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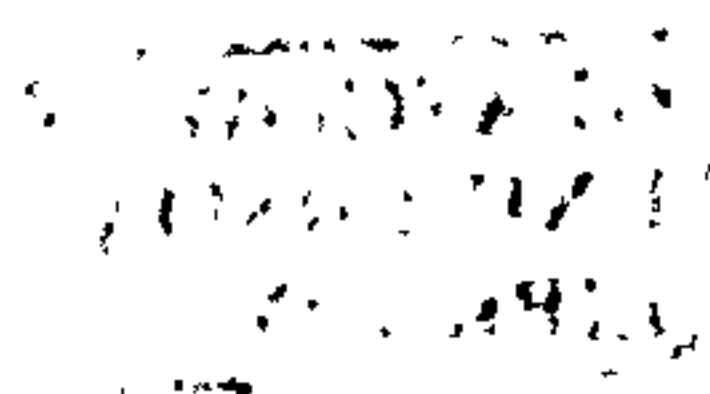
# **The Creative Dark: Writing about the Holocaust, Trauma and Autism.**

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**Volume II: The Creative Dark - a commentary**

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**VOLUME II**

**THE CREATIVE DARK: A COMMENTARY**

**CONTENTS**

Introduction	273
Chapter One	
The Idea	276
• A short history of autism	278
• Bruno Bettelheim	283
• Definition of autism	287
• Beginning the novel	290
Chapter Two	
Research and the Writing Process	300
• Beginning the research	300
• The drafts	318
• Draft 2	319
• Draft 3	320
• Draft 4	321
• Final draft	325
Chapter Three	
Memory of Trauma	328
• Repression and dissociation	329
• The nature of traumatic memory	331
• Holocaust survivors and memory of trauma	334
• Fragments	337

Chapter Four	345
Women's Experiences of the Holocaust	
• Rape	352
• Menstruation	353
• Pregnancy and childbirth	354
• The nurturing role	357
• Lovely Green Eyes	363
Chapter Five	
Representing the Holocaust	370
• Is the Holocaust unique	370
• Representation of the Holocaust	374
• Silence as a response	376
• Testimonial accounts of the Holocaust	382
• Fictional representations	384
• The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas	387
Conclusion	394
Appendices	397
Bibliography	406

## Introduction

In the introduction to her collection of essays about writing, *Negotiating with the Dead*, Margaret Atwood states “These are the three questions most often posed to writers, both by readers and by themselves: *Who are you writing for? Why do you do it? Where does it come from?*” (xix).

While the question of *why do you do it* is one that apparently exercises writers – Atwood provides a list of reasons running to two pages, gleaned from various sources including interviews, conversations and autobiographies – it seems to be the final question which most intrigues readers. In essence, where do ideas come from?

Ideas, however, are only part of the story. In her autobiography, Doris Lessing wrote about how difficult it is to describe the process of writing:

So that’s the outline of a day. But nowhere in it is there the truth of the process of writing. I fall back on that useful word ‘wool-gathering’. And this goes on when you are shopping, cooking, anything. You are reading but find the book has lowered itself: you are wool-gathering. The creative dark. Incommunicable. And what about the pages discarded and thrown away, the stories that were misbegotten – into the waste paper basket, the ideas that lived in your mind for a day or two, or a week, but haven’t any life so out with them. (Lessing, 1997 in *Granta* 58, p. 72)

The creative dark. For me this is twofold. It describes the factors that must be considered: the thinking, the research, the drafts and redrafts that lead to a finished work. Is all this, as Lessing claims, incommunicable? Some of it will be, as it is unlikely that any writer is fully aware of where everything he or she writes comes from. But other aspects of the process of writing are communicable, or can be made so by reflection.



