

Meine geliebten, goldenen Kinder: Silenced voices from the Holocaust.

A Proposal for a Thesis in Creative Writing

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מאיינע געליבטען, גולדינען קינדער: קולות מושתקים מהשואה

הצעת מחקר לתיזה בכתיבה יוצרת

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Introduction

This project will be based on letters that were written by two Holocaust victims as well as the correspondence between their various family members before, during and after World War II. The letters came to me a few years ago when an Israeli friend of mine asked me to help translate letters that his great-grandparents Gustav and Stefanie Gärtner, German-speaking Czechoslovakian Jews, wrote to their son – my friend’s grandfather – who had emigrated to Palestine in the early 1930s and was living in a kibbutz. The great-grandparents were deported from Prague in late 1941 and died in early 1942 in the Lodz ghetto. Their son, the recipient of the letters, died a few years ago without ever having spoken much of his parents; thus, the letters are the only thing left of them and, alongside a few entries in various Holocaust databases, the only source of information on their last years before they perished. The letters will hopefully help in getting to know the great-grandparents a little bit. As John Donne wrote in “To Sir Henry Wotton”: “More than kisses, letters mingle souls, / For thus, friends absent speak” (1-2).

As well as an attempt to draw a picture of the lives and deaths and personalities of these two people and give a voice to two Holocaust victims, this project will also be a story of my journey in two ways. Firstly, I will document my journey with the letters – also geographically speaking, as I plan to travel to the places relevant to their story – and my reflections on the discoveries I make when translating them and researching their background. Secondly, it will also serve as a memoir of my journey with “my Israeli family”, to whom the letters belong.

This thesis will have a great personal significance to me. It will serve as an homage not only to these two Holocaust victims, but also to their descendants in Israel, who have taken me in as a family member. I also hope to be able to tell a Holocaust story from a fresh, different

perspective: from the point of view of a Scandinavian non-Jew – but one that has a great interest and respect towards Judaism and love for Israel.

Aims and General Description

I intend to produce a non-fiction manuscript about the last years of two Holocaust victims, the letters they wrote before they perished, and the aftermath. The themes will not be completely clear to me until after I have translated the letters and done further research on Gustav and Stefanie's background and fate, but I assume this project will include themes of second generation Holocaust, anti-Semitism, family, roots, and self-discovery.

Structurally, I intend to divide the manuscript into chapters, where each chapter would consist of a translated letter or an excerpt of one, a short account of historical dates, events and facts of what was going on in Europe or the Czechoslovakian occupied areas (if applicable and relevant to the letters and narrative) and my own reflections. The personal essays in individual chapters will have continuity and will read like a narrative.

It will therefore be a multi-genre project. Because of the letters or excerpts of them, it will have elements of the epistolary novel; my own reflections in each chapter will be presented in the form of personal essay with elements of memoir, historical documentation, and lyrical essay.

Conceptual Background

My work will without doubt be influenced by all Holocaust-related literature I have ever read. Apart from the eyewitness accounts and the stories of those who lived to tell about their

experiences in the Holocaust, the stories of some who perished have survived. One of the most famous voices of Holocaust victims is probably that of Anne Frank; *The Diary of a Young Girl* is well known all over the world. But what about those victims who didn't leave diaries or other such written legacy? In this thesis, I want to give a voice to two Holocaust victims whose voices were silenced.

Holocaust-related literature ranges from first-person accounts, biographies and memoirs, to poetry and historical fiction told from different, even surprising points of view. The fictional novel *The Book Thief* by Markus Zusak, narrated by Death, tells the story of a young girl whose foster family is hiding a Jewish man in their basement; *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* by John Boyne is a story of the son of a high-ranking SS officer at Auschwitz who becomes friends with a Jewish boy at the concentration camp, on the other side of the fence, without really realizing what the situation actually is. Both portray a protagonist who is neither Jewish nor a persecutor, merely a bystander, but whose story nevertheless is tightly linked to the Holocaust. It is in this sense that I want to work on my project.

Although fiction, the novel *Sarah's Key* by Tatiana de Rosnay is structurally similar to what I want to do in this project. It follows two plots: the story of a ten-year-old Jewish girl in Paris in 1942, narrated in the third person, and that of an American journalist living in Paris sixty years later discovering the young girl's story, told in the first person, which gives it a stronger feeling of urgency and presence. A similarly structured non-fiction children's book with two layers is *Hana's Suitcase* by Karen Levine. It is a true story of a Japanese Holocaust education center curator, who gets her hands an old suitcase with the name Hana Brady on it. She decides to uncover the story behind the suitcase and finds out that Hana was a young Czechoslovakian Jewish girl who died in the Holocaust. What makes *Hana's Suitcase* unique among the numerous

stories of Holocaust victims is how the story jumps between Hana's life and the journey of the Japanese curator, someone who has no personal connection whatsoever to the Holocaust. I see a great similarity between *Hana's Suitcase* and my project in two ways: firstly, my point of view as an "outsider", someone with no personal connection to the Holocaust, resembles that of the Japanese curator. Secondly, whereas Hana's story was inspired by an object that belonged to the protagonist of one of the storylines – Hana's suitcase – my project will be based on letters. The difference to my project will be that instead of recreating the lives of Gustav and Stefanie in detail, I will let the letters speak for themselves in direct quotes and excerpts, but will touch on their lives in my essays.

