

# How Much Should We Tell the Children?

## Representing Death and Suffering in Children's Literature about the Holocaust

By Eva Tal

Although forgotten except by scholars of children's literature, early texts for children in the 17th century made extensive use of long drawn out scenes of death and dying which today we would consider overly melodramatic. This school of writing was superseded by moral tales that proposed to teach children through example, such as the well known 19th century German tales of *Struwwelpeter* by Heinrich Hoffman and *Max and Moritz* by Wilhelm Busch, both of which combined humor and the cautionary tale with a degree of violence that would preclude publication today. These in turn were abandoned for the "happily ever after" school of children's literature that characterized most of the twentieth century. Children's writers believed they had to protect young readers from the difficulties of life by hiding suffering, death, and evil, or at best relegating them to a minor character.

Bruno Bettelheim's ground breaking *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales* published in 1975 criticized contemporary books for children for avoiding central issues such as death and aging: "the dark side of man." Bettelheim contended that despite the books proffered by the predominant culture, children continuously turned to fairy tales, which are filled with death and evil, precisely because the message of fairy tales is a message essential for the development of a healthy psyche. Even Bettelheim believed children needed the satisfaction of a happy ending, however, and this became a byword of modern children's literature in the twentieth century.

### *How Much Should We Tell the Children?*

In his groundbreaking 1977 article in *The Horn Book* magazine, "Confronting the Ovens: The Holocaust and Juvenile Fiction," Erich Kimmel wrote of the "juvenile writer, who is torn between his duty toward his subject and his responsibility toward his craft; not to be too violent, too accusing, too depressing" (Kimmel 84). Almost thirty years later, Kimmel's questions about how to present death and the camps to children remain appropriate.

In existing Holocaust fiction for children and young adults there has been a natural reluctance to grapple with the presentation of evil and death. Kimmel used the metaphor of Dante's *Inferno* to describe Holocaust children's literature as a series of concentric rings, each coming closer and closer to the fiery inferno of death in the concentration camps (84). In the outermost ring are the resistance novels of World War Two, in which young people, usually non-Jews, take an active role in the movement to save their homeland. Next come the refugee novels, which, because they document successful escape attempts, are basically optimistic. The third category includes the novels of occupation and hiding. Even closer to the inferno are the heroic novels presenting the stories of Jewish resistance in the ghettos or with the partisans. Kimmel further subdivides these into novels of physical and spiritual resistance. Lastly, he discusses the novels that confront the concentration camps and mass murder. There are far fewer examples of this type because, while coming closer to the truth of the Holocaust, they are almost impossible to write within the conventions of children's literature. Since the publication of Kimmel's article, the field of Holocaust literature for children has expanded in directions that necessitate the addition of several new categories, including allegory, and novels of post-war survival which focus on survivors' attempts to discover the fate of their families and rebuild their lives. I have named still another category "contemporary catalysts," because they appeal to young readers through the use of a present day protagonist whose is linked to the Holocaust, usually through a survivor.

Ursula Sherman, in an article ironically titled "Why Would a Child Want to Read About That?" writes that "the most difficult prospect for children's writers struggling with this subject may well be the need to deal with the reality of evil," for, until recently, the only literature for children dealing with pure evil was folklore (174). Contemporary young adult fiction now deals with "bad" adults and includes the real-life issues of child maltreatment, sexual abuse, psychological abuse, murder, incest, abandonment, etc. Yet this evil differs from the evil of the Holocaust, because it remains particularized. It is centered in one or two characters, and presented as deviant and localized, although it may be argued that young adult author Robert Cormier's work demonstrates a more methodical evil at work in society as a whole. The evil of the Holocaust is different; it is a "systematic plan rather than an isolated event," and defies the assumption that the world is automatically good (Sherman 174).

