sus propósitos. El Holocausto fue un hecho tan único en sus complejidades que se diferenció de otras atrocidades históricas. Pero, este no es solo un evento histórico, sino que afectó tanto a la psicología como a la sociología, la política, la innovación, la medicina, la ingeniería, la ética, la moralidad y la expresión artística. A lo largo de este ensayo, argumentaré sobre la literatura del Holocausto: qué se entiende por literatura del Holocausto, a qué desafíos se enfrenta como género, cómo está evolucionando y cuáles la mejor manera de leerla. Los autores de este género tienen la gran responsabilidad de presentar información verídica mediante el uso de la prosa. Esto es de especial interés a medida que los supervivientes mueren y surgen nuevas voces, ya sean de hijos de supervivientes o no. Narrar las numerosas historias del Holocausto puede ayudarnos a ser testigos de una tragedia humana que, aunque muy oculta y manipulada por el lenguaje, las emociones y los acontecimientos, afectó al mundo entero.

Palabras clave

literatura del holocausto;
lenguaje de la memoria;
testigo;
sobreviviente

Holocaust Literature: the Language of Memory

Jorge Luis Borges, the Argentine writer, claimed that nothing is original. He believed that everyone influences everyone else and therefore literature as well. His theory is easily seen in various literary forms and genres regardless of authorship or cultural origins from captivity narratives (the first-hand accounts of Anglo-women kidnapped by Native peoples during the Westward expansion and its violent clashes between Americans and Indians) to slave narratives (the retelling of first-hand accounts of the experiences of slaves during the era of Slavery in the Americas) to other forms of testimonial literature. The reader can see the similarities between all narratives while still appreciating their differences. Holocaust literature can be easily adapted to fit this theory in that it too consists of first-hand accounts, diaries and testimonials, but it is also an artistic expression as unique as the historical event that prompted it. Unlike the historical accounts of slavery of Indian conquests or any other form of human attempts to subjugate and conquer their neighbor, the Holocaust was truly unprecedented. Never before had a government been motivated purely out of evil intentions, never before had various nationalities and cultures joined together to promote the annihilation of an entire people simply because of their social category (in this case – Jewish), so that the motivations behind the Holocaust have little if anything to do with political, geographic, or financial gains and everything to do with promoting murder for the sake of murder. Unlike the racist economic system of slavery or a power-hungry tribal massacre, the Holocaust was not driven by a desire for cheap labor or more land. Any gains made by the Nazis were a side effect of the original motivation of death to all Jews simply because they were Jewish. It is because of the uniqueness of the Holocaust that the literature that was born from its ashes is unique too.

Ernst van Alphen explains the uniqueness of Holocaust Literature in the break between witnessing and understanding, in the book *Image and Remembrance: Representation and the Holocaust* (2003). In it he explains that for centuries (since the Enlightenment) the ability to visually observe our world and comprehend that which we observed has been conjoined. To witness something, anything, is to immediately understand what one saw and what it means for humanity. But, according to van Alphen, “the link between seeing and comprehension, however, has been radically disrupted in the experiences of Holocaust victims” (2003, p. 330). This disruption is the very thing that separates the survivor-author from the reader but also from the non-survivor author. The “realities” of the Holocaust defied all logic, all human comprehension, and all ability to express through language what one witnessed.

Most of the authors that make up the canon of Holocaust Literature were witnesses to the Holocaust by having survived it. Simon Wiesenthal (1997), Andre Schwartz-Bart (1959), Ernest Becker (1973), Primo Levi (1996), Zsuzsanna Ozsvath (2010) and Elie Wiesel (1980), among many others, all wrote about the Holocaust from the combined perspective of witness, victim, and survivor. They all experienced the Holocaust first-hand, but as Ernst van Alphen states, they could not comprehend what took place before their eyes. And even after 75 years of information, education and personal artistic expression on the event, we too have great difficulty comprehending

it. It is not just the complexities of human cruelty and sheer evil that leave the current generations with more questions than answers. The literature that provides new generations with the knowledge and emotions of the Holocaust also leaves many un-answered questions. What constitutes Holocaust Literature? What defines a novel or narrative as part of the canon? Does language play a special role in this literary form? Are the motivations of the author different from other forms of testimonial narrative?

