

אוניברסיטת בר אילן

המחלקה לאנגלית

בריחה בספרות השואה

הצעת מחקר לתואר השני

רימונה שטיין

ת.ז. 302111398

מנחה: פרופסור מיכאל קרמר

30.8.12

Bar-Ilan University

Department of English

Escape in Holocaust Literature

A Proposal for a Master's Thesis

Rimona Stein

302111398

Adviser: Prof. Michael Kramer

## Table of Contents

1. Aims and General Description .....	2
2. Scholarly and Critical Background .....	2
3. Methodology .....	8
4. Outline of Chapters .....	8
5. Bibliography .....	11

## 1. Aims and General Description:

Holocaust literature comprises, in large part, narratives of those who lived through the horrors the Nazis inflicted upon Jews and others in Europe.<sup>1</sup> We tend to call all these people, "survivors." However, as Melvin Bukiet suggests, a significant distinction can be made between, on one hand, the stories of those who were transported to concentration camps, endured the atrocities within the barbed wire, and survived, and , on the other hand, the stories of those who escaped, either by eluding deportation or breaking the grip of the Nazis in some other way. In this thesis I want to examine the literary characteristics of this second category, the Holocaust literature of escape.

## 2. Scholarly and Critical Background:

Persecuted Jews had two possible paths to try to survive the Holocaust: to endure the "concentrationary universe" of the camps, or to escape it by fleeing Nazi occupation—by hiding in captivity, for instance, or joining partisans in the forests, and/or assuming the identity of a gentile. Little Holocaust scholarship actually distinguishes the literary characteristics of survival and escape narratives. Although there is a logical intersection between literary works of enduring the camps and those relating tales of escape, each category invokes its own set of themes, motifs, characters, plots, setting and language and would benefit from study as a separate category.

While there is reason to study narratives of survival and escape separately, most scholarship deals with themes that collapse these distinctions. Lilian Kremer in *Witness Through the Imagination* analyzes the common themes that international writers deal with in terms of "the connections between historical anti-semitism and Nazi Genocide; dehumanization of the victims; the Holocaust era survival strategies; postwar survivor syndrome... and theological, social and psychological implications of the Holocaust"

---

<sup>1</sup> The exception that proves the rule here is Anne Frank.

[10]. Primary questions of Holocaust scholars pertain to modes and rhetoric of approaching "the unspeakable" and the "unknowable" horrors. Debates are sparked by the problematic ethical and epistemological issues regarding the transmission of the atrocities, particularly by those born in the aftermath.

In Adorno's essay "Commitment," he revised his proclamation that "to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric," stating that the suffering of the Holocaust is "a situation of paradox, not merely the problem of how to react to it." The "suffering ... also demands the continued existence of art while it prohibits it" [84-85]. Daniel Schwartz asks in *Imagining the Holocaust*, "if we do not write imaginative literature, how can there be a post-Holocaust era" [22-23]? When authors fictionalize the suffering of their characters, escapers and survivors, concern arises regarding Holocaust denial and historiography. Lawrence Langer points out in *Holocaust Testimonies: The Ruins of Memory* that "issues of style and form and tone and figurative language ... can deflect our attention from the 'dreadful familiarity' of the event itself" [19], that is, literature can take the place of the tragic subject matter. In *Voicing the Void: Muteness and Memory in Holocaust Literature*, Sara Horowitz expresses similar fears with regard to the fictional literary text: "its own artifice, rhetoricity, and contingent symbol-making—threatens to shift and ultimately destroy the grounds by which one measures one set of truth claims or one historical interpretation against another"[18].

Narratology, phenomenology, the commingling of imagination and memory, fact and fiction, and the legacy of trauma are also prevalent themes in Holocaust literary study. In Roger Luckhurst's *Literature and the Contemporary Fictions and Theories of the Present* he states that "the historical past is irrecoverable; memory alone is the only access to it, and memory is a malleable narrative always open to retroactive re-description" [91], relating to Hayden White's essay, "The Fictions of Factual Representation." James E. Young's *Writing and Rewriting the Holocaust* affirms that

"literary and historical truths of the Holocaust may not be separable" [1]. According to Cathy Caruth in *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma and the Possibility of History*, trauma yields different strategies of writing, "a rethinking of reference [that] is aimed not at eliminating history but at resituating it in our understanding [182]. Marita Grimwood in *Holocaust Literature of the Second Generation* analyzes various Holocaust genres, describing the shift from realistic representation to innovative literary responses of present and future generations as "a means of expressing a theme that on some level we cannot understand in a form that we can comprehend"[93].

