

**Lost Memories and New Beginnings**

A Proposal for a Thesis in Creative Writing

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**זכרונות אבודים והתחלות חדשות**

הצעת מחקר לתיזה בכתיבה יוצרת

המחלקה לאנגלית

אוניברסיטת בר-אילן

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## Introduction

As a second generation Holocaust survivor, I have been interested in questions about the Holocaust and as a result also in family genealogy since early childhood. Both my parents were born in Poland and spoke Yiddish at home. I believe my fascination with Yiddish is also the inspirational origin for my humoristic, sometimes sarcastic style, in several of the personal essays.

Another more recent source for my interest in family history and writing about Holocaust-related subjects was the publication of a book in Norway in 2003. The book, called "Kathe – Always Been Here" (to be published in English in 2014), by Espen Sørbye, a historical researcher at Statistics Norway, is about Kathe Lasnik, the aunt of my first wife. In 1942, at the age of 15, Kathe was sent to Auschwitz together with her parents and one sister. The book became a bestseller in Norway. I proofread the professional English translation of the book. I had translated the book myself in 2003 so that my children could learn about this important recollection of their mother's family history. For me this book also served as a confirmation of our decision to come on Aliyah.

## Aims and General Description

My thesis will comprise a collection of personal essays, some using themes from my experience growing up as a second generation Holocaust survivor, while others will deal with childhood memoirs and religious issues, in both realistic and humoristic styles. The overriding theme will be my personal journey from growing up in a non-religious, albeit traditional home, to becoming a practicing Jew, a Baal Teshuva, and eventually moving to Israel.

The bulk of the personal essays will be non-fiction but will include some hybrid themes as well. The most significant personal essay, 'Every Human Being Has a Name,' will be about my discovery that I had a half-sister, who was born in the ghetto of Lodz to my father's first wife. She was two years old when she was taken to Auschwitz together with her mother. The personal essays will read like a narrative but will be interspersed with original documents some of which I have collected and some that I hope to find in archives in Poland and Germany.

The thesis will be multi-genre with elements of historical documents, memoir and lyrical essay, drawing on what we learnt during the Hybrid Multi-genre course

## Conceptual Background

My writing will be deeply influenced by my background, growing up as a second generation Holocaust survivor and by all the books on the Holocaust I read in my formative years. I will try to describe my transition growing up in a secular, albeit traditional, Jewish home in Sweden to becoming deeply involved in Judaism and Zionism, culminating in joining the religious Zionist youth movement Bnei Akiva, becoming a Baal Teshuva and going on Aliyah to Israel.

I vividly remember reading Leon Uris' *Mila 18* about the heroic stand of the remaining Jews in the Warszawa ghetto and watching the *Stalag 17* film about American prisoners-of-war escape from a German internment camp. But these are fictional accounts based on real events. I intend to create a more personal essay supported by original documents. For example, I have managed to locate the birth certificate of my half-sister in the Lodz State Archives. I also have in my possession a letter written by an American soldier who met my father upon liberation as well as the text of a speech my father gave at the 20<sup>th</sup> commemoration of the end of World War II, describing the three most significant events in his life. These documents will be incorporated in the personal essay 'Every Human Being Has a Name' as well as in other essays describing how I discovered these documents.

Two recent works provides a model for my own imagined work: Göran Rosenberg's book "A Short Stop on the Way from Auschwitz", provides a biographical account of the author's father attempt to rebuild his life in Sweden after the war, but who eventually committed suicide in 1960. Rosenberg's father was from Lodz as was my father; they both settled in small industrial cities, they both wanted to move to Israel. But there the similarities end: Göran Rosenberg became a virulent spokesman for the Palestinian cause in Sweden. I, on the other hand, grew up in a deeply Zionist home, eventually becoming religious and moving to Israel with my newly established family.

Rolf Tardell's book "Grandma, Why Do You have Numbers Engraved on Your Arm?", written in Swedish, deals with the family history of Rolf's mother, who was taken from France, where her family lived, to labor camps in Germany and barely survived the Holocaust. Rolf is the brother of my sister-in-law. I intend to follow a similar pattern that he did in researching original documents and interspersing the narration with background history of the period.

To achieve the project aims I intend to travel to Poland and Germany to try to locate more documents try to experience the setting where the events occurred. I intend to apply for a grant from Yad Vashem and/or other sources to cover the expenses.

The project will draw on biographical sources such as the book "Lo-Yehi Boker" (in Hebrew) written by my father's sister-in-law Sara Selver-Urbach. My father was married to Luba Urbach and spent the last months of the war in labor camps together with her brother Yitzhak Urbach, Sara Selver-Urbach's husband.

## Shape of Project

The structure of the project is likely to change depending on the material I discover in my research but I basically foresee it structured in two main sections.

The first section will deal with childhood memoirs and personal essays. One essay, called "The Kitchen," recalls my childhood memories of my mother's blueberry cakes, and why she wasn't a very good cook – she was only 17 when WWII broke out and therefore never had a chance to learn to cook. Another essay, called "How I smuggled a Shul From Sweden to Israel," deals with how I circumvented Israeli customs regulations at the time to transport a shul that was no longer used – complete with a Tora scroll, the Scroll of Esther, ark, bima-reading table, furniture and ornaments- from Sweden to Israel. A third essay, titled "Hemorrhoids as Writer's Inspiration," addresses the reasons why I want to become a writer at this late stage in my life. These essays will deal with different aspects of my childhood road to Zionism, finding religion and my early ambition to eventually become a writer.

The second section will deal with Holocaust related subjects, expanding on the personal essay *Every Human Being Has a Name* I prepared during the workshops in Creative Non-Fiction at Bar-Ilan University. I have managed to obtain a family history memoir written in 1986 by my aunt Roszka Shlonsky (nee Liberman) when she was 75 years old. She came to Israel in the early 1930s and lived all her life on a kibbutz to be over 100 years old. Roszka's husband Jozef Shlonsky was the uncle of the journalist

Moshe Shlonsky, the one-time head of Galei Zahal - Army Radio station in Israel. At a chance encounter at a literary event, Moshe mentioned that he is in possession of Roszka's memoir piece but has no intention of writing any longer piece based on it, since "we journalists can't write anything longer than 45 seconds." My hope is that these memoirs will add insights into the life of my father's family in pre-war Poland and the life of less known branches of the clan. I will try to intersperse this with my genealogy research to create a family history and describe my journey to Judaism and Israel. This delving into my family history will touch on the different aspects raised in the first section about my road to Zionism and Judaism and eventually how this lead to fulfilling my writing ambitions.



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