So what exactly is Holocaust Literature and why should we read or study it? At its core, and in its original writings, Holocaust Literature was an attempt by Holocaust survivors to tell the story of how they died. We write in our hearts and heads long before we put pen to paper. Holocaust survivors who later wrote their stories had been creating their narratives, making sure to remember every detail, first in their hearts and then in their heads. For most of them it took years, decades even, before they could put it to paper. All literature has value, helps the reader better understand life from someone else's perspective. But Holocaust Literature, often without employing many literary devices, transports the reader through time and space and transcends human reality. It allows us all to become survivors of the Holocaust by merely reading about it. If nothing else, this is its greatest purpose; its greatest reason for existing and being studied.

It would seem that the motivation for writing about the Holocaust can be found within the pages of the book, *Echoes from the Holocaust*,

Should our murderers be victorious, should *they* write the history of this war... their every word will be taken for gospel. Or they may wipe out our memory altogether, as if we had never existed, as if there had never been a Polish Jewry, a Ghetto in Warsaw, a Maidanek. Not even a dog will howl for us. But if *we* write the history of this period... we'll have the thankless job of proving to a reluctant world that we were Abel, the murdered brother. (Wyschogrod, 1988, p. 335)

Perhaps this is what differentiates Holocaust literature from other forms of literature; the author is not using creativity to tell a story, to express emotions, or to make dreams a reality. It is a means of giving testimony through the use of prose. It is literature created with the intention of giving voice to the dead so that even if only one person had survived to tell the story, the names of every victim would be known, and remembered, even if only as a member of the Jewish people. Leon Schagrin, a Holocaust survivor, was 13 years old the day his entire family was murdered. He was saved because he looked German, was young, and could work with horses. When he tells his life story to high school students, he recalls his father telling him to survive so he could tell the world there once was a large Schagrin family that farmed the land in Poland. This promise was made by nearly every survivor to their parents. They would survive to tell the story of how the world killed all its Jews. In Judaism, a person is dead if there is no one left to remember them. Creating a literature that remembers individuals along with the 6 million Jews murdered by Nazis, gives eternal life to the victims. It gives a more profound purpose to the literature too.

Unlike other testimonial literatures (captivity or slave narratives) the stories of the Holocaust are not told with a political slant or exaggeration of events, for the purpose of changing or complying with political trends. On the contrary, until recently all Holocaust Literature was written by survivors, and at times by those that died during the Holocaust as is the case of Anne Frank and Miklos Radnoti, without exaggeration of any events. Unlike the previously mentioned narratives, the motivation for writing Holocaust narratives was not to change situations or punish perpetrators, but to give life and dignity to the dead. Exaggerations would have defeated the original intention. Furthermore, the reality was so unimaginable that the telling of the Holocaust experience is often not nearly as torturous as the reality. As a literary genre predominantly written by survivors, Holocaust Literature faces some significant challenges – one is the inability to undo the manipulation of language created by the Nazis thus restricting and constricting the survivor-author's words; the other is the emergence of non-survivor authors as they write about this time period as they would any other significantly lacking in the emotional connections to the Jewish victims and to the underlying causes that still plague all of humanity. Elie Wiesel's *Night* (1980) is a good example of how the language used to describe the events is often powerful yet sparingly used.