To be sure, some Holocaust scholarship does deal with the theme of escape in various ways. Contemporary writers illuminate the challenges of unearthing buried stories and memories that belong to the internal lives of victims and survivors that resonate in our lives. Burial and resurrection are recurrent motifs in Post Holocaust literature. Peter Brooks in *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative* associates burial images with a "literary obsession with the buried utterance; the word, the tale, entombed without listener" [76]. Grimwood connects these burial images to escape, in writing that this "should not be surprising: surviving the Holocaust was a matter of seeming not to exist, whether by hiding or 'passing' as a non-Jew outside camps, maintaining anonymity within them, or fortuitously escaping and fleeing mass murder" (20-21). Lilian Kremer in *Women's Holocaust Writing: Memory and Imagination* distinguishes between dominant subjects of both genders, contending that "women's writing focuses far more emphatically than men's writing on the plight of young children" who are smuggled into hiding, whereas male authors are "more likely to feature older adolescent sons entering the camps with their fathers"[12]. These findings assume but do not elaborate a distinction between survival and escape stories.

Critics also have responded to the concept of escape in content (retreating from imagining the direct horrors of the camps) or in mode (fantasy and magical realism as

forms of escapism). Jenni Adams' *Magical Realism in Holocaust Literature* contributes to the ongoing critical debate regarding the connection between magical realism and escape, illuminating the ambivalence of this representational strategy and recognizing the consolatory function of escape from reality. In her words, "Narratives of escape and consolation bear certain parallels to the phenomenon of escapism, the indulgence in modes of narrative which function to distract from, rather than engage with, unresolved ideological, emotional and ethical issues" [145]. Lee Behlman and Alan Berger analyze the employment of escapist strategies as a means for dealing with escape and escapism for therapeutic purposes. Behlman, in "The Escapist: Fantasy, Folklore, and the Pleasures of the Comic Book in Recent Jewish American Holocaust Fiction," analyzes the emergence of 'escapism' techniques for writer and reader, and Berger's "Chabon's *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay: The Return of the Golem*" goes so far as to argue that "one cannot escape the Holocaust ... [and] escapism leads to forgetting...the ultimate form of Holocaust denial" [88]. Others, view escape literature as a way to provide "wish fulfillment," as Stanford Sternlicht observes in his analysis of Elie Wiesel's work in *The Student Companion to Elie Wiesel*. Sternlicht maintains, "Perhaps, deep down Wiesel wished that 'Gates of the Forest' had really been his story" [66] fleeing deportation.

Sidra Ezrahi writes that survivor narratives set in the camps are dominated by the confines of an evil and deathly environment of collective suffering, "a world without exit and unless one clings to...metaphorical or mythical forms of escape, there can be no organizing principle to the way out" [52], reaffirming like Berger that there are no "avenues of escape from this reality" [55]. Indeed, Ezrahi suggests that even stories that seem to provide an avenue escape are ultimately imprisoned by the concentrationary universe, as the writers "foreclose escape by extending the boundaries of the camp to encompass all of existence" [218]. The recent emergence of literary works focusing on the subject of successful or unsuccessful escapes, with some inspired by the iconic story

of Anne Frank, illuminate Marianne Hirsch's concept of "postmemory," the trauma of successive generation authors whose creative works are associated with Jewish identity and the inescapable past.