The creative dark has another meaning for me. The novel, which I wrote for this degree, *Yesterday's Shadow*, is about the Holocaust. Writing fiction about such a subject can also be seen as 'the creative dark'. The Holocaust is a 'dark' subject in the sense that it is gloomy, mysterious, and unknowable; in addition, writing about it as an outsider, one has the sense of stumbling around in the dark, trying to understand it, fearful of causing offence. This begs the question, "Why write about it?"

The importance of written and oral testimony is well documented; in the words of Primo Levi, survivors "speak because they know they are witnesses in a trial of planetary and epochal dimensions" ("The Drowned and the Saved" p. 121). But this does not apply to writers of fiction. Or does it? In a paper about the literary representations of the Holocaust, Anna Richardson argues that "it is essential not to lose sight of the greater issue: that the Holocaust happened and it must not be forgotten" (p. 17). She goes on to discuss a poll in 2005, which showed that 60% of adults under the age of 35 did not know what Auschwitz was and concludes that:

We cannot afford to limit ourselves when it comes to the acquisition and transmission of knowledge. Whilst there is a duty of care towards the victims and survivors of the Holocaust in order to ensure that their experiences are adequately and appropriately represented and commemorated, this does not mean that those not directly affected by it should excuse themselves from that responsibility (ibid).

In chapters one and two, the genesis and development of a set of imaginative concepts about the Holocaust, autism and trauma is discussed. Chapter one considers the origins of the idea for *Yesterday's Shadow*. A link between autism and the concentration camps was found in the person and beliefs of Bruno

Bettelheim. Bettelheim survived Dachau and Buchenwald and saw a similarity between the Musselmänner<sup>1</sup> and autistic children. This led him to hypothesize that autistic children were withdrawn because their parents did not love them and that this caused their autism. This concept of the 'refrigerator mother' was influential for many years. *Yesterday's Shadow* explores the difference between the developmental disorder of autism and the withdrawal caused by trauma. An outline of autism along with the concept of the 'refrigerator mother' is given. Chapter Two discusses the process of writing along with the research that was done. The remaining three chapters discuss significant research questions relating to the subject matter of the novel. The first of these concerns memory, in particular how we remember trauma. Another factor that had to be examined in more detail relates to women's experience of the Holocaust and whether there is a case for stating that women's experiences were different from those of men. Finally, it was also necessary to explore how the Holocaust is represented and the ethical issues surrounding this. Each of these three chapters discusses a work of fiction in relation to these issues.

During the course of writing the novel, I kept a writing/research journal. The purpose of this was twofold: to record the writing process in detail and to note and discuss research carried out for the novel. There are quotations from this journal throughout; these are in italics and are double indented to distinguish them from quotations from the literature. Extracts from the novel are also double indented and are clearly marked as such. Where the extract is from the final draft, a page number is given. Page numbers are not given for earlier drafts.

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<sup>1</sup> Musselmänner was the name given to inmates who had given up hope and who wandered the camps like the living dead.



## Chapter One

### The Idea

It had not been my intention to write a novel for this degree, let alone one about the Holocaust. My provisional thesis title was *Autism in Literature/Creative Writing* and I had proposed a series of linked short stories about autism together with a critical appraisal of how autism is represented in fiction. The latter was to be a development of a critical essay written as part of the M.Litt in Creative Writing.

At the time of starting the journal in early October 2003 I had written one short story, *Same as Me*, about a visit to Auschwitz. I had visited Auschwitz earlier that year and was deeply affected by the experience. One incident in particular unsettled me. In Auschwitz 1 there is a series of rooms exhibiting items taken from the prisoners: hair, pots and pans, prosthetic limbs, spectacles, suitcases. While I was looking at the display of suitcases, an American man stood beside me, pointed at one of the suitcases, read aloud the name and the date of birth from it, and said loudly, 'look at that, same as me'. He was smiling as he said this, a reaction that baffled everyone around. Eyebrows were raised, eyes averted. Later that day, I saw the man again, being guided into a bus. His walk was a slow shuffle and I realised that he probably had a learning disability. By saying what he did in that context he was showing a lack of understanding, a lack of empathy. He was unaware that his reaction might appear crass or inappropriate to others. But thinking about it further, I saw it wasn't as simple as this. If in fact he were learning disabled, there was a terrible poignancy to what he said. As well as the simple coincidence of the same name or date of birth that



led to him saying ‘same as me’<sup>2</sup>, there was the undeniable fact that had he been born in Poland or Eastern Europe rather than the USA, it was likely that he too would have been eliminated as an undesirable. The incident provided the germ of the idea for *Same as Me*.<sup>3</sup>