In three days I shall no longer be here... say the Kaddish for me. We promised him. In three days' time, when we saw the smoke rising from the chimney, we would think of him. Ten of us would gather together and hold a special service. All his friends would say the Kaddish. Then he went off toward the hospital, his step steadier, not looking back. An ambulance was waiting to take him to Birkenau. These were terrible days. We received more blows than food; we were crushed with work. And three days after he had gone we forgot to say Kaddish. (Wiesel, 1980, p. 73)

Elie Wiesel has said so much in such a short paragraph. We know that death was waiting for them and they knew it too. We know that hunger and survival consumed their every thought, and we know that although forgotten at the time, the guilt that rose from survival lives on. We know this because of the carefully chosen words Wiesel uses to express this idea. It is not an idea repeated over many pages. It is simply stated once. This is true for most of the statements made in the novel. Only the word "night" appears over and over again. To the reader who is new to the world of Holocaust Literature, this may seem odd, even unemotional and unattached. But post-Holocaust language is unable to express what happened, what people saw, and especially what they felt. Berel Lang claims in Rosenberg's *Echoes from the Holocaust* that this distortion of language is a direct result of the manipulation of language by the Nazis: "Thus, too, the assertion made here of a connection between language and Nazi genocide may seem hardly to move beyond the claim that language was at once a victim of the genocide and an agent causing it" (Lang, 1988, p. 341).

Nazis chose to give new meanings to mundane words and phrases. Their efforts resulted in a new code language allowing them to continue their mission of killing Jews while Germans, and many others, continued with their lives unaware of what was happening outside city limits. Words like *Sonderbehandlung* (special treatment execution), *Aussiedlung* (evacuation), *Umsiedlung* (resettlement), *Auflockerung* (thinning out), *Ausschaltung* (removal) and *Sauberung* (cleansing) were all used instead

of the words for killing or execution. These terms were used with the Jewish population in order to prevent resistance, but also with the general population and amongst Nazis as well (Lang, 1988, p. 351). Even within the topsy-turvy world of Auschwitz and other death camps, mundane words like “hospital”, “ambulance”, and “shower” had very different meanings. The Nazis manipulated language to keep both the civilian population and the SS in charge of killing Jews from over-thinking or internalizing what was really taking place. But it also keeps survivors from being able to tell their experiences in a way that the rest of us can fully comprehend.

In addition to the chosen vocabulary changes, other words, too, were altered in meaning. Words like boxcar, numbers, barracks, ration, selection, roll call, tattoo and chimney all were given new meanings due to their usage during the Holocaust. Even the word prisoner or inmate was distorted. This use and abuse of language by Nazis has made a victim of all who uses the words. It makes victims of us because we are left with no other words but those chosen by the perpetrators to tell the story of the victims. As the Holocaust is taught to more people, its mutilated language, the language of a nightmare lacking in its ability to properly express itself yet understood by those who hear it, is passed on as a torch of knowledge and agony to a new generation.

I believe there is a danger that still haunts the language of the Holocaust. If such simple and ordinary words were transformed into the mechanism that allowed evil to exist, the dual definition must be taught explicitly. The problems of language and the Holocaust are not confined to the complexities of word choice when telling the story of the Holocaust. The post-Holocaust world is one that is permeated by the events of the Holocaust. The re-defining of language has affected not only the literature but everyday speech as well. Here, too, the Holocaust is unique from its testimonial narrative predecessors. Words like Holocaust, Nazi, Hitler for example, have become such common terms that they are often misused or abused. In recent years we have seen such terms used to describe everything from immigration policy disputes along the US-Mexico border to conservative voters or Israel itself. Even after the Holocaust, in a world seemingly so different from the one that created it, language continues to be inadequate in its ability to speak of the unspeakable and inadequately used to compare one political idea or movement to another. Individual words themselves have become commonplace within everyday speech.

Language has evolved in the post-Holocaust world as a tool with which to manipulate the political and social senses, “a view that at the level of political reality was not long ago a radical innovation now becomes naturalized and familiar” (Lang, 1988, p. 358). This is true even for those who do not intend to manipulate. The writer of Holocaust Literature, for example, has no intention of manipulating the reader, yet has no other choice since the only words available to the writer are those created by the Nazis. Words of deceit, manipulation, and what Berel Lang calls the *figurative lie*.

