

THURSDAY OCTOBER 14, 1999
AFTERNOON SESSION A 14:00-15:30

Object & Voice in Australia

by
Rev. Barbara Allen

Use of Objects and Australian Writing in the Creative Writing Process re the Holocaust
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Aim: To stimulate the creative/imaginative elements in terms of the Holocaust, using excerpts of writings by Australian writers/poets, as well as specific 'props.'

Objectives:

- a. Exposure to resources from Australian writers;
- b. Use of these writings as a catalyst for writing about the Holocaust;
- c. Creation of a written work which brings awareness of the Holocaust into the student's everyday life.

Suitable for use from Grade 8 on.

Outline of the educational workshop:

Introduction: the historical context

'A migrating people has never been able to carry its literature as the aboriginal carries a fire in his canoe from one place to another without loss or extinction. The fire has to be rekindled with new wood on the new earth. It happened in America: it happened here.'
 (Marjorie Barnard *Pomegranates*, p.10.)

In this workshop, I have chosen to focus on the work of Australian writers and poets to stimulate the creative writing process while writing about the Holocaust. Before considering some of these writers it would be helpful to give a short overview of Australian Jewry and the Australian response to the Holocaust.

This has been different in a number of key respects from those of other western countries reflecting differences of history, geography and population. In Australia, Jews have never numbered more than 0.5% of the population. In 1991, 0.4% of the population (nearly 75,000 people out of a population approaching 17 million identified themselves as Jews; as affiliation is voluntary, the actual percentage may be higher.) The distance from Europe to Australia (19,000 kilometers,)-meant that there was no mass migration, as occurred in other countries however, there has been a Jewish community here ever since Australia was first settled by convicts. Indeed some convicts were known to be Jewish. (Helen Bersten, 'Jewish Convicts in the First Fleet', *The Sydney Jewish Museum Newsletter*, Vol. 1, No. 2 (1993) p.5)
 Free settlers arrived in small numbers until the 1830s increasing after 1851 due to the gold rushes. Most of them were from England and Western Europe. Up until 1933, the Jewish community was predominantly of British origin, like the rest of the population- although there were smaller number of immigrants from Germany (W.D. Rubinstein (ed), *Jews In The Sixth*

Continent (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1986, p.4) Though conditions in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in Central and Eastern Europe made emigration attractive.,Australia was not a destination which these Jewish emigrants favoured.

Though small the Australian Jewish community has made its mark on Australian society from the earliest days. Being a Jew was not a barrier to success: Sir John Monash, became Commander-in-Chief of the Australian army and one of the senior allied commanders on the Western Front during World War One. Sir Isaac Isaacs was the first Australian-born Governor-General .Anti-Semitism has not been a significant factor in Australian history. (Paul R. Bartrop, *Australia And The Holocaust* (Kew: Australian Scholarly Publishing, 1994), p.xi.) One reason is that, in contrast to many European countries, Australia has a strong Calvinist religious tradition which, “has shown considerable philo-Semitism and admiration for the Jews.” (Serge Liberman, ‘Gentile champions of Jews in Australia,’ in W.D. Rubinstein, *op.cit.*, p.77.) Despite the restrictive quotas for refugees, almost 8,000 German, Austrian and Czechoslovak Jewish refugees were allowed to settle between 1933 and 1940-41. After the War, perhaps 25-40,000 European Jews who survived the Holocaust came to Australia. (Rubinstein, *op.cit.*, p.4.)

In retrospect, we can ask why more wasn’t done. ?. At the time, political and social leaders argued that immigration should be restricted on economic grounds and a desire for Anglo-Celtic conformity. Also, the magnitude of the problem-that 7-8 million Jews were in such danger-was not comprehended until after Australia was at war with Germany, and once war began, large-scale immigration was impossible. (*Ibid.* p.6)

Bartrop reminds us that Australia took more Jews in per capita terms than any country save Palestine. In numerical terms, sadly, the approximately ten thousand who made it into the country by 1945 were nowhere near enough to make an impression on the massive number who actually sought entry or who would have been happy to do so. (Bartrop, *op.cit.*, p.xiv) The experiences of the newly-arrived immigrants and refugees varied. For some, Australia was a relief:

Avram, a survivor, said (of Australia)

It was a country about which I knew very little. We learned in school about the continent called Australia which is part of the British Empire...After the war the most relevant thing for us was that it was the farthest point we could find from Europe. My hopes were to get away from Europe, to get away from living under the shadow of the Holocaust. (Naomi Rosh White, *From Darkness To Light* Melbourne: Collins Dove, 1988, p.167)