I had also started another story, on a quite different theme, *A Splinter of Ice*, which explores the protagonist’s fear that her child’s autism is attributable to her ‘coldness’. In one scene, just after her child receives the diagnosis, she asks the paediatrician whether she is to blame:

‘Do you have any questions?’

Only one came to mind. ‘Is it my fault?’

‘Absolutely not.’ The words were emphatic, no room for argument. Dr Bryce’s voice matched her appearance, professional.

‘My husband says ...’ Stella stopped, not wanting to say the words aloud. She swallowed, tried again. ‘My husband says I have a splinter of ice in my heart. Don’t some people think that autism happens because of the mother being cold? What’s the term they use? Refrigerator mother?’<sup>4</sup>

I have worked professionally as an educational psychologist for twenty years. In that time I have assessed and worked with many children with additional support needs and have found that parents are often desperate to know why their child has difficulties, whether they are caused by birth injury, genetic factors or environmental trauma. Sadly, in many cases there is no obvious reason.

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<sup>2</sup> There is a poem, *September Song*, written by Geoffrey Hill about exactly such a coincidence. The poem starts with the date of a child’s birth (19.6.32) the day before Hill’s birthday. The line ends with the date of the child’s deportation (24.9.42) and presumably death – *As estimated, you died. Things marched, /sufficient to that end. / Just so much Zyklon and leather, patented /terror, so many routine cries.* (Geoffrey Hill, *September Song*, from *New and Collected Poems, 1952 – 1992*) There is also a similar coincidence in *The Boy with the Striped Pyjamas*, a recent novel, which is discussed in Chapter Five. In this novel, the protagonist, a German boy, shares the same birthday as a Jewish boy incarcerated in Auschwitz.

<sup>3</sup> This story became an integral part of *Yesterday’s Shadow* (pp. 244 - 256)

<sup>4</sup> This scene, slightly changed was later incorporated into *Yesterday’s Shadow* (pp. 11-12)

There have been many theories regarding the cause of autism: mercury poisoning, MMR injections, genetics and inbuilt neurological problems to name some more recent ones. The theory mentioned by Stella, the ‘refrigerator mother’ hypothesis, although now completely discredited, was popular in the 1960s and 1970s. As this theory is so important in the finished novel, it is outlined here in some detail, in the context of the history of autism.

### **A short history of autism**

Autism comes from the Greek for self, *autos*. In 1911, Ernst Bleuler, a psychiatrist was the first to employ the term, using it in a very specific sense with regard to childhood schizophrenia:<sup>5</sup> referring to a condition in which the child withdrew from relationships with people and the outside world. The American writer Conrad Aiken describes this brilliantly in his short story, *Silent Snow*, *Secret Snow*. Stone and Stone claimed that Aiken “described a crucial period in a child’s life where he makes the turn towards autism” (p. 153). The experiences of Paul, the main character, do fit with many popular ideas about autism: “All the following morning he had kept with him a sense as of snow falling about him, a secret screen of new snow between himself and the world” (Aiken p. 164).