To witness an event is to share its essence with those who actually experienced it. This is the core purpose behind Holocaust writers’ motivations for sharing their stories. In writing about the event, they give testimony; *they bear witness* to the Holocaust, thus sharing the experience of all victims with their readers and turning their readers into witnesses. Creating a fictional testimony, that is to say, a fictional piece of literature based on historical events, can provide much-needed

longevity and expansion of audiences to the genre, but it can pose serious threats to the validity of all Holocaust testimony. Unlike previous testimonial narratives, Holocaust Literature and history scholars often want to create universality to the suffering, perhaps as an attempt to prevent another genocide; perhaps as an attempt to make a “Jewish” story relevant or interesting to non-Jews. Two authors come to mind as examples of this: William Styron (*Sophie’s Choice*, 1976) and John Boyne (*The Boy in the Striped Pajamas*, 2007). Both authors tell the story of the Holocaust and the “horrors” of surviving Auschwitz, but they do so by focusing the reader’s sympathy onto a non-Jewish victim and by changing the factual realities. Sophie is described as a member of the Polish *inteligencia* who upon arriving at Auschwitz must choose which of her two children will live or die. She chooses to save her son. In reality, this would not have happened. All prisoners upon arrival at Auschwitz (a death camp created solely for the purpose of quickly and efficiently killing as many people as possible) were subjected to a selection process by Dr. Mengele. He sent all elderly people, disabled, weak, and young mothers with small children to the gas chambers upon arrival. They did this because children were useless to them (except the few saved for medical experiments or pedophilia brothels) and because mothers whose children were taken away became useless themselves as they did nothing but cry for their babies. In addition, Polish prisoners were made *Kapos*, those in charge of a barrack. The Nazis relied on the existing Antisemitism among the Polish people to help them further dehumanize and police the Jews. One has to ask why did Styron choose to change the reality? Did he want to avoid the underlying root cause of the Holocaust – Antisemitism? A similar situation is true of Boyne’s work. The story is about a Jewish boy roughly 9 years-old and the son of the commandant of the same age. They become friends as the German boy and Jewish boy travel in and out of Auschwitz through a hole in the fence and culminates in the German boy being rounded up with his Jewish friend and gassed to death. Again, none of this is remotely possible. Fences around Auschwitz were fortified with a second fence, both electric. It is true that the commandant of Auschwitz, like several other camps, had families that lived there with them, but their children had been taught well who Jews were, why they were in Auschwitz, and why it was a crime to be friends with them. We again ask: why would the author change the reality? Why did he feel the need to have an “innocent” victim die? Why was the death of a 9-year-old Jewish boy not enough? The Holocaust is full of extreme experiences. The dangers associated with this type of Holocaust novel are only intensified by their popularity as films. The reality is that Styron and Boyne will influence few people who read Wiesel, but a much larger number of people watch movies than read these days. Styron has said that he has read some Holocaust Literature, but that since they share certain details it is unnecessary to read too much on the subject (Lewis, 2016, p. 175). Styron’s opinion of the Holocaust as “detail” is evident in his work as *Sophie’s Choice* is not about the Holocaust but rather about Sophie’s life because of her choice. Sophie could just as easily have been asked to make that choice as a Chinese woman during the Chinese Cultural Revolution, or as an Irish woman during the Irish potato famine, or as a slave woman in Antebellum America. Styron attempted to make the Holocaust more than an atrocity against European Jews, but that is what it was –the Final Solution– the irrational and fervent desire to eradicate Jews from all of Europe that made the Holocaust unique. As stated earlier, it was the motivations of the Nazis, not their actions, that made the Holocaust unique. In their quest to make

the Holocaust a universal suffering, Styron and Boyne robbed their audiences of being literary witnesses to the event, separating them even further from the victims, the survivors, and its memory.

