The Impact of the Holocaust Literature and Film

by

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Introduction

Fifty-five years after the events, the impact of the Holocaust on Western Civilization has not been completely analyzed or comprehended. Historians are still exploring it all over the world, presenting detailed research of people, places, ideologies and acts. At the same time, educators in many countries choose to include Holocaust Studies in their curricula. It seems that the interest in the events and their consequences are not solely a Jewish topic any more. The universal aspects of this major rift in western civilization become more evident as more perspective is gained. This might be the reason that non-historical representations of the Holocaust - in fiction and film - can be found in growing numbers, in many languages. This phenomenon is in total disagreement with Adorno’s statement that after the Holocaust no more poetry will be written, only silence will prevail.

General outline of the workshop

The workshop will explore some representations of the Holocaust in literature and on film.

Literature:
See under Love (David Grossman), Snow in August (Pete Hamill),

Film:
Life is Beautiful (Roberto Benigni).

A few other books will be referred to more briefly, such as: Stones from the River (Ursula Hegi), The Reader (Bernhard Schlink). Most books can be found in both Hebrew and English. Thus they are accessible to readers and educators, as well as students.

By exploring these materials, an attempt will be made to analyze the impact of the Holocaust through the eyes of youngsters.

The main topics discussed will be:

- How can educators deal with the total chaos – emotional and intellectual – the Holocaust created in Western Civilization?
- Is there a way to re-create an orderly, hopeful, optimistic attitude to life in post-Holocaust world?
- Can non-historical writings help educators teach about the Holocaust to generations to come?

Discussion
In the following pages we will deal with some issues related to the Holocaust as they are presented in the above mentioned books and films. The idea is to explore possible comparative ideas and then to translate them into educational terms.

When this book appeared in Hebrew in 1986, it became a bestseller. It is not a pleasant book, focusing on hope and optimism. In spite of the title, there is no love in this book; Grossman chooses to define love in the fourth and last part of this book, which he named: The Complete Encyclopedia of Kazik’s Life and Death. The whole part is composed of short alphabetically written articles, dealing with the life and death of the above mentioned Kazik. For Love Grossman has one line: See under: Sex. Going now to Sex, it says: See under: Love. Thus, it seems, the title of the book is somewhat misleading. If when choosing to read it one thinks the author decided to write a heroic tale of “love conquers all”, even the Nazis, in the end, when love is finally referred to, it is as hollow and cold as can be. We are moving in a circle without meaning when trying to talk about it. Grossman seems to tell us that words lose their meaning when writing or talking about the Holocaust.

Aside from the above short notes about the book in general, the main discussion here will be about the first part of the book, Momik. Momik is a young child in his early teens, living in Jerusalem in the late fifties. Holocaust survivors- his parents, grandparents and their friends- surround him. His mind is full of their stories, the terms and words they use. He becomes somewhat obsessed with the phrase “The Nazi Beast”. In his avid mind this term, common during those years as a description of the Nazi regime and its horrors, becomes a real animal. He creates a whole world centered on this Beast. In this world the Beast exists in the cellar of his apartment building, lurking, hiding, waiting in the darkness for another opportunity. Momik sees himself as the one person who knows the real facts: The Beast can be tempted to emerge from hiding by the smell of “Jews from Overthere”, with the additional smell of dead mice. When the Beast finally emerges again, Momik will be there, fully prepared. In the battle between them Momik will slay him and the Nazi Beast will be finally and totally beaten. The world will then return to its normal course. Fear and chaos will disappear. The survivors will be able to start life again without the constant shadow of The Beast looming over them. Momik the Hero will be like David against Goliath, the savior. Well, the plan does not work. The episode in the basement, where Momik assembled all the neighbors and friends, those “people from overthere”, is a fiasco. After it was over Momik was sent away from his home to a boarding school, as his teachers and even his parents consider his obsession a form of madness.