The idea of a secret screen between him and the world ties in with many people’s image of the autistic child shut away in their own world. Frith argues that some fairy tales such as *Sleeping Beauty* and *Snow White* that have a theme of “life-like death” are early attempts to rationalise or come to terms with autism (pp. 17-19). In these stories the beautiful child is locked away, barred from the

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<sup>5</sup> Childhood Schizophrenia is a psychotic disorder. In the first two editions of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* it was paired with autism but since the third edition, autism has been listed separately and childhood-onset schizophrenia has been listed under the general heading of schizophrenia.



exterior world by a hedge of thorns or a glass coffin. Paul sees his secret (the snow) as giving him a sense of protection: “It was as if, in some delightful way, his secret gave him a fortress, a wall behind which he could retreat into heavenly seclusion” (Aiken p. 161).

However, as Stone and Stone imply by the phrase ‘makes the turn’, Paul is clearly *choosing* how to behave and he is aware of the effect his behaviour is having on his parents:

This had been, indeed, the only distressing feature of the new experience; the fact that it so increasingly had brought him into a kind of mute misunderstanding or even conflict, with his father and mother (Aiken p. 165).

This awareness of Paul’s suggests a degree of choice not available to the child with autism. We now know for certain that there is no choice involved in being autistic but when Stone and Stone wrote about Aiken’s story there was more ambiguity, possibly because of the popularity of the refrigerator mother hypothesis, or possibly because autism and childhood schizophrenia were still paired together for diagnostic purposes.

Autism was used to describe children like the fictional Paul, i.e. with childhood schizophrenia, until the 1940s when two papers were published almost simultaneously, describing case studies of children with what we now know as autism spectrum disorders.<sup>6</sup> At the time of writing their papers, Leo Kanner, a psychiatrist working in the USA but originally from Austria, and Hans Asperger,

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<sup>6</sup> At the time of writing, this is the accepted terminology. However there are moves to rename it as Autistic Spectrum Conditions. In a talk given at the Social Brain Conference in Glasgow on 2<sup>nd</sup> March 2006, Christopher Gillberg argued that using the term disorder implies that there must have been order there in the first place to become disordered, whereas autism is there from the beginning.

a general practitioner in Nazi-occupied Austria, did not know of each other's work. Their papers described children who were alike in many ways. The children described by Kanner showed the following features: autistic aloneness, showing itself in an inability to relate to other people and ordinary situations; a desire for sameness, which manifested itself in repetitive behaviour and an 'anxiously obsessive desire for the maintenance of sameness' (Kanner, p. 246); and islets of ability: behaviour that was not commensurate with the child's general presentation. This could take many forms, for example, phenomenal feats of rote memory, or an unusual ability in art or music.

Asperger's paper also described children who had difficulty in relating to other people. As well as outlining their problems, Asperger also emphasized their abilities:

In many cases, the failure to be integrated in a social group is the most conspicuous feature, but in other cases this failure is compensated for by particular originality of thought and experience, which may well lead to exceptional achievement in later life. (p. 37)

Asperger was working in Vienna at the time this paper was published and his emphasis on high ability is thought by some to show that he was trying to save autistic children from the concentration camps. For example, in a talk to an Autism Spectrum Disorder Support group in 2000, Caroline Baird claimed that Asperger carried out his research on these children (who had previously been diagnosed with childhood schizophrenia) in order to protect them from 'being killed by the Nazis'. (<http://hunter.apana.org.au/~cas/autism/speech.html> accessed 15/2/06). Another website makes the following assertion:

Working in Nazi Vienna, Asperger was surely aware of the prospect of many autistic children being sent to concentration camps after being



labeled mentally retarded. Thus, he ended up creating a more optimistic picture of the disorder than the vision of crippling disability that the psychiatrist Leo Kanner had described in his groundbreaking analyses of classical autism, first published in 1943. Asperger and Kanner mapped out two different ends in the spectrum of autism: the Asperger end was distinctly sunnier, with the possibility that such "high end" autistic children could thrive and even be gifted in their way.