While Australia generally did not want to know about the experiences of Jewish refugees, there was little overt anti-Semitism. As before, being Jewish was no barrier to success. But, despite this acceptance of Australian Jewry, the Holocaust has not figured prominently in the consciousness of non-Jewish community, including the Church. The general population is being educated, or at least informed and challenged, through popular entertainment. The film *Schindler’s List* was based on the book *Schindler’s Ark* by the Australian writer, Thomas Keneally. Another film *Father* (released in 1989), tackles the theme of war crimes and individual responsibility for the Holocaust. This film dealt with issues that Australians and the Australian Government grappled with in the 1980s and 1990s: the investigation of European war criminals who had immigrated to Australia. In the 1990s committal proceedings were heard against three men charged with war crimes but none were convicted. These, as well as the controversial book *The Hand That Signed The Paper* by Helen Darville, brought war crimes, to public’s attention .Public attention was also drawn to the Holocaust by the strong opposition, led by the Jewish community, to a proposed visit in May 1993 by

Holocaust-revisionist David Irving. Consequently, he was banned from entering Australia, on the basis that his planned speaking tour could cause disturbances in the community.

Australia has some outstanding Jewish writers, especially second-generation writers who I shall use during this workshop. I want to place these writers within an historical context.

Introduction to the Australian Jewish writers

Lily Brett: was born in Germany in 1946. She came to Melbourne with her parents in 1948. She is married to the Australian artist David Rankin. And has written several volumes of poetry, and prose Residing in New York. She is a second-generation survivor. Both her fiction and poetry have won major awards.

Serge Liberman: was born in Russia in 1942 and came to Australia in 1951. He is a doctor as well as an author. and has three of award –winning collections of short stories published. In 1987 he published the *Bibliography of Australian Judaica*, .

Jacob Rosenberg: was born in Lodz, Poland in 1922. He was confined with his parents, sisters and nieces to the Lodz Ghetto. In 1944 they were transported to Auschwitz. The sole survivor of his family, he emigrated to Australia in 1948. He writes in both English and Yiddish.

Arnold Zable: was born in New Zealand in 1947 and grew up in Melbourne, Australia. Formerly a lecturer at Melbourne University, in recent years he has been teaching English to migrants, as well as writing several books for children.

Mark Baker: was born in 1959 and is a second generation survivor. He lectures in Modern Jewish History at the University of Melbourne. He is also the editor of *Generation: A Journal of Australian Jewish Life and Thought*.

Anna Rosner Blay: was born in Paris in 1947 and immigrated to Melbourne in 1949 Her parents were Polish Jews. A second generation survivor. She teaches English and French. Her first book, *If All the Seas were Ink* was about her uncle Jozef Gross, who was saved by Schindler.

Dianne Armstrong: was born in Poland in 1939 and im grated to Australia with her parents in 1948A ‘second generation’ survivor. She is a freelance journalist winning many awards for her articles.

(A bibliography will be handed out at the workshop.)

Symbols of the Holocaust

A. Questions for discussion:

- What are some concrete objects we that are ‘symbols’ of the Holocaust?
I expect some of the answers might be bread, a bowl, a spoon, lists, photographs, barbed wire, and so on.
 - How do you use these objects with a class?
 - What are the positive/negative aspects when using particular items?

B. Juxtaposition of concrete objects with the ‘written’ word.

Different objects symbolizing the Holocaust will be placed on the table and a passage will be read from one of the Australian authors or from a more well-known source. If time allows, I will ask the participants to name authors who have dealt with these. Hopefully, the contrast, through the introduction to new material, will open up other ways of seeing' or 'experiencing the object. For example

1. *Possessions acquired by others.*

(Symbols: plate, a doll's table, a framed picture.)

My Mother's Lame Table

(Jacob G. Rosenberg: *My Father's Silence* p.1)

After The War

(Lily Brett: *Poland and other poems*, p.67)

2. *Camps*

(Symbols: a piece of barbed wire, a striped garment)

Another Selection

(Lily Brett: *The Auschwitz Poems*, p.29)

Memories of Auschwitz.