Writers of fiction, like writers of memoirs, feel an obligation to convey the facts of the Holocaust to young readers by 'telling the truth.' But telling the truth in the context of the Holocaust raises serious moral questions: how much of the truth is appropriate for children? Is truth merely a label we paste onto a collection of facts, or is the method chosen to present these facts as important as the data itself? Critics like M.P. Machet maintain that "[H]istorical accuracy in terms of Holocaust literature for children is a difficult concept. The real horrors of the Holocaust need to be softened or avoided to some extent as children should not be exposed to events such as medical experimentation carried out in Auschwitz" (no page). This "partial truth" is not a static concept. Concentration camps were considered an inappropriate subject for children's literature until the 1980s and 90s. Taboos honored by society and authors themselves are fluid, but the author's responsibility to the truth remains constant.

### **Representing Death and Suffering**

In the remainder of this session, I am going to focus on the existing limits of representation in children's books: the major literary techniques used by authors of children's books to present horror, violence, and death. In most cases, these techniques protect the reader from the full horror, but we will also look at examples in which the taboos are broken.

#### *Narrative Structure: How the Story is Told*

A typical plot in children's books about the Holocaust begins in a happy time before the war, or more specifically, before the disruption in the life of the main character. לעב ירתפכ בהזה לייחה (The Soldier with the Gold Buttons) by Miriam Steiner Aviezer for example, opens with a scene befitting a pastoral 19th century novel: "The morning fog lifted over the surrounding forests and pastures of the small village. The shepherds led their flocks to pasture carrying jugs for milk and baskets for mushrooms and wild berries so plentiful at this time of year. The flocks trudged bleating through the village, their bells ringing. The village began to awaken" (7 my translation). Nowhere can one find a hint of a country at war or the threat of the coming disaster. Instead, the first three paragraphs seem to exist out of time. Setting the beginning of the narrative in a time of innocence provides a useful contrast between the disruption of the protagonist's life and the portrayal of suffering in the middle section of the book. It also provides the child reader with an historical framework. The child reader needs the historical setting in order to comprehend the chronology of the story and the enormity of the change that occurs in the characters' lives. Stories of occupation and hiding often extend this period, building tension as life becomes more and more constricted by the occupation.

A minority of books departs from this formula by eliminating the scene-setting beginning. If I Should Die Before I Wake by Han Nolan plunges the reader directly into the consciousness of Hilary who, while lying in a coma, hears and comprehends what is occurring around her, communicates with the dying older woman in her hospital room, and undergoes the older woman's Holocaust experiences. The Final Journey by Gudrun Pauswang opens even more abruptly: "The sliding-door of the railway truck closed with a deafening clang" which signals the beginning of Alice's journey to the gas chambers (1). In books like these, the past is presented through flashbacks or strands of memory, whose importance to the main character is vital. חן קרוי הינאו: מירוע תכלשב (Yorek and Anya: Youth in Autumn) by Miriam Akavia, short flashbacks are interspersed throughout the bleak present. Many portray scenes of summer holidays in the country, which contrast with the ugliness of the ghetto, prison and camps. These memories provide both a dramatic contrast and a relief for the reader from the sufferings the characters endure in the Holocaust. One of the most common techniques used

to protect the child reader is the use of the prologue, which can either be set off from the story itself, as in Livia Bitton-Jackson's memoir *I Have Lived a Thousand Years*, or constitute the first chapter, as in Ruth Minsky Sender's memoir *The Cage* and Jerry Spinelli's *Milkweed*. Bitton-Jackson describes a visit to the town in Bavaria where she was liberated. Sender describes her present day nightmares and the comfort she receives from her daughter. In the short opening chapter of *Milkweed*, the fictional narrator conveys the essence of his past: the running, the theft of bread, the chase and the shout "Stop! Thief!" (1). These openings signal the reader that the protagonist has survived, providing an assurance that all will turn out well (at least for the protagonist) no matter how frightening the events that occur later in the book.