(<http://www.dr-bob.org/babble/20000610/msgs/37688.html> accessed 3/3/06)

Children with Asperger's Syndrome are not "mentally retarded", however. They are of normal intelligence as measured by IQ tests and many are of high intelligence. Asperger himself talked of the children in his study as "little professors". If it were the case that Asperger categorised autistic children in this way and exaggerated their abilities solely to save them from concentration camps then we would be unlikely to recognise the condition of Asperger's Syndrome today as it presumably would not exist in this form.

Kanner's paper became more widely known than that of Asperger. At the time of publication, he was working in the United States and his paper was broadly accepted in the English-speaking world as the authoritative work on autism. His description of autism became the accepted one and this was the case until the 1990s when the term Asperger's Syndrome was found to be "clinically useful in helping to identify cases that might otherwise be considered too 'mild' to be diagnosed as having autism" (Frith, *Enigma* p. 11).

In *Autistic Disturbances of Affective Contact*, Kanner gives detailed descriptions of eleven children with autism. Reading these case studies today, it is uncanny how accurately they describe behaviours that I see every week in my working life as an educational psychologist:

He has a good relation to objects; he is interested in them, can play with them happily for hours ... the child's relation to people is altogether different ... Profound aloneness dominates all behaviour (p. 246).

In essence, this is little different to case notes I made recently while observing a child in a preschool assessment centre. In the file I noted that the child lined up blocks in a very methodical way and concentrated well on this for around fifteen minutes. He then moved away when another child approached him. Throughout the whole observation, which lasted an hour and included free play, structured play and a group activity, he did not approach any other person, nor did he show any imaginative play although he completed several form board type puzzles.

It could be said that the Kanner paper is where the whole concept of the "refrigerator mother" started. Although he initially hypothesized that "these children have come into the world with an innate inability to form the usual biologically provided affective contact" (p. 250), he was also struck by how aloof some of the parents were.

One other fact stands out prominently. In the whole group, there are very few really warmhearted fathers and mothers. For the most part, the parents, grandparents and collaterals are persons strongly preoccupied with abstractions of a scientific, literary or artistic nature, and limited in genuine interest in people. Even some of the happiest marriages are rather cold and formal affairs. Three of the marriages were dismal failures. The question arises whether or to what extent this fact has contributed to the condition of the children. The children's aloneness from the beginning of life makes it difficult to attribute the whole picture exclusively to the type of the early parental relations with our patients (ibid).



This aloofness was picked up and elaborated upon by others but it was one man in particular, Bruno Bettelheim, who was responsible for the popularisation of the belief that a child's autism was caused by the coldness of its parents.

## **Bruno Bettelheim**

Bruno Bettelheim was born in Vienna in 1903. His family were affluent (his father owned a lumber business) and he studied at the University of Vienna. Before the Second World War he was imprisoned in Dachau and Buchenwald for a total of eighteen months. The category under which he was arrested was '*Schutzhäftling Jude*', a category devised by the Nazis meaning a Jew incarcerated for his own protection. Bettelheim maintained however that he had 'been singled out for his anti-Nazi deeds'<sup>7</sup> (Pollak p. 61). Pollak's biography of Bettelheim discusses possible financial transactions that may have led to his release in April 1939 but concludes that 'all the details of Bettelheim's release may never be known' (p. 89).

On his release, Bettelheim was moved immediately to the USA. Desperate to alert the West to what was going on in concentration camps, he spoke to "everybody willing to listen" ("Surviving", p. 14) He started to write about it in 1940 but the resulting paper, *Individual and Mass Behaviour in Extreme Situations*, was not published until 1943. This paper outlined his case that the concentration camps were a carefully organised operation with the aim of making prisoners more useful subjects of the Nazi regime. He was keen to present his argument in a "scientific fashion" ("Extreme Situations", p. 17) and

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<sup>7</sup> It is not known what these deeds were. Pollak claims Bettelheim was not active politically and cites Bettelheim's own words to the war-crimes tribunal in 1945, when he said that after three day of questioning about his political activity, the Austrian police found 'no basis whatever' for any legal action against him. (p. 61)

claimed to have known and interviewed over 1500 prisoners. Pollak is sceptical of this number:

Establishing a personal relationship with fifteen hundred prisoners in ten and a half months would have meant getting to know and interview at least five new inmates every day in a setting hardly conducive to such research (p. 118).