(Jacob G. Rosenberg: *My Father's Silence*, p.6)

(compare with Nelly Sachs: **O the Chimneys**)

3. *Numbers/tattoos*

Numbers

(Lily Brett: *In Her Strapless Dresses* pp.36-37)

I Keep Forgetting

(Lily Brett: *After The War* pp: 93-4)

For every alternative there is an alternative; every shadow casts its darkness on someone else's light. That's what all the survivors say: "It was luck. It could have been me. Maybe I lived on someone else's number?"

Soon after Lieb's death, 5503 becomes a Catholic Pole, Jan Lebeder. In the camp system, only the numbers are eternal; they are reincarnated in new bodies. So why can't my grandfather live on as his friend, Kogut? Why can't it be him who survives along the route of Prisoner Number 5488, so that a different fate can carry Leib from Buchenwald to Auschwitz and back again to where he can be reunited with his two sons? Maybe even live to see his grandchildren in another country? For me to see him, my Zeyde.

(Mark Baker: *The Fiftieth Gate*, p.197.)

Others: Serge Liberman: *On Firmer Shores* p.15, Anna Rosner Blay: *Sister, Sister*, p.157. Compare with Primo Levi's description in *if this is A Man* p.33 (Abacus: Sphere Books)

4. *Bread*

(Symbol: a loaf of bread and/or a few crumbs)

(At Solly Nadel's Guest House:)

There was never any bread left on the tables after the meals. Mr Grossman saved the left over bread from his table. After two weeks, he took home three cardboard boxes of bread. Other people did the same.

"He is a peasant, that Mr Grossman," said Mrs Lipshutz. Freida Factor interrupted her. "We should understand, Mrs Lipshutz, that this is not his normal behavior. I don't know if you know this, Mrs Lipshutz, but Mr Grossman was in Mauthausen concentration camp." "Well, he is now in Melbourne, Australia, where there is plenty of bread," Mrs Lipshutz replied. "That sort of behavior causes anti-Semitism," she added.

(Lily Brett: *Things Could Be Worse*, p.81)

My mother never throws away a piece of bread. She tells she likes the end, the 'heel' of the loaf. She particularly likes challah with honey or rye bread with caraway seeds. She cuts a chunky slice and spreads a thick layer of butter on it. In the playground I sometimes see children throw their lunches into the rubbish bin. I don't always want to finish my sandwiches, but I have been told to bring them home. It's a sin to throw bread away. I believe that I am being watched, and if I ever dared to put my lunch in the bin my mother would know. I dutifully carry my squashed half-sandwich home, and wait for the sorrow to cloud my mother's eyes when she unpacks my bag.

(Anna Rosner Blay: *Sister, Sister*, pp.181-182)

5. *Muselmann*

People were as transparent as ghosts, you could count each bone, and the flesh had disappeared from their buttocks. Those who could still walk stumbled around like grotesque skeletons, others were too weak to move and lay dying in their own excrement. The first sign that someone was about to die was that they turned yellow. We called them "*Mussulmans*" because of the color of their skin. They just lay there and lost interest in everything, even food. In a few days they were dead.

(Diane Armstrong : *Mosaic*, p.369)

Muselmanner (Moslems)

(Lily Brett: *The Auschwitz Poems* pp:23-24)

6. *Potato Peel*

(Symbol: a potato peel (if that is not possible, a vegetable peeler))

My Eleventh Birthday

(Lily Brett: *Poland and Other Poems*, pp. 162-163.)

The Seder plate filled with the entire traditional offering glows like a jewel against the white tablecloth. The usual items are there, the shank bone, the roasted egg promising life, bitter horseradish and sprigs of celery leaf and parsley for hope. But tonight there is one more item. This potato peel, it has been suggested, should be placed on the Seder plate to represent our memory of the six million Jews murdered in the Holocaust. In those years of horror a piece of potato peel could mean the difference between life and starvation. It was worth more than gold. To steal a potato peel could mean instant death.

(Anna Rosner Blay: *Sister, Sister*, p.195)

7. *Soup/Food*
(Symbol: bowl)

Soup

(Lily Brett: *The Auschwitz Poems*, p.13)

Dinner

(Lily Brett: *Unintended Consequences*, pp:119-121)

View, p.22

8. *Possessions*

(Symbols: bowl, spoon, some paper, and string, stump of lipstick, a handbag)

Possessions of the Rich

(Lily Brett: *The Auschwitz Poems*, pp.44-45)

In An Emergency

(Lily Brett: *Unintended Consequences*, p.77)

9. *Photographs*

(Symbols: an empty photograph album, several old (? torn) black and white photographs)

Lola saw herself in photographs, too. She saw herself in photographs of street urchins in the Lodz ghetto. She saw herself in a photograph of a small girl sitting next to her dead mother in the ghetto. She saw herself in photographs of Jewish women smiling for the camera in displaced persons camps.