The use of a matrix narrative, or frame story, set in the present is another technique found in Holocaust fiction for children. The main character is a contemporary child with whom the reader can identify. In Han Nolan's *If I Should Die Before I Wake* and Jane Yolen's *The Devil's Arithmetic*, the contemporary character is transported back into the past where she experiences the horrors of concentration camps and the deaths of friends and family. Critic Lydia Kokkola points out:

The return to the frame story [...] provides reassurance that the time is now past and life continues. The unusual frequency with which framing is used in Holocaust literature compared with other genres may well be a consequence of the need to reestablish normalcy. These forms of structural closure are the most common, although other possibilities can be found. (155)

In addition, the frame device protects the reader with the knowledge that the protagonist survives. In a variation on time slip narrative, the story of the past is related to the contemporary protagonist by a survivor, as in Jane Yolen's *Briar Rose*, Haya Gilon's *תקליצה* (*The Scar*) and Nava Makmel-Atir's *ידעה לשי ידע* (*A Jewel for Adi*). The two Hebrew novels portray a loving relationship between a Holocaust survivor who passes on her memories to her granddaughter.

### **Happy Endings**

The phrase "happy ending" is a contraction in the framework of Holocaust literature. For a story about the Holocaust to end happily, the events preceding the ending would have to contradict the historical reality of the period. Literary criticism talks about "closure" rather than ending:

Traditionally, children's literature ends with closure: a closed ending which leaves no questions open. We may further distinguish between structural closure and psychological closure. Structural closure brings the plot to a satisfactory conclusion, whereas psychological closure brings the protagonist's personal conflicts into balance. (Kokkola 154-5)

Holocaust literature for children contains many variations on structural and psychological closure. *The Devil's Arithmetic*, for example, provides a double challenge for there are two different plot lines. In the Holocaust narrative, Hannah substitutes herself for her friend Rivka by making the supreme sacrifice of giving her life to save another. Hannah's return to the present provides the frame story with structural closure, as does the revelation that by sacrificing her life, she has saved the life of her beloved Aunt Eva, the Rivka of the Holocaust narrative. Hannah's experience in the past allows her to achieve psychological closure by creating within her the recognition of the importance of memory, which she denied in her earlier rebellion against family tradition. "I'm tired of remembering [...]" (3), the first sentence of the novel, changes to "I remember. Oh, I remember" (164) at the novel's close. Although *The Devil's Arithmetic* pushes the boundaries of children's literature in its portrayal of suffering and death, at the same time it conforms to American society's need to provide children with "hope and happy endings." The many English language books I have read all impart a message of hope and sense of optimism through structural or psychological closure. Jews are rescued, families escape, brothers and sisters are reunited, and survivors undertake the journey to a new life in America or Palestine.

Must children be given endings that provide them with hope even when that hope represents a distortion of reality? I am not arguing for a literature of death, suffering, and disillusionment, but rather for a presentation of the Holocaust in a context that children can find meaningful without a distortion to suit the needs of the author or the society in which she writes. By idealizing Jewish victims and turning them into martyrs or victors over evil, Holocaust literature for children fails to provide exactly the type of witnessing it professes to impart.

Other alternatives exist. In the final chapter of הרענון, תא, ויאמ (Where Are You From, Girl?) by Irena Leibman, Ala, the protagonist, twice visits the Jewish cemetery. The first death is the peaceful end to her grandmother's long life and Ala is supported in her grief by her loving father. Years later on the occasion of a school friend's death from typhus in the ghetto, Ala, who has lost her entire family, is unable to keep up and loses the funeral party in the snow-covered cemetery. To break her fall, she grabs a gravestone that turns out to be her grandmother's. This chance reunion with her grandmother gives Ala new strength to face her daily suffering. Although the book closes without the assurance that she will survive, Ala's new will to live at any price reassures the reader that she has a future. This turning point is further reinforced by the introduction of the future tense in the closing sentences, as well as the hint that Ala will "grip with the remainder of her strength the strip of land promised to the people who whisper their prayers in a language thousands of years old [...]" (73). Although structural closure is denied, Ala achieves psychological closure in her reassertion of her will to survive, while the ending is left open.