By Bettelheim's own admission, many journals rejected the paper before it was eventually accepted by *The Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology* (Pollak p. 118).

Bettelheim greatly exaggerated his qualifications, claiming at various times to be well trained in all fields of human and social psychology and to have conducted research in psychology and education. He gave the impression that he had doctorates in philosophy (summa cum laude), history of art and psychology whereas in fact he had one doctorate (in philosophy without honours). He also claimed to have studied for fourteen years at the University of Vienna although for ten of the years he claimed to be there he was actually working for his father's lumber business (Pollak pp. 110 – 111). The impressive CV that he produced undoubtedly helped foster his academic reputation. Bettelheim first procured a teaching post at Rockford University then later went on to become principal of the Orthogenic School in Chicago.<sup>8</sup> Bettelheim's work there increased his fame and led to an international reputation as an expert on the treatment of disturbed children including autistic children.

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<sup>8</sup> The Orthogenic School was part of the University of Chicago. It was founded in 1912 to treat children of "doubtful mentality". (Michael Jenuwine, *A History of the Orthogenic School of the University of Chicago from 1912 to 1990*, Dec 1990, p.6. cited in Pollak 130).



Although Bettelheim's work in the Orthogenic School was primarily with disturbed children, it later became known as a school for autistic children<sup>9</sup> largely because of the media reaction to his 1967 book about autism, *The Empty Fortress*. The American press were fulsome in their praise, with the *New York Times* listing it "among the year's twenty outstanding non-fiction books" (Pollak p. 271). Professionals and academics were less enthusiastic but as Pollak points out, their reservations were published in academic journals not easily accessed by the public.

In writing about autism, Bettelheim claimed to have seen a resemblance between the behaviour of some of the prisoners in concentration camps and that of autistic children:

Some victims of concentration camps had lost their humanity in response to extreme situations. Autistic children withdraw from the world before that very humanity develops. Could there be any connection, I wondered, between the impact of the two kinds of inhumanity I had known - one inflicted for political reasons on victims of a social system, the other perhaps a self-chosen state of dehumanisation ("Empty Fortress", p. 7).

Later on in the same book Bettelheim made the staggering claim that "the precipitating factor in childhood autism is the parent's wish that his child should not exist" (p. 125). In other words, Bettelheim believed that parents of autistic children had never wanted these children and therefore could not love them. The children reacted to this lack of love by withdrawing into autism.

By the time Bettelheim wrote *The Empty Fortress*, the psychogenic view of autism was becoming less acceptable. In 1964, Bernard Rimland had

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<sup>9</sup> This is despite the paucity of autistic children there. Of 220 children admitted to the school between 1944 and 1973 (Bettelheim's time as director), only thirteen came with the diagnosis of autism, though more were labelled during their time there. (Pollak 267)

published a book, *Infantile Autism: The Syndrome and its Implications for a Neural Theory of Behaviour*. Rimland, who worked for the US Navy Personnel Research Laboratory, held a doctorate in experimental psychology and was himself the father of a boy with autism. The boy's behaviour was extreme and their paediatrician, according to Pollak, had never come across a similar case. The Rimlands were left to struggle with the child's behaviour. However, Rimland's wife remembered reading about such children as an undergraduate and in one of her textbooks they found the explanation of why their son was this way. Rimland went on to read everything he could about autism, including articles in several different languages. After carefully examining the evidence from over four hundred and fifty sources, he concluded that there was no evidence to suggest that poor parenting was to blame and speculated that autism was an organic disorder. In the foreword to the book, Kanner endorsed this view.