Lola also looked for relatives in these photographs. She searched through photographs, books and films for members of her family. She looked for the son that her parents had had before the war. She looked for her grandparents. She looked for her auntie's and uncles and cousins.

(Lily Brett: *Things Could Be Worse*, p166)

One particular page stood out. In the wake of the Annihilation, the survivors had assembled photos, snatches of history, glimpses of what had been until so recently their beloved hometown. They did it in haste, as if building a moat against the ravages of memory loss.

(Arnold Zable: *Jewels And Ashes*, p.13)

To Be Remembered

(Jacob G Rosenberg: *Twilight Whispers*, p.1)

10. *Nature*

(Symbols: several leaves, a flower.)

Yom Kippur night was glorious; there had never been such a night. The moon, which silhouetted every moving figure, had never shone so brightly but the silence and solemnity of the occasion were broken by exploding rockets and shellfire. Already leaves were falling in the orchards during that golden autumn. It was nature's way of bidding us goodbye.

(Diane Armstrong: *Mosaic*, p.240)

The Last Autumn

(Jacob G Rosenberg: *My Father's Silence*, p.8)

Dead Flowers

(Janka Abrami: *Pomegranates*, pp.264-265)

11. *Family/Name*

(Symbol: a poster of a family tree-perhaps with half of it erased, or scrubbed out, from 1939-45)

What was it they were trying to convey, our elders, when they told us their stories? means 'future'-yet they talked endlessly about the past, sometimes lovingly, 'Jadimah' sometimes with real venom. Their stories were like the Siberian night sky as it appears now above the train, streaking starlight between spaces of darkness; and this is where their tales petered out, into an infinite darkness they called the Annihilation. They left a legacy of fragments, a jumble of jewels and ashes, and forests of severed family trees which their children now explore and try somehow to rescue.

(Arnold Zable: *Jewels and Ashes*, pp.23-24)

A Coalition

(Lily Brett: *After The War*, pp.53-54)

12. *Survivors*

(Symbol: discuss with participants about what they would use as a symbol for a survivor)

With Survivors around My Table

(Jacob G Rosenberg: *My Father's Silence*, p.25)

Everything Looked Normal

(Lily Brett: *The Auschwitz Poems*, pp.117-119)

13. *Australia*

(Symbols: a sundress, a map conveying a sense of the distance between Europe and Australia)

One of the first things Esther had said to Renia was: "You should buy yourself an Australian dress. Here it is called a sunfrock. It will help you look like an Australian. We Jews are just beginning to be accepted, and you shouldn't cause trouble for us. Last week the

bank manager did come to us, to our house, for a cup of coffee. He had coffee and a piece of cake, and he saw that we are normal, just like everybody else. It is important to be normal.”

(Lily Brett: *Things Could Be Worse*, p.3)

Within the shadows of their recent bereavement they had sought asylum in a New World. ‘Why did you choose Australia?’ we asked. ‘I looked at a map of the world and chose a place as far as possible from Sibir’, one of them had replied.

(Arnold Zable: *Jewels and Ashes*, p.22)

‘We voz at a picnic,’ my father relates. A picnic for orphans, soon after he arrived in Australia.

An Australian asks: ‘So where were you during the war?’

‘Buchenwald,’ my father answers.

‘Where’s that? In the mountains? How was the air?’

(Mark Baker: *The Fiftieth Gate*, p.298)

Mother cannot forgive Melbourne, upon which, she says she has merely stumbled. Nor Europe, now left behind. And even while her feet tread the dry dusty earth of this firmer quieter shore, the ship of her existence floats, hopelessly, on an ocean of regret and dejection, of reproach and tears...Of all misfortunes available to the children of this earth, she bemoans, Melbourne was the one she had to choose. Melbourne, a tail torn from the rump of the world, where she is lost, amongst neighbors, generations, continents, galaxies apart from herself, a foreigner Jew in an Australian marsh. Like satin in tweed, perfume in tar, crystal in clay.