Very few books deny the child reader the comfort of at least psychological closure, but there are some examples. In Friedrich by Hans Peter Richter, Friedrich the Jewish boy loses his family and dies terrified and alone in a bombing raid, his needless death the result of the cowardice of his neighbors who are afraid to stand up to the despicable landlord/shelter warden. In *The Final Journey*, the naïve Alice goes to her death in the gas chamber believing that she is about to shower away the dirt of the transport and "drink coffee with the grownups" (154).

Miriam Akavia's *Youth in Autumn* makes no pretense at structural or psychological closure. At the close of the first section, Yorek's death is certain: "Darkness already. And I didn't finish... The darkness continued and another day never dawned" (110). Anya's story ends in Auschwitz where, having lost her father and most of her family, she is struggling to survive with her mother and sister. The war is drawing to a close. American planes fly overhead, but nothing changes in Auschwitz: "Anya doesn't believe a world of good people still exists. If it did, they wouldn't let this happen. Good people, if they existed, would come by the multitudes to this camp to help, to save" (160). Even the brief flash-forward to the future offers no closure: "Today too, black ravens circle over this place of mass crime which has absorbed the blood of millions of people. Visitors from all over the world visit this place – and no one understands" (162).

In the introduction, Akavia writes of her own and her sister's survival, but the text denies even this reassurance by closing with Margot's brief story. Margot's sister Ruth dies next to a filthy toilet. Instead of love and understanding, her relatives offer blame and lack of empathy. Unable to express what she has suffered, Margot leaves their home as alone as she arrived: "The summer night covered her with hot choking humidity. The street was full of people. Margot's feet were heavy. Where and how to go?" (171) By refusing to provide structural or psychological closure, Akavia expands the boundaries of children's literature. Her characters raise difficult questions without the pretense of an answer or a didactic lesson. She offers no idealization of suffering in its ability to ennoble or enlighten the sufferers. She denies a return to normalcy. Margot has no home to return to. Neither liberation nor immigration to Israel can solve the questions raised in this book, which instead of hope offers realistic insightful characters and the life affirming value of family.

### **The Child's Point of View**

The child's point of view is frequently used in children's books about the Holocaust. As literary critic Naomi Sokoloff points out:

Engagement with a child's vision and inner life, always problematic in fiction, is in some ways well suited to narrative concerning the Holocaust. Focus on a child's partial understanding helps alleviate the adult narrator's struggle with language and artistic expression, for the young character's incomprehension serves to indicate the incomprehensibility of the catastrophe. For example, when children fail to understand what occurs in their surroundings, their confusions highlight the madness about them. Their misunderstandings of words in particular, can lodge a protest against the ways grown-ups speak and against the inadequacies of language in explaining what has happened. Children's clouded understandings of events can also act as a filter, allowing the author to forestall disclosure of overly horrifying fact. In other cases, faced directly with brutality, the children view events in an immature way that buffers them and makes persecution more bearable. (Sokoloff 16)

While this technique has many advantages, limiting the point of view to the perspective of a young child creates a serious problem: when the child reader's lack of knowledge and understanding of the Holocaust is matched by that of the child narrator/protagonist, the author is faced with the challenge of providing the wider context of events without losing the advantages of the child narrator's perception.