Scholarship outside the particular field of Holocaust studies can help us formulate ways of approaching escape literature more fully. Slave narratives recount the processes, decisions and plans of runaway slaves culminating in their escape from the brutality and inhumanity of their enslavement. These works present the perils and suffering of fugitives who resist racial oppression, mental and physical anguish, which are comparable to thematic issues and conventions of escape in Holocaust literature. The runaway slave author who is escaping his/her fate incorporates generic themes of transformation and defiance, a heroic "triumph in his rise from bondage to freedom" [Nichols 284.]. Slave narratives address aspects of rootlessness, alienation, concealment, desperation, guilt, abandonment, lack of identity, deception, which amalgamate into rebirth. To portray their slave and fugitive experiences, these authors employ dramatic elements of mystery, suspense, adventure, romance and heroism. According to Charles H. Nichols's analysis of runaway slaves, "the slave's stratagems for survival , his ingenuity in playing out roles his situation demanded is the leitmotif of the narratives... Fear, hate, aggression and guilt stalk them all" [285]. Moreover, fugitives share characteristics of western fiction including tricksters and masqueraders effacing capture, comparable to escapers in Holocaust works. Literary conventions rely on "the picaresque mode with its accounts of 'social and psychic disintegration' [285] employing comic modes of irony as the "slaves perceived the irony of the slaveholders' loud boasts of superior knowledge and love of liberty" [285]. In *To Tell a Free Story*, William L. Andrews analyzes slave narratives, including that of William Wells Brown (1848) who employed "comic reversals, dramatic ironies, and most importantly, the success of the trickster in manipulating people" [149]. James Olney lists the conventions of slave narratives, including

"description of patrols, of failed attempt(s) to escape, of pursuit... description of successful attempt(s) to escape, lying by during the day, travelling by night...[and] taking a new last name"[153] which are also characteristics in Holocaust escape stories.

Andrews asserts that for the slave operating without his master's control, "the world outside... is extremely precarious and oppressive ... [and] ...he is rendered defenselessness and directionless in the great world...sustained solely by the survival instinct" [40]. Self-reliance and reliance on rescuers are prevalent themes in these escape stories, such as in Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a slave Girl, Written by Herself* and in the works of Fredrick Douglass whereby heroic fugitives recount their suffering, preparation, and perils of actual escapes. In the slave narrative, Andrews says, "readers found a factual parallel to the capture-flight-and pursuit plots of their favorite romances" [129 ] as slave authors developed "stylistic and tonal experiments that could broaden the slave narrative's rhetorical range and emotional appeal"[139].

Earlier, 17th and 18th century captivity narratives depict psychological and physical bondage, portraying confusion of identity, transformation and assimilation, invoking the fears and anxieties of their traumatic experiences of enslavement, attempted and actual escapes. Similar to the representations of later 19th century slave narratives these works include escapes that serve moral, historical, and political functions. These genres constitute features of "escape" that are also dominant in Holocaust literature. Abolitionist Ephraim Peabody summarizes the literary genre of slave narratives with these words: "we know not where one who wished to write a modern odyssey could find a better subject than in the adventures of a fugitive slave" [19]. Holocaust writer Daniel Mendelsohn, on his epic quest to unearth the stories of his lost family who perished in the Holocaust, discovers from an "escaper" that "if you didn't have an amazing story, you didn't survive [315]. Combining and contrasting these captivity and slave genres, I hope to present other significant themes of escape in the context of Holocaust literature.



### **3. Methodology:**

I will rely primarily on close textual analyses that build upon the genre criticism (Holocaust literature, slave narratives, captivity narratives) that I have described in the previous section, drawing from the studies of fields of psychology and trauma to address topics and tropes of escape and escapism.

### **4. Outline of Chapters:**

The thesis will consist of five parts, an introduction, conclusion, and three chapters, each highlighting a particular thematic element of Holocaust escape narratives.

#### **Introduction:**

The introduction will explain the significance of my project and place it in the contexts of the relevant critical discourses pertaining to Holocaust escape literature. I will compare Shoah related narratives to other historical escape stories, (i.e. slave narratives) that highlight the transformation from slavery and captivity to freedom.