Grossman’s book is hard to read. This first part, Momik, is in some respect the softer one. In trying to look at it from an educational point of view, one can say that Momik is a symbol of the need to find order in the chaotic world after the Holocaust. Children and youngsters tend to look for order and reason while growing up. The world Grossman writes about in his book has none of them. Like Superman, Momik undertakes the task: to bring back reason, order and calm to the chaotic world he knows. The fact that he fails does not reduce his heroic attempt. Teachers can make use of this story, even in part, when dealing with the impact of the Holocaust. The question raised here is basically how to interpret this attempt to right all wrongs beyond the story itself. Does Momik represent a real need, a wish to correct and heal? Is it at all possible to do, or is the Holocaust the kind of event that changed the world so totally that no healing is possible? These questions will be open for discussion in the workshop.
Pete Hamill: *Snow in August*

This book was published in 1997. The author is an American of Irish decent, currently the editor of the New York Post. The book does not deal directly with the Holocaust.

The story takes place in Brooklyn in 1946-47, after the war. Even so, it relates to the Holocaust and its impact.

A short synopsis of the story: 11 year old Michael Devlin is an Irish boy growing up in Brooklyn. His father was killed as an American soldier in W.W.II. He is a sensitive, easily impressed kid. On a windy and snowy Saturday he meets a Rabbi on the street. Rabbi Judah Hirsch is a refugee from Prague, who asks Michael to be his Goy Shel Shabbat and put on the lights in the synagogue. Thus starts a beautiful friendship between the two protagonists of the book. Michael teaches the Rabbi English and the rabbi teaches him Yiddish and tells him wonderful stories of Prague.

The streets of their Brooklyn neighborhood in the forties were ruled by anti-Semitic gangs of Irish and Italian youngsters. As the story progresses the anti-Semitic gang attacks both the Rabbi and Michael, injuring and humiliating them.

For Michael, the beautiful stories of Prague that the Rabbi tells him are fascinating and enchanting. As the Rabbi is a sole survivor of his family – he escaped from Europe before the war started – the stories he tells are of Jewish Prague as it was its history and greatness, its beauty and magic. Part of this magic is the Golem legend: The anthropoid creature who saved the Jews time and again in the days of the Maharal of Prague.

Why is it, asks Michael, that this Golem could not save the Jews of Europe? And his father too? To return to an issue looked at above – Why could not this Golem bring order and calm to the chaotic world ruled by hatred and brutality? Why in post war years, in America, anti-Semitism is still rampant in the streets of Brooklyn, putting the Rabbi in the hospital and giving Michael a broken arm?

Once again, as in Momik, the young hero comes to the rescue. Michael builds a Golem from wet earth in the park. He convinces Rabbi Hirsch to divulge the secret word to be put in the Golem’s mouth. In the last chapters of the book the giant creature comes to life. Gigantic and omnipotent, his task is to prohibit the Anti-Semitic gang from celebrating and rejoicing their brutality and cruelty. For Michael, an avid reader of Captain Marvel and Superman comics, the Golem can do only good. He will never harm anyone in spite of his strength and power.

His purpose in creating him is only to restore the world to it normal and just ways. Thus the Brooklyn Golem causes snow to fall only on the streets near the party, causing havoc to the Gang. The snow blinds their eyes, they are lost, the streets are blocked, and the party is cancelled. The Rabbi recuperates from his injury. The world has been saved; the good people won, evil will not prevail.

Unlike Grossman, who knows there is no easy way to heal the world from the impact of the Holocaust, and thus sends Momik with his gallant ideas away to another school after failing to slay the Nazi Beast, Hamill’s Michael is indeed Superman: He succeeds fully. He re-creates the legendary Golem who rights all the wrongs of the
world in one short night. The last chapters in Snow represent a fairy tale of sorts. But beyond this tale there is also some deeper truth: After the Holocaust there is no orderly, calm world. Hatred and racism did not disappear with the fall of Nazism. In fact the story tells also about Jackie Robinson, the first Afro-American to play Baseball in the Major League, in Brooklyn, during the same period of time. Robinson suffered a lot from racism while playing, but he also opened ground for changes, gradual and slow. In dealing with the events of Baseball in America in 1947 as part of the story of Michael and Rabbi Hirsch, Hamill talks to his American readers. As for the Golem, Hamill seems to say that after the Holocaust only an Anthropoid, an imaginary man-like creature, can claim to bring order to the chaotic world. Human beings, it seems, are unable to do that any more. By choosing this story educators can peel away the fairy tale and look into the deeper layers. The simplicity of the tale can be a good way to start a broader discussion.