Rather than limit myself to using only the letters, however, I will also use other documents available in various databases to get a clearer picture on issues where more detailed information is available, such as deportation and time and cause of death. Such structure with a scrap-book feel can be seen in *The Stone Diaries* by Carol Shields, where the last chapter consists of various lists, obituaries, short conversations and even cooking recipes.

In *You Can't Make This Stuff Up: The Complete Guide to Writing Creative Nonfiction--from Memoir to Literary Journalism and Everything in Between*, Lee Gutkind writes: "The word 'creative' in creative nonfiction has to do with how the writer conceives ideas, summarizes situations, defines personalities – and shapes and presents information. 'Creative' doesn't mean inventing what didn't happen, reporting and describing what wasn't there." I will work with this statement in mind and let the unclear parts of Gustav and Stefanie's story remain as questions, although I will allow myself to contemplate different options.

In terms of craft, I also intend to familiarize myself with other works relevant to my project: *The Lost* and *The Elusive Embrace* by Daniel Mendelsohn, *Grüße und Küsse an alle*.

Die Geschichte der Familie von Anne Frank by Mirjam Pressler (English title: *Treasures from the Attic: the Extraordinary Story of Anne Frank's Family*), *Nothing Makes You Free: Writings by Descendants of Jewish Holocaust Survivors*, edited (?) by Melvin Jules Bukiet, and *Eine exklusive Liebe* by Johanna Adorján (English title: *An Exclusive Love*"), praised for its artful reconstruction of the author's grandparents' lives by Neil Genzlinger in his critical review on four memoirs titled "The Problem With Memoirs". I will also read literature on creative non-fiction, including *Writing Creative Nonfiction: The Literature of Reality* by Gay Talese and Barbara Lounsberry.

Shape of Project

I have around sixty scanned documents in my possession, some of them letters, some other documents. Ten of the letters are written in German by Gustav and Stefanie, the others in German or English by various family members or in German or Czech by various officials. Many of the other letters, however, deal with or mention Gustav and Stefanie, and I intend to use those as well, if relevant. On the other hand, letters that do not mention them may be just as interesting exactly for that reason.

I intend to divide the narrative into chapters according to themes, e.g. home in Czechoslovakia, deportation from Prague, and life and death in the Lodz ghetto, and/or according to places, as Gustav and Stefanie wrote letters in Turnau, Prague, and Belgrade. Each chapter will contain excerpts from the translated letters, perhaps in reference to historical events in Europe at the time, as well as my reflections and my journey with the letters. The structure of each chapter may not always be the same. I may place the letter excerpt first and continue with an essay, or have the letter weaved into the essay. I do, however, plan to write each chapter as a

dialogue between the letters and my experiences and research as well as other relevant works, such as eyewitness accounts from the Lodz ghetto.

For the chapter of Gustav and Stefanie's home in Jablonec nad Nisou, former Czechoslovakia, I will include excerpts of letters and documents concerning Jablonec. I will travel there and write about what I see, what is left of the Jewish community, and how the town and the surroundings of their former house would have looked when Gustav and Stefanie lived there.

As some of the letters were written in Turnov, former Czechoslovakia, I will also write a chapter on Turnov that will include excerpts of the letters as well as contemplation as to why Gustav and Stefanie went there. I will also visit the town and try to get a picture of how it would have looked at their time.

For the chapter on Prague, I will collect any information I can in the letters concerning Gustav and Stefanie's time there. I will write about Prague's Pinkas Synagogue, where the names of all Czechoslovakian Holocaust victims, including Gustav and Stefanie, are written on the walls. I will visit the house where Gustav and Stefanie were staying until their deportation in October 1941 and familiarize myself with the history in an attempt to answer questions such as why they relocated to Prague. I will also read first-person accounts, such as *Under a Cruel Star: A Life in Prague 1941-1968* by Heda Margolius Kovály, to get an idea of Jewish life in Prague at the time.

This is where Gustav and Stefanie's letters end; they were deported from Prague. Their story continues only in letters written by other people as well as various databases listing Holocaust victims. For the chapter dealing with Gustav and Stefanie's deportation from Prague to the Lodz ghetto, I will use the resources at Yad Vashem and any other databases I can find to

get as many details as possible. I also plan to travel by train from Prague to Lodz to be able to better describe the scenery along the transportation route.

I will include a chapter on Lodz ghetto, although, obviously, nothing written by Gustav and Stefanie has survived. I will look at hospital and cemetery records from the ghetto to get a clearer picture on their deaths and visit their last known address in Lodz. I will also see if there is a chance to find their burial sites.

As I haven't translated all of the letters and travelled to the relevant places yet, I can hardly know at this point what further discoveries I will make that will turn into further chapters. I will, however, keep my mind open for any new ideas throughout the project, intending to discover and write down everything I can about Gustav and Stefanie' story, remembering the quote from the 19th century Scottish essayist Alexander Smith: "Everything I see or hear is an essay in bud. The world is everywhere whispering essays, and one need only be the world's amanuensis" (Smith, "On the Writing of Essays").

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