#### **Chapter 1 - Captivity and Fugitive Life**

In this chapter, I will analyze the thematic element of captivity and fugitive life by examining a number of Holocaust escape narratives. The central texts in my study are Aharon Appelfeld's *Blooms of Darkness* and *Tzili*, *The Book Thief* by Markus Zusak, and *Fugitive Pieces* by Anne Michaels. Each book employs its own stylistic mode to depict the theme of escape. The major plot elements convey the duality of humanity, highlighting good as well as evil, illuminating the moral courage of rescuers by incorporating unlikely friendships (including non-Jewish rescuers) as well as the betrayals which are part of the hope of escaping one's fate during the Shoah. Each author utilizes a distinct perspective to describe the perpetual fears and struggles of confinement and of

being pursued to invoke the sense of foreboding and claustrophobia of remaining invisible and the intense anxiety of being discovered and captured. The chance of averting fate is dramatized via the allure of adventure, mystery, horror and romanticism and explored through elements of tension and suspense. Escapes propelled by the ingenuity of daring feats of action or by fortuitous getaways bring forth themes of alienation, isolation and loneliness. My major resources in analyzing this thematic element will be the analyses of Holocaust scholars Marita Grimwood and Lilian Kremer, slave narratives and the writings of critics of this genre.

## **Chapter 2- False Identity and Assimilation**

Chapter two will address a second thematic element of Holocaust escape literature: the victimhood and suffering brought on by assuming a false identity, to assimilate. The conflict between assimilation and Jewishness dominates these escape narratives as the victims emerge from invisible to visible, yet not as their true selves. I will examine works in three different genres: the memoir, *The Nazi Officer's Wife* by Edith Hahn Beer, the short story "The House on Kronenstrasse" by Shira Nayman, and the reimagined fairy tale, *The True Story of Hansel and Gretel* by Louise Murphy. These plot elements evoke the theme of transformation and conflicts associated with discovery, confronting the psychological impact of assuming a new life under a false identity rooted in deception and disguise. In each work the authors describe how by deceiving the Nazis via tricks and transformation, a Jew could escape his/her fate and explore the attending questions pertaining to recover identity. In each story the "escape" from identity functions either as the central event of the plot or underwrites a plot that focuses on the aftermath of the escape itself. I will closely examine these escape narratives and compare the ways this motif appears in Holocaust writing and in slave narratives.

### **Chapter 3- The Refuge of Escapism**

In this chapter I will analyze how and where the themes of physical escape and mental escape, or escapism, intersect, drawing primarily from the fiction and nonfiction works analyzed in the previous chapters. Against the backdrop of the Holocaust, escapism, a term implying a flight from reality, suggests illusionary freedom, the metaphoric journey of the mind. The plot elements associated with the role of escapism as a survival technique include memory, wishful fantasy, artistic vitality and activity via music, storytelling, reading and writing. These plot elements allow the authors to convey the coping devices that allowed Jewish escapers to endure their ordeals presenting the value of escapism that is synonymous with hope for survival. I will cite narratives set in the camps where physical escape was virtually impossible and the only mode for getaway was via the mental and spiritual plane; freedom of the mind or death (physical death, soulful or both). Escapism for the imprisoned Jews functioned as defiance and comfort, even though it could not safeguard their survival. My major resources for analyzing this thematic element will be via an examination of scholarly research on escapism, including slave and captivity narratives.

### **Conclusion**

In the conclusion, I will summarize the diverse narrative strategies and literary techniques that writers employ to tell stories of escaping the Holocaust that highlight themes and motifs of this genre. In addition, I will reiterate upon how the notion of escapism served the escapers. Each of the works in my study draws upon escape as an expression of resistance, a fight towards freedom at any cost, and illustrates the physical and emotional impact of a character averting his/her fate. Exploring the literary conventions, as well as the responses of characters/persona to experiences of captivity, assimilation and flight will facilitate and advance the understanding of this aspect of Holocaust literature.