"One of the key differences between using a first and a third person narrator is the signal that this gives to readers regarding the likely outcome of life-threatening circumstances" (Kokkola 118) since the first person narrator survives to tell the tale (although an exception is Yorek in *Youth in Autumn*). In *I Have Lived a Thousand Years* Elli is a reliable narrator who never reveals more than she knew at the time events were taking place. Although Livia Bitton-Jackson's memoir could allow her perspective on past events, she resists the temptation for authorial interpretation or insights that would not have been available to her at the time. Perspective is presented in a natural way:

We saw this train station seven-and-a-half weeks ago, when we arrived. Only seven-and-a-half weeks ago. Yet, long, long ago. Before I became part of death and blood and naked horror. Before I experienced decimation, tasted death itself. It was before I saw people tortured and shot. It was before I knew that there were no limits to human cruelty. (115)

Close third person is the most popular narrative choice after first person in Holocaust children's literature. *The Soldier with the Gold Buttons* focalizes the third person narrative through a child too young to comprehend what is happening. When Biba is called home from her games with her friends, she does not understand the presence of all the neighbors, why her father is pale, her mother crying. When she learns that the family is leaving, she is thrilled to finally travel by train, and invites the cook to accompany her. The narrator never comments on Biba's naiveté and never allows Biba thoughts unsuitable to her age. As Naomi Sokoloff points out:

By limiting himself to the child's unknowing stance, and by not undertaking analytical retrospection, the narrator does not try to explain away the incongruous mixture of dread and wonder that he felt as a child. On the contrary: giving special prominence to the child's views, the text also credits those past thoughts with a certain legitimacy. (114)

The gap of knowledge between the reader and the focalizer generates an irony that serves to protect the reader from the full horror of the events, but the juxtaposition of evil with the innocence of childhood can also highlight the evil the child witnesses, as we shall see shortly. The use of a child protagonist and child's point of view serve a variety of functions in Holocaust literature. The incomprehensibility of the Holocaust is best reflected in the incomprehension of the child character. The child's failure to understand can act to filter disclosure of the horrifying truth of what is taking place, or can serve to underscore it. At the same time, the child looks at the world around him with an acceptance untypical of adults and a naiveté that highlights details an adult might miss. Identification with the child character also provides a measure of protection, for few child protagonists are killed off by their creators, particularly in middle grade novels.

Using a child's point of view does hold certain risks: "Entrance into the child's inner life and personal world or misunderstandings may constitute an evasion of collective moral questions. At an extreme the result is over privatization of the issues, a dissatisfying universalization or political blindness – particularly with regard to the Holocaust" (Sokoloff 182). In order to universalize the reader's understanding of the Holocaust beyond the comprehension of a single child focalizer, a variety of different methods are employed, such as adding a foreword or afterword to provide historical or personal information. Many texts provide interaction with more knowledgeable characters who help fill in the gaps in the young focalizer's understanding. In others the overt narrator assumes a measure of personal expression. In *The Devil's Arithmetic* the protagonist's memory from the present expands the focus of the narrative beyond the events taking place in one unnamed death camp.

### **Portraying Death**

Few children's books take place in concentration camps and still fewer in death camps. Almost none touch on mass extermination. Instead they choose to focus on individual deaths, if at all. The most prevalent technique used to protect the child reader portrays death "off stage," away from the focalizer's view. Both *Where Are You From, Girl?* and *Youth in Autumn*, two books that disregard closure and make no attempt to prettify or idealize the experiences of the protagonists, never present the death of a major character through the eyes of the