(Serge Liberman: *On Firmer Shores*, pp.3-5)

14. Others

a. Birthmark

And wilderness to her was any place where not a Yiddish word was spoken, where Sholem Aleichem and Leibush Peretz were not heard of, where one, so to speak, clung to the shadows lest a gentile finger be pointed or a sneer thrown or allusion be made, however subtly, to one’s Juiciness. Jewishness, after what had happened, was not a matter of pride. How could it be? It was a birthmark, sometimes-if one were unlucky-borne in a prominent place, at other times mercifully hidden beneath the surface wraps...Jewishness was merely a thing to be observed, when observed at all, behind closed doors, behind approximated curtains and with muted voice, among one’s own.

(Serge Liberman: *On Firmer Shores*, pp.199-200)

b. Lamp-post

The Lamp-post Where I stood

(Jacob G Rosenberg: *My Father’s Silence*, p.7)

c. *Gates*

In Mark Baker's book: *The Fiftieth Gate*, he uses the metaphor of gates as he journeys with his parents through their memories. Baker draws on the Bible, the Kabbala, 5th century Talmudic literature, as well as the writings of Rabbi Nahman of Bratslav. A comparison of the use of concentration camp 'gates', prisoners inside, freedom on the outside: could the gate be viewed as an innocent bystander or as a witness?

Compare with Elie Wiesel's *The Gates of the Forest*.

(also worth noting Baker's adaptation of Dan Pagis's **Written In Pencil in the Sealed Freightcar** for his beginning of Gate XLII:

Here in this carload

I am Hinda

tell him that I...

(Mark Baker: *The Fiftieth Gate*, p.261)

d. *Paul Celan*

Compare Celan's **Death Fugue** with Brett's **The Newest Dentist** *Unintended Consequences*, pp. 81-82

e. *Kingdoms*

Compare Elie Wiesel's Kingdom of the Night with Lily Brett's 'disordered kingdom' in **The Arrival** in *Unintended Consequences*, p. 9. Elsewhere, Brett refers to the 'kingdom of doom.'

f. *Pockets*

I knew that I couldn't ask my mother too many questions, but I was desperate to know what had happened, and desperate to know what was happening now. There were so many unsaid things in our house. Small explosive pockets dotted the air. Pockets of shame, degradation, bitterness, and guilt. They were secret pockets, never talked about. So many secrets. They seemed to spill out of cupboards and drawers. Nothing was what it seemed.

(Lily Brett: *In Full View*, p. 331)

g. *Bunks/sleeping*

Compare and contrast Lily Brett's **Sleep** in *The Auschwitz Poems*, p. 11 with Primo Levi's accounts in *If This Is A Man*, pp.57, 65 and 71.

Conclusion

I will close with a song by Scottish-born Australian, Eric Bogle. This song could easily be incorporated within a unit on Australian Holocaust Literature, or used as a catalyst for students to write their own lyrics:

Never Again/Remember (written after a visit to Sachsenhausen)

I have been to hell today, I saw the Devil's naked face

I felt the poison freeze my heart, in that evil, evil place
 I heard the ghosts cry out in warning, their voices ringing through the years
 I stood beneath the barbed wire fence, and wept, and wept, bitter tears.
 stood alone that winter's day, on that barren killing ground
 Inside my head the voices grew, till my brain
 was bursting with the sound
 They cried "Comrade, do not forget us" and I replied "I never will",
 And as my soul in anguish wept, one by one, the voices stilled
 Never, never, again.

Europe, sixty years ago-Remember?
 Depression, millions on the dole-Remember?
 In those dark, despairing times
 Of unemployment and bread-lines
 A cancer grew, fat and malign-Remember?

It's banner was a crooked cross-Remember?
 It's destiny a holocaust-Remember?
 It's creed was racial purity
 It fed on fear and bigotry
 It's touch was death and slavery-Remember?

It's happening again, it's happening again
 Can't you see it's happening again.

Treblinka, Auschwitz and Dachau-Remember?
 David's Star-a people's shroud-Remember?
 No refuge and no hiding place
 For non-members of the Master Race
 Whole nations enslaved and debased-Remember?

Blood and toil and sweat and tears-Remember?
 The nightmare lasted six long years-Remember?
 The world drowned in a bloody tide
 Of war and death and genocide
 Fifty-seven million died-Remember?

I've lived in freedom all my life, never
 thinking much about the cost
 Of those who suffered and who died so that
 freedom's flame would not be lost
 I saw the flame in Sachsenhausen, in spite
 of all its burning yet
 To all the ghosts who guard the flame,
 I promise you I won't forget
 Never. Never again.
 Never. Never again.

(Eric Bogle, *Never Again/Remember*, Larrikin Music, 1993)

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