In contrast, John Biguenet, author of a collection of short stories titled *The Torturer's Apprentice* (2001), wrote a short story that was later made into a play as part of that collection titled: *I Am Not A Jew*. The play/story is part of the evolution of the genre to include non-survivor and non-Jewish authors that may not even center their story during the years of 1933-1945, but that still deal with the after-math of the Holocaust. In the story, the non-Jewish American characters bear witness to the experiences of life after the Holocaust. The main characters are a middle-aged couple who go to Germany on vacation. They notice how hospitable everyone is around town, how quaint the town is as if stepping out of a history book or fairy tale and how proudly German they are without being hostile or rude about it. The wife naps while the husband takes a stroll around town. He ends up in an abandoned cemetery on the outskirts of town. He soon realizes it is a Jewish cemetery. As he admires the headstones with dates and names and small photos inscribed on the marble slabs a group of Neo-Nazi youth attacks him. The whole time he shouts in broken German "*Ich Nicht bin Juden – I am not a Jew*". He escapes, and after composing himself, returns to the hotel and tells his wife. It is her response that gives testimony that transforms the story into one of the Holocaust, and the reader into witness. She simply says to her husband: "*Wir sind alle Juden, We are all Jews. After Hitler, what choice do we have? We have to be Jews, all of us. In the cemetery they split the world into Jews and Nazis... and you chose not to be a Jew*" (Biguenet, 2001, p. 50-51).

The wife expresses the post-Holocaust concept that one must join the victims, that is to say, only those that see no difference between a Jew and a non-Jew are the ones that will create a new world –a better-healed world; a world where a Holocaust could not occur. And a world where the victims of the Holocaust are remembered through the testimony of the new witness –the reader through their thoughts, words, and choices.

Reading Holocaust Literature transforms the reader into a witness. This is the purpose of the genre. And although most authors have created beautiful prose to envelope the horror they share, it is not literature... not in the way Borges' *El Aleph* is literature. Therefore the reader cannot read it seeking to analyze plot or character development or any other aspect of literature. Instead it must be read like testimony, simply read it, internalize the reality of what is being shared, and tell others by sharing the story.

75 years have passed since the liberation of Auschwitz, and people are still questioning the fields of Holocaust scholarship and literature. Holocaust deniers, as they are called, do not only question the reality of the Holocaust as a factual event, but also the validity of studying or reading works from this field as they question the authenticity of the information presented. One of their greatest weapons are such books and films as *Sophie's Choice* and *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas*, claiming the break with other novels as a sign that all novels or stories are fictional. A similar argument is made with films such as the 1998 Academy Award winning film *Life is Beautiful* (1998) by Roberto Benigni. Authors within the field of Holocaust Literature have a great responsibility to present factual information through the use of prose. This is particularly of concern as survivors die and new voices

emerge, whether they are the children of survivors or not, the telling of the many stories of the Holocaust can help us all become witnesses of an event that although highly secretive and manipulative of language, emotions, and events affected the entire world. All our humanity has been affected. But our humanity cannot be restored through more distortion, further manipulation, or denial. Holocaust Literature, therefore, is the language of our collective memory in a post-Holocaust world where everyone is either a Nazi or a Jew.

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* **Carolina Simon** holds a Master's degree in Humanities with a focus on Literary Studies (Holocaust/Ethnic Literature) from the University of Texas at Dallas where she had the privilege of studying under the direct instruction of Dr. Zsuzsanna Ozsvath. Ms. Simon has attended a variety of educator workshops, seminars, and professional travel and is an Alfred Lerner Fellow through the Jewish Foundation for the Righteous at Columbia University studying under the direct instruction of such notable Holocaust scholars as Peter Hayes, Doris Bergen and Edward Westermann. In 2018 Ms. Simon was awarded the Gutterman Family Holocaust Educator of the Year award for her work with middle school students in Palm Beach County. Past professional accomplishments include a Tolerance Quilt Project (a part of the permanent Mosaics collection of the Jewish History Museum of South Florida in Miami Beach), Course Development for Miami Dade College in Doral, Interfaith Yom Hashoah event at Florida Memorial University, and a Holocaust Memorial Butterfly Garden at Loggers Run Middle School. She is currently the Educational Director for We Dared to Live and the founder of Zachor Shoah.

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