focalizing character. In *Youth in Autumn*, the family never learns how Yorek died. Anya's father is taken away, and the story ends before the death of Anya's mother. Only on the last page of the book is death portrayed directly when Margot remembers the death of her sister: "A filthy toilet next to the dying Ruth's head. Margot holds her sister's thin hand in hers, but Ruth's hand falls away. Margot wants to scream, but no sound comes out of her throat. Next to the head of the dead Ruth, the toilet stops up..." (171) This description dwells on the external: the toilet clogging, the dead girl's hand slipping away, and conveys the feelings of Margot through her silent scream rather than her thoughts. At the same time there is a measure of distance in the fact that Ruth is not a developed character; she is barely mentioned in the brief closing chapter of the book. Her death is also told in flashback, which further serves to distance it, although the use of the present tense contradicts this effect. Death permeates *Milkweed*, but here too, many of the "major" deaths take place off stage, including the fate of Mischa's original family, his adopted family, Dr. Korczak and the orphans, and many of his gang. In several cases Mischa is not present at the death itself, entering the scene after the person has died: "Kuba lifted the newspaper. 'He's dead.' 'Kaput,' said Enos. We were standing in the snow around the body of Jon. I wasn't sure how they could tell. Jon was no grayer, no more silent than usual. Other people walked by, not looking" (100). These deaths are the minority in *Milkweed*; the majority are anonymous deaths such as a dead boy "sleeping" under a newspaper or the boys beaten to death for smuggling onions. Mischa has no emotion to spare for these anonymous deaths for "[D]eath was as familiar to us as life. Even those still breathing, walking—they looked as if they were waiting for someone to tell them they were dead" (146). Faced with so many deaths, the individual anonymous death begins to lose its emotional impact and ability to shock, turning the reader into a bystander like the ghetto 8 residents who pass the dead body of a boy without looking at him, but also without tripping over him (85).

### *The Death of the Protagonist*

When a death is presented directly, it is usually the death of a secondary character. In Carol Matas' *Daniel's Story*, Daniel's young cousin and Auntie Anna go to sleep and never wake up in the Lodz ghetto. His friend Adam chooses to attack a guard in Auschwitz and is immediately gunned down. Another friend, Peter, is attacked by Polish farm boys after the liberation and dies of his wounds with Daniel holding his hand. The sadness of this death scene is immediately followed by the happy reunion of Daniel with his girlfriend Rosa who has survived the war in hiding and is waiting for him in their meeting place.

Although rare, the protagonist does die in several children's books, but all take care not to portray the actual moment of death. Friedrich's body is found after the air raid. The *Final Journey* ends as Alice waits for water to pour out of the shower. The fact that the shower is actually a gas chamber is noted in the Afterword, but not in the text itself. The actual circumstances of Yorek's death are not known. Hannah in *The Devil's Arithmetic* chooses to substitute herself for her friend. As the three "chosen" girls walk arm in arm to their deaths, the narrator relies on metaphor to convey the last moments of their life: "She stopped as the dark door into Lilith's Cave opened before them...Then all three of them took deep, ragged breaths and walked in through the door into endless night" (160). When Hannah opened the door for the prophet Elijah during the Passover celebration she entered the past; now opening the door of death leads back to her comfortable life in the present.

An earlier death scene portraying the execution of Hannah's young uncle Shmuel and several others when their escape plan fails is clothed in romanticism. At the moment of execution, "Shmuel alone smiled" and reunites with his beloved: "He bent down and kissed the top of her head as the guns roared, a loud volley that drowned out birdsong and wind and screams" (153). The beauty of the language and the heroic aura of love and sacrifice romanticize these deaths, turning them into a lesson in "hope and courage" rather than a realistic picture of death in the Holocaust.

### *Telling Too Much*

Up to this point, the examples I have given of representations of death and suffering are all designed to protect the child reader in different ways. There are, however, examples in children's literature in which these protective devices cease to exist. The text then crosses what I define as the boundary between literature for children and literature for adults.

The deaths in *I Have Lived a Thousand Years* are neither romanticized nor idealized. With the Russian army approaching and liberation a few hours away, thousands of prisoners are packed one hundred to a car and shipped east without food or water. At one point the prisoners are provided with soup from Red Cross trucks and then inexplicably shot at by German soldiers as they eat:

Blood is bubbling from the shoulder of the girl next to me. The girl on my other side tumbles face down, her soup spilled. A hole in the middle of her back is spurting blood like a fountain. As I lie flat on the floor I see streaks of fire darting through the walls from all sides, and zigzagging through the car. One such flash hits my neighbor in the face, and her eye splatters on her left cheek. (193)