Rimland discovered in his research for the book that many clinicians were using the term as originally defined by Bleuler, i.e. synonymous with childhood schizophrenia. He also found that there was a body of research suggesting that autism was an organic disorder. At one point Rimland wrote to Bettelheim requesting help in finding candidates for chromosomal studies and received the following reply:

I regret to inform you that I am very critical of the approach you are using to study infantile autism. In my opinion your book contains gross errors and misstatements. I therefore shall give you no help in a study of autistic children which I consider ill-conceived and based on erroneous and biased judgements (Letter from Bruno Bettelheim to Bernard Rimland, March 25 1965, quoted in Pollak, p. 280).

In spite of the growing disquiet about the psychogenic theory of autism, it was to be many years before it was to be fully discredited and in some parts of Europe there are still psychiatrists who believe that a child's autism is caused by the coldness of his or her parents. As recently as 2001, the Rizzoli- Larousse encyclopaedia had this to say about autism:

The autistic child, if he receives the appropriate treatment and this is followed up by his relatives (who are often the cause of the syndrome, especially when they overstep the mark and insist on a perfectionist upbringing) can be more or less completely cured

(<http://www.autismconnect.org/news.asp?section> accessed 11/7/05).

There is of course an irony in all this as we come to know more about autism. Kanner's observations about the parents of children with autism still hold today. Some parents of autistic children show features of autism without being autistic themselves. Some are themselves on the autistic spectrum. If autism has, as is now widely thought, a genetic basis, then this is not surprising. However, in no way can this be taken to mean that the parents did not want their child and thereby caused the child to withdraw into autism. Rather than take a scientific approach to the study of autistic children and their parents, Bettelheim followed the fashion of the day and endorsed the theory of psychogenic causes for disability.

## **Definition of autism**

The most commonly used criteria to diagnose autism are those taken from the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual* of the American Psychiatric Association (DSM IV). There are three criteria, known as the "triad of impairments", which must be present for the diagnosis to be given. Frith outlines these as:



1. There must be a qualitative impairment in reciprocal social interaction, relative to developmental level. Behavioural signs include poor use of eye gaze and of gestures; lack of personal relationships.
2. There must be a qualitative impairment in verbal and nonverbal communication, relative to developmental level. Behavioural signs include delay in the acquisition of language or lack of speech; lack of varied, spontaneous make believe play.
3. There must be a markedly restricted repertoire of activities and interests, appropriate to developmental level. Behavioural signs include repetitive or stereotyped movements, such as hand flapping; interests that are abnormally intense or abnormally narrow (“Enigma”, p. 9).

This triad of impairments can be seen in almost 1% of the population.<sup>10</sup> Because there is so much variation in the way autism presents itself, it is now known as a spectrum, Autism Spectrum Disorders. To give some idea of the variation in presentation two brief case studies from my own experience, are outlined below. Names and some details have been changed:

Robert is an eight-year-old boy who attends a school for children with complex learning difficulties. He is the oldest of three children and difficulties were noted early on in his development. Although his motor skills developed normally and he is a very active child, his language skills did not develop. He does not talk although he can use a symbol system to communicate basic needs. Robert avoids eye contact and his play is very repetitive: he lines up cars endlessly and will scream if interrupted. Robert can be affectionate but this is indiscriminate and he is as likely to hug a stranger, as he is to hug his mother. He follows a rigid routine at

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<sup>10</sup> In 2002, Wing and Potter carried out a review of 39 population studies from a number of different countries. This suggested that the incidence of autism was much higher than had previously been thought at 60 per 10,000. Additionally, studies in Sweden found that Asperger’s Syndrome occurs in around 0.4% of the population giving us the estimate of almost 1%.



home and at school and becomes very distressed if it changes for any reason. A change in his teacher's hairstyle led to an outburst of violence towards her. Robert has basic independence skills such as dressing and eating but has no awareness of common dangers and has to be supervised at all times. Although he is still very young, it is difficult to envisage him ever living independently.

