

A collection of Stories about Holocaust Survivors

A Proposal for a Thesis in Creative Writing

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Aims and General Description

The thesis will consist of a collection of short stories about a family of Holocaust survivors. The stories will describe events in the lives of the characters during the years after the Holocaust attempting to portray the character's subjective experience of events and situations in the light of their history. The collection will be like a photo album. The stories will be like snap shots that reveal a mood, a moment, an insight or state of mind.

I aspire to describe the internal world of survivors who carry on in normal situations while having to carry the burden of memory and to show how it affects their perceptions and choices by presenting the reader with glimpses into events and situations throughout their lives.

Conceptual Background

During the past 57 years volumes have been written about the Holocaust. At first there were accounts of what happened, such as Primo Levy's Survival in Auschwitz, later novels set during this time were written as well as historical research. As time passed and some distance from the events developed more literary attempts to deal with his traumatic period were produced. The Holocaust is such a huge and complex subject which perhaps is impossible to ever fully understand and digest. What we can do is concentrate of different aspects of this experience and hope to shed some light on them. My stories will be a tiny part of this effort.

My goal is not to tell what happened in the Holocaust but rather to show what it feels like to live with the memories and the effects of tragic destructive persecution and loss and to reveal how the emotional burden carried by victims influences their lives and their children's lives. I strive to reveal the emotional experiences of my characters rather than recount precise historical events. In fact I deliberately make the historical details vague in order to show how they were remembered by those who experienced them as children or adolescents who were overwhelmed, confused and ignorant of historical and political processes.

The short story is an appropriate medium for such an effect as it would free me from having to deal with sequence of events and development of character and plot and enable me to concentrate on moments and scattered reflections, memories and feelings.

In After Such Knowledge and Holocaust Kid Eva Hoffman and Sonia Pilcer describe their family's histories and difficulties with their survivor parents. Their ideas and thoughts are interesting but they maintain a distance from their parents and themselves in their writing. Both these works recount in the first person perceptions of Holocaust survivor parents and thoughts and difficulties related to being their children. Rather than recount my experience with my survivor family as they did, I strive to be in the skin of my characters and show their experience from within. Rather than observe my characters I would like to be inside them and see the world through their eyes. The challenge is to reflect a moment and make it coherent by showing something of the background that imbues meaning and coherency.

In Holocaust Testimonies—The Ruins of Memory, Lawrence Langer writes about "levels of memory". He describes the difference between "common memory" in which the survivor recounts his experiences in an ordered and chronological way providing coherent pictures of places and events and "deep memory" when the survivor relives terrible experiences with a full charge of pain, chaos and irreversible loss. "... it becomes clear from the testimonies that many (perhaps most) survivors, in their daily lives, are frequently anguished by deep memory. One explained: "We have these . . . double lives. We can't cancel out. It just won't go away." Another described the impact: "It's always there; it's more a view of the world . . . of extreme pessimism . . . of really knowing the truth about people, human nature . . . in a way that other people don't know it. And all of the truth is harsh, and impossible to really accept, and yet you have to go on and function."

My stories will describe the experience of living with "deep memories" and how they creep in and affect ordinary events, situations and relationships.

In Austerlitz, W.G. Sebald describes the travels of a man who as a small child was sent to England from Czechoslovakia on the Kindertransport in 1939 and grew up with a Welsh family. His memories of his original family were buried and "forgotten." As an adult architectural historian he travels through Europe and recovers some of his memories in snatches of images and emotions. The reader follows the hero's external and internal experiences and is able to sense the emptiness, longing, rage and despair through the description of places and buildings. I strive to achieve this kind of reading experience in which ordinary places and events, processed through the consciousness of the character are laden with history and memory.

In Sisters in Sorrow, Ilana Rosen presents an anthropological and psychological study of Holocaust survivor's testimonies and narrative. She presents the actual stories and examines their cultural and social context and style. Her presentation provides a social and historical context for the experiences described and is a fascinating academic document. My stories will be presented on their own free of precise historical context as my goal is to show states of mind, bits and pieces of life rather than present a coherent historical document.

In Grace Paley's stories the reader comprehends emotionally before actually grasping the "facts." With economy of language she presents a glimpse into memory and emotion leaving the reader to piece together the narrative. For instance, in "Wants" in her Collected Stories (p.133) I understood immediately that she was writing about loss and the passage of time while the "story" was only apparent upon thought and rereading—that the narrator and her husband had very different values that made their partnership untenable despite their love. This is the sort of writing I strive to achieve, in which the feelings are the subject rather than the narrative.

Shape of the Project

There will be 10 to 20 stories that will each stand on its own as a short story but will also be a coherent whole, presenting a portrait of the characters that will be increasingly complex as the reader encounters the heroes over time in various situations. They will deal with events that take place throughout the lifetimes of my characters; some will be about a young family, others about the same characters later in time. I intend to recount the stories with a focus on my character's subjective experience, staying "in their head" in an attempt to represent their world as they saw it and their development over time.

The stories will be set in Israel during the 1950s and New York during the 1960s. Situations and conditions during these times are will be an integral part of the stories as my characters lived during these times. Obviously these were the years following the Holocaust and the times in which survivors lived. Issues relevant to the lives of young families during these times will be at the center of the plots. Such issues will include the status of women, the development of modern concepts and mores as opposed to traditional values, ideas and customs in child rearing, economic hardship, the search for creative expression in a stressful life, issues related to immigration and transition between places and cultures.

In one of my stories "Gold Fish" my heroine, Tzippi Swartz, a survivor, buys a family of Gold Fish. When the biggest one which she has decided is the father suddenly dies, she sinks into months of depression.

In another, "The Hungarian Psychiatrist", Tzippi Swartz consults a psychiatrist because her husband tells her she is mad. He tells her this because she resents staying home with a baby and longs to be free and independent while her husband longs to have a warm and stable home to return to after long difficult days at work.

In a third Shmuel is arrested for fighting with a bus driver. The inconsiderate behavior of the bus driver releases a dangerous outburst of rage.

In what will be the last story "Most of the Time We Just Sit" an elderly Holocaust survivor in a nursing home describes, among other things, the tension between herself and her daughter. The daughter tries to relate to what her mother tells her about her terrifying delusional experiences in a matter of fact, rational manner because she's tired of listening to more accounts of suffering. The daughter's unsympathetic responses to her confidences make the heroine feel misunderstood and lonely.

It is my hope that this collection will bring to life the struggle of Holocaust survivors and their families reflect their courage, ingenuity and particular charm as well as their emotional handicaps. The generation of Holocaust survivors is gradually disappearing and I hope that this collection will succeed in keeping something of them alive. So much as been written about the Holocaust and survivors I have wondered if I my small addition would have any value. After much thought, I have decided to try because these are my stories.

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