Both Michael and Momik decide to correct all wrongs in one strike. Educators could offer the two heroes as a base for comparison on a few levels. Israeli and American, Brooklyn and Jerusalem, direct relation to the Holocaust versus some universal link to it.

Literary heroes like Momik and Michael open doors to this discussion. In some sense stories with a young person as their hero creates immediate identification, and from here doors are open to various avenues of exploration.

**In the movies: Life is Beautiful, by Roberto Benigni (1998)**

This movie, widely acclaimed all over the world, joins the stories discussed above. Let us look here at the common points in them, while assuming that the story of this movie is well known to many.

Benigni goes into the heart of things when he chooses a camp as location for his movie. I wish to ignore here the dispute concerning the validity of the camp and its representation in the movie. The points relevant to our discussion are basically outside this dispute.

It seems that Benigni is somewhat influenced by Grossman. In a radio talk between the two of them on Yom Ha-Shoa, Holocaust Memorial Day in April 1999, Benigni said Grossman’s book is his favorite. He also stated that telling a story like the one he presents in *Life is Beautiful* through the eyes of a child enables the viewers to ask the most fundamental questions about the human experience called the Holocaust, and then try to give answers on this same level. “I remembered the child in your book, and it really helped me. I tried to help this child, to protect him…” (Benigni in the radio interview, April 13, 1999)

From an educational point of view we have once again the same phenomenon: an attempt to eradicate evil by concentrating on a story which gives a total explanation, rational and human, to a chaotic and horrible situation. The young boy in the film can be any one, learning for the first time about the horrors of the Holocaust. “Can This Be Man?” asked Primo Levi, and answered, yes, the facts of Auschwitz prove that. They show man at his lowest. Beningi tells us in his film that guarding and saving a child from the real world in the camp gives humanity a hope of sorts. The representation, given by father to son in the movie to the events around them is a morally sound idea.
Like Momik and Michael, Guido in *Life Is Beautiful* represents the deep human wish to create a world in which it is possible to eradicate total evil by one single, sweeping deed. By telling his son that everything is a game with a prize in the end Guido represents this deep human need to replace evil with goodness and chaos with order.

The validity of this assumption can be dubious, or impossible, as we know the real events of the Holocaust and the historical progress of the Nazi era. At the same time, stories like those discussed here creates a way for students, at the end of this century, to attempt to better understand the impact of the Holocaust on the human race. It also enables a discussion of what it took to survive the Holocaust and of the possibility for humanism and optimism to exist after Auschwitz.

This discussion cannot replace the study of history, but in our day and age it creates another method of approaching this complex subject and examining its impact on post-Holocaust world. It involves the emotional aspect of learning this subject and thus makes an important addition to the study of history. At the workshop parts of the texts will be read and the film will be discussed. If time allows, it parts of the film will be shown too.

**A brief look at two books by Contemporary German Writers**

German writers are the authors of the two contemporary books offered now for a short discussion. These authors represent post-Holocaust generation of German writers, who are trying to deal with the history of their nation, and its impact, mainly the awesome guilt it created.