At first the wounded are anonymous, but as the gunfire ceases, Elli names them: Lilli, the sixteen year old whose leg has been shot off at the knee, the three Stadler sisters, Judy with a lung wound, Irene, whose eyes have been shot out. As the railroad car continues its senseless journey, the doors now open, the wounded girls die one by one in an agony of pain and thirst, calling for their mothers. Elli is helpless to relieve their suffering: "Pale light filters into the wagon. I look at Irene's face. Two empty eye sockets stare back at me. I cover my face with both hands. God! Oh, God! God!" (202) The narrator makes no effort to clothe these deaths in poetic language or distance. Elli's perspective functions like a camera, drawing closer and closer to death as the memoir progresses until in the last moments of the war the camera finally focuses on death itself in all its horror. The chronological gap of two months in the next chapter is a welcome relief from what may be the most horrifying scene in English language children's literature.

A scene midway through Miriam Steiner-Aviezer's *The Soldier with the Gold Buttons* surpasses this in horror. Six-year-old Biba, torn from her parents during a nighttime round up, is thrown into a closed boxcar with a group of children. After a few days, the train stops, and the children are marched by soldiers through green fields in which both the children and soldiers play together. This idyll ends when they arrive at a deserted encampment: "No vegetation or flowers. On the filthy ground were open cans, broken crates, yellowing boxes, children's shoes, rusty metal; the place was like an old garbage dump or a deserted village" (46). The soldiers lock the children in the only hut with a roof where fear, heat and thirst torment them. A girl finds a broken cup and crawls among the children begging for water. She licks the tears rolling down the terrified Biba's face. At that moment the door opens and the soldiers allow the older children to leave the hut.

Once outside, the older children, including Biba, and the soldiers line up for the arrival of the soldier with the gold buttons who orders a bottle which Biba assumes is water brought to the children in the hut. Instead "[T]he soldiers with the bottle went to the hut and to everyone's amazement, began pouring the liquid from the bottle around the hut; it gave off an acrid smell which scraped the nostrils and made the eyes tear" (52). Then the soldier with the gold buttons throws a match into the kerosene. The oldest girl, who has been like a mother to the children in the boxcar, is the first to react. She struggles to enter the hut, catches fire herself, appeals again and again to the soldiers, and with the other children tries to put out the flames with pieces of cardboard.

As if the futile attempts to save the little children were not horrible enough, the girl with the cup suddenly appears in the barred window of the flaming hut: The girl with the cup was hanging on the window grid, which remained in its frame. She was still alive. She moved her fingers, positive she was climbing, but her body never moved. Her face – panic. She wanted to flee, but couldn't. Everything on her was aflame, her hair an enormous torch sprouting from her head. The star burned on her arm, but instead of falling away, the bits of rag were absorbed and formed a huge burn. Her dress had fallen away and now her lace slip was ablaze, turning her whole body into a burning wound. As if she felt nothing, as if there were no pain, she climbed with the last vestiges of her strength on the window grid. She clasped the cup in one hand and whispered over and over: "Mommy." (54)

The children watch her until she dies: "She resembled an old doll, dirty, torn, that someone had thrown at the window. But her eyes were wide open. Her glassy stare was directed at each of the children. This stare held them; they couldn't move, until they began to understand that they had now seen death" (54). There is no attempt to beautify the girl's death with metaphor. There is no reason given for her death or the burning of the little children. The deaths are senseless, painful, ugly. No 'terrible beauty' or religious revelation is born.