## 5. Bibliography

- Adams, Jenni. *Magical Realism in Holocaust Literature: Troping the Traumatic Real*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011.
- Adorno, Theodor W. "Commitment." In *The Essential Frankfurt School Reader* ed. Andrew Arat and Eike Gebhardt New York: Continuum, 1982. 300-318.
- Andrews, William L. *To Tell a Free Story: The University of Illinois Press*. Urbana and Chicago, 1988.
- Appelfeld, Aharon. *Blooms of Darkness*. Trans. Jeffrey M. Green. New York: Schocken Books, 2010.
- Beer, Edith Hahan and Susan Dworkin. *The Nazi Officer's Wife: How One Jewish Woman Survived the Holocaust*. New York: Harper Perennial, 2000.
- Behlman, Lee. "The Escapist: Fantasy, Folklore, and the Pleasures of the comic Book". In *Recent Jewish American Holocaust Fiction*. Shofar: An interdisciplinary Journal of Jewish Studies- Volume, 22 Number 3, Spring 2004, pp. 56-71 (article).
- Berger, L. Alan, Michael Chabon's *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay: The Return of the Golem*. *Studies in American Jewish Literature*, Volume 29, pp. 80-89 (article).
- Brooks, Peter. *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984.
- Bukiet M.J., 'A Note on Method and Category', in Bukiet, ed., *Nothing Makes You Free: Writings by Descendants of Jewish Holocaust Survivors*. New York: Norton: 2002, pp. 27-28.
- Caruth, Cathy. *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996.
- Davis, Charles T and Henry L. Gates Jr., eds. *The Slave's Narrative*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1985.
- Douglass, Fredrick and Harriet Jacobs. *Narrative of the Life of Fredrick Douglass, An American Slave & Jacobs Harriet Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. New York: The Modern Library, 2004 Kindle edition.
- Edlow, Jeremy B. *The Theme of Escape in the Novels of Aharon Appelfeld*. New York University, 1989.
- Ezrahi, Sidra. *By Words Alone: The Holocaust in Literature*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1982.
- Grimwood, Marita. *Holocaust Literature of the Second Generation*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007.
- Hirsch, Marianne. *Family frames: Photograph, Narrative and Postmemory*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1977.

- Horowitz, Sara. *Voicing the Void: Muteness and Memory in Holocaust Fiction*. Albany: State University of New York, 1997.
- Kremer, Lillian S. ed. *Holocaust Literature: An Encyclopedia of Writers and their Work*. 2 vols. New York: Routledge, 2003.
- , *Witness Through the Imagination: Jewish American Holocaust Literature*. Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 1989.
- , *Women's Holocaust Writing: Memory and Imagination*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1999.
- Kulka, Erich. *Escape From Auschwitz*. Massachusetts: Bergin & Gravey Publishers, Inc., 1986.
- Langer, Lawrence L. *Holocaust Testimonies: The Ruins of Memory*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1991.
- Levi, Primo. *The Drowned and the Saved*. New York: Summit Books, 1988.
- Luckhurst Roger, and Peter Marks, eds. *Literature and the Contemporary Fictions and Theories of the Present*. Harlow: Longman, 1999.
- Mendelssohn, Daniel. *The Lost: A Search for Six of the Six Million*. New York: HarperCollins, 2007.
- Michaels, Anne. *Fugitive Pieces*. London: Bloomsbury, 1998
- Murphey, Louise. *The True Story of Hansel and Gretel*. New York: Penguin, 2003.
- Nayman, Shira. "The House on Kronenstasse". In *Awake in the Dark*. New York: Scribner, 2006.
- Nichols, Charles, H. "The Slave Narrators and the Picaresque Mode: Archetypes for Modern Black Personae". In *The Slave's Narrative*. Ed. Charles L. Davis and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 1985. 283-298
- Olney, James. "I Was Born: Slave Narratives, Their Status as Autobiography and as Literature". In *The Slave's Narrative*. Ed. Charles L. Davies and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. New York: Oxford University Press. 1985. 148-175
- Peabody, Ephraim "Narratives of Fugitive Slaves", pp 19-28. In *The Slave's Narrative*, eds. Charles T. Davis and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. New York: Oxford University Press, 1985.
- Schwarz, Daniel. *Imagining the Holocaust*. New York: St. Martin's, 1999.
- Solokoff, Naomi B. *Imagining the Child in Modern Jewish Fiction*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992.
- Sternlicht, Sanford. *The Student Companion of Elie Weisel*. Westport: Greenwood Press, 2003.
- Vice, Sue. *Holocaust Fiction*: London. Routledge, 2000
- White, Hayden. "The Fictions of Factual Representation." *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism*. Baltimore, MD: John's Hopkins UP, 1978. 121-134.

Young, James E. *Writing and Rewriting the Holocaust : Narrative and the Consequences of Interpretation*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988

Zusak, Markus. *The Book Thief*. London: Black Swan, 2007.