Ursula Hegi left Germany when she was 18, and now lives in the U.S.A. She writes in English. Her book, *Stones from the River* is a panoramic novel about Germany from 1915 to 1952. The main figure in the book is a midget, a dwarf heroine. Her name is Trudi Montag, and she lives in a town-village in Germany. She is an outsider because of her looks and size. In some respects she is an eternal child, even though she grows up as the book progresses. As the major theme of the book is Germany and the German people, and the way they absorb and comprehend the events around them. Choosing an outsider like Trudi as the protagonist in this novel is of course intentional. Trudi is not only a symbol of all those who are different in society; during the Nazi era when dwarfs were doomed many times as unwanted in the pure Aryan society and were murdered during the time of the Euthanasia program. *Stones from the River* is a long novel; educators can offer parts of the story to interested students, in order to understand the point of view of a German writer when dealing with the historical events.

Hegi’s point of view is complex. When dealing with guilt and with the issue of responsibility of the German people she is sometimes vague. Trudi belongs to the righteous and she and her father hide Jews in their cellar. She suffers herself all her life, because she is different, and thus can offer deep understanding of the suffering of others. People in the book are different, or indifferent, but only a few are true Nazis.

In Hegi’s book most people in the town-village were victims themselves of hunger, bombings and misery. The Jews disappeared, but that happened because of somewhat far away events. Hegi does not go into the details of the Final Solution. Her purpose
is to examine German society and to decipher its inner working so as to understand how could Nazism happen.

The book was widely acclaimed for its candor and depth, and it certainly can give teachers an important point of view into the perpetrator’s side.

Once again, literature is given a task here, which goes beyond the study of a story as such. It brings forth the issue of the impact of the Holocaust on human conscience and awareness, this time from the German point of view. Unlike the stories discussed above, there is no hero who attempts to create a better world here by his own sweeping action. It seems that when it comes to the German side of the events no such act is possible, not even in a book of fiction.

Bernhard Schlink is a German professor of law and a practicing judge. His best selling book, *The Reader*, is yet another story dealing with the impact of the Holocaust on the German people. The protagonist in this book is a young man, at the start of the book he is fifteen. From the point of view of age he belongs to the same group of literary heroes we looked at before. But this is the only resemblance. The book takes place after W.W.II. Michael, the young protagonist, meets by chance an older lady, Hanna, who helps him when he feels sick in the street. He cannot know the fateful meaning of that meeting. As the story unfolds, Michael becomes Hanna’s lover. Later on she disappears, leaving the young Michael devastated. When he sees her again she is accused of being a guard in a camp during the Nazi regime, and he is a law student observing at the trial.

Without going into all the details of this captivating story, it is possible to link it with the point made above: The young Michael in this book falls in love with a much older woman. He has no idea of her history or former life. Being German, Schlink writes about the human aspect of History through the eyes of his young protagonist.

He does not have the notion of righting all wrongs in one action, but he allows the young person to fall in love with the older woman, thus creating a fragile bridge between generations—the war generation and the post war one. But this bridge collapses, for maybe it could not be built at all. The real world, the historical events, interferes more than once. First and foremost the book deals with the moral corruption of those who were participants in Nazi acts: Hanna is not a nice lady, even though Michael loves her deeply. She ruins life for him permanently, she is cruel to him and at one point in the story even beats him. We could also say that only a morally corrupted adult would let a young person of fifteen become her lover, and to totally absorbed in that love. This is as if Schlink is saying that the impact of the Holocaust on the perpetrators and their children is forever there.

There are more aspects of this book to discuss, and if time allows it will be possible to do so at the workshop.

**Conclusion**

When dealing with the major issues related to the impact of the Holocaust in our time one should go beyond just studying history. It enables educators to look into the meaning of the Holocaust for the conscience of humanity and also to discover the
proper ways to assist the younger generations to internalize and analyze its lessons. Presenting these stories may give educators a larger spectrum of tools and means for looking at the Holocaust and its impact from diverse points of view, raising questions that go beyond the study of historical events. The purpose here is not to replace the study of the history of the Holocaust as the main discipline. Non-historical representations of the Holocaust can only enhance the exploration and analysis of the deeper aspects of this major event in the history of mankind. The workshop will be a starting point for such discussions. Participants will be encouraged to take part and share their views.