Both the burning scene in *The Soldier with the Gold Buttons* and the railway car deaths in *I Have Lived a Thousand Years* cross the boundaries that children's book authors have

constructed to spare the children. While Elli and her immediate family survive the war and successfully emigrate to America, providing at least the relief of a happy ending in the context of the Holocaust, Biba survives the burning only to carry the trauma of adult betrayal with her when she enters the camp. Biba and her mother struggle to remain alive in the camp as women and children die all about them. There is no end to the war or promise for the future. In conclusion, I want to ask you, as educators, a few questions. I have purposefully avoided the subject of readers' ages in my discussion, but clearly certain subject matter that is appropriate for adolescents is inappropriate for young children. Friedrich, *The Final Journey*, *The Soldier with the Gold Buttons*, *Daniel's Story*, or *The Devil's Arithmetic*, are not appropriate reading for 6-9 year olds, even if they are precocious readers. At what age would you "teach" a book that portrays death and the concentration camps? Would you prefer a book that provides closure and a happy ending, even if this ending were unrealistic in the historical context of the Holocaust? Would you use or recommend a book that contains material that might be traumatic for the reader? Are there subjects that should remain taboo in children's books? Although I have presented different ways that death and suffering are portrayed in children's literature, the primary questions remains: How much should we tell the children?



### Works Cited.

- Akavia, Miriam .Yorek V'Any: Naorim B'Shalechet. [Yorek and Anya: Youth in Autumn.] 1975. Jerusalem: Yad Va'Shem, 2000. 11
- Bettelheim, Bruno. The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales. 1975. New York: Random House, 1977.
- Bitton-Jackson, Livia. I Have Lived a Thousand Years: Growing up in the Holocaust. 1997. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1999.
- Cohen, Adir. "Mikvat Esh: Sifrut Yelidim Al HaShoa." "[Burning Wound: Children's Literature on the Holocaust] Maagal Kriya: Katav Et L'Iyun Va L'Mechkar B'Sifrut Yeladim 19 (9.89): 37-64.
- Ezrahi, Sidra DeKoven. By Words Alone: the Holocaust in Literature. 1980. Chicago: U of Chicago, 1982.
- Gilor, Chaya. HaTzaleket. [The Scar]. Kiriyaat Gat: Danny Sfarim, 1999.
- Kertzer Adrienne. My Mother's Voice: Children, Literature, and the Holocaust. Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview, 2002.
- Kimmel, Eric A. "Confronting the Ovens: The Holocaust and Juvenile Fiction." The Horn Book Magazine LII (Feb 1977): 84-91.
- Kokkola, Lydia. Representing the Holocaust in Children's Literature. NY: Routledge, 2003.
- Liebman, Irena. MeAyin At, Yelda? [Where Are You From, Girl?] 1983.Tel Aviv:Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 2000.
- Machet, M.P."Authenticity in Holocaust literature for Children." South African Journal of Library & Information Science. Vol. 66 Issue 3 (Sep98): p114. 8 p.
- Makmel-Atir, Nava. HaAdi Shel Adi. [A Jewel for Adi.] Israel: Yediot Achronot, 2001.
- Matas, Carol. Daniel's Story. New York: Scholastic, 1993.
- Nolan, Han. If I Should Die Before I Wake. 1994. Hong Kong: Harcourt Brace, 1996.
- Pauswang, Gudrun. The Final Journey. Trans. Patricia Crampton. 1992. New York: 1998.
- Richter, Hans Peter. Friedrich. 1961. Trans. Edite Kroll. New York: Puffin, 1987.
- Sender Minsky, Ruth. The Cage. New York: Aladdin, 1986.
- Sherman, Ursula F. "Why Would a Child Want to Read About That? The Holocaust Period in Children's Literature." How Much Truth Do We Tell The Children? The Politics of Children's Literature. Ed. Betty Bacon. Minn: MEP, 1988. 173-184.
- Sokoloff, Naomi B. Imagining the Child in Modern Jewish Fiction. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1992.
- Spinelli, Jerry. Milkweed. NY: Knopf, 2003.
- Steiner-Aviezer, Miriam. Trans. Yochanan Omri. HaChayal Baal Kaftorey HaZahav. [The Soldier with the Gold Buttons] 1977. Tel Aviv: Moreshet VaYad VaShem, 1988.
- Yolen, Jane. The Devil's Arithmetic. 1988. New York: Puffin, 1990.