Michael is twelve and is in first year of a mainstream secondary school. He is an articulate, bright boy who talks in a very adult fashion. He prefers to interact with adults and has no friends of his own age. He is a talented artist but tends to draw the same thing over and over again, related to whatever his current intense interest is. These interests last for months at a time and include political systems such as fascism, anarchy and communism, and musical groups such as Pink Floyd and Marlyn Manson. Michael will talk about his interests for lengthy periods of time regardless of whether his audience shows any interest or not. He is unable to pick up on social cues that would indicate lack of interest etc. Although he is above average at maths, having attained level F<sup>11</sup> in primary school, he believes that he is poor at this and becomes very anxious when doing maths exercises, needing to constantly check answers. This leads to him spending hours on an exercise that should take no more than a few minutes.

Although these children are very different, the triad of impairments is clearly present in both. In their own way they show impaired social interaction, difficulties in communication and restricted interests. Robert has a diagnosis of Childhood Autism and Michael one of Asperger's Syndrome.

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<sup>11</sup> This refers to the final level of the 5-14 curriculum in Scotland. Level F would normally be attained at age 14, i.e. at the end of year 2 in secondary education.

Autism is a developmental disorder that has many different manifestations. Some people go on to live completely independent lives; others are unable to cope on their own. Some have amazingly well developed islets of ability; others struggle with basic skills. Many people, myself included, have found autism fascinating. Why is this the case? One possibility is that most people with autism do not look as if they have a disability. As Uta Frith puts it:

The typical image of the child with autism is surprising. Those familiar with images of children who suffer from other serious developmental disorders know that these children usually *look* handicapped. In contrast, more often than not, the young child with autism strikes the observer with a haunting and somehow otherworldly beauty. It is hard to imagine that behind the doll-like image lies a subtle yet devastating neurological abnormality (“Enigma”, p. 1).

This seeming “normality” can lead to many thinking that the child’s real ability is somehow “locked in” and with patience and understanding and the right key the child can be cured. This has led to many spurious and unlikely remedies such as swimming with dolphins. At present there is no cure, though good teaching and therapies can make an immense difference to quality of life.

Another possible reason for fascination with autism is that we may recognise its traits in our own personalities. Perhaps only the most extroverted among us have not felt the desire to withdraw from the social life. Only the most emotionally literate have not felt the pain of misreading a situation only to recognise later how wrong they were. Many of us have interests verging on obsessions. Research shows that families of people with autism can have these autistic traits in their personalities without meeting the criteria for diagnosis. For the rest of us, it is worth remembering that while we may have the occasional desire to withdraw, this is a choice. For the person with autism there is no option.

## Beginning the novel

My interest in autism is professional and I have read widely on the topic for many years. I was aware of the “refrigerator mother” hypothesis but not of its origins. In my mind it was linked with “holding therapy”, which I remembered reading about in the late seventies. This therapy, where “unloving” mothers were encouraged to hold their autistic children for hours at a time to compensate for their lack of affection, had struck me at the time as being ludicrous. Now, more than twenty years later, as an educational psychologist with wide experience of children with autism, it seemed not only ludicrous but positively harmful. People who are autistic are often highly sensitive to touch; a therapy that forces touch on them can only be cruel.<sup>12</sup> So Bettelheim’s ideas were not only harmful in themselves, causing untold pain to parents blamed for their child’s autism, they also led to a therapy which was at best unhelpful, at worst damaging.

It struck me that the prisoners in the concentration camps were deeply traumatised and that Bettelheim had confused this withdrawal as a result of trauma with autism. I discussed this with one of my supervisors as this extract from my journal shows:

**16<sup>th</sup> October 2003**

*... thinks I should go with the Bettelheim idea and examine the connection between autism, concentration camps and refrigerator mother. Links the two stories – Same as Me and A Splinter of Ice.*

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<sup>12</sup> Temple Grandin, a woman with autism, has written about how she developed a mechanical contraption to hold her when she was upset. However, in no way can this be compared with being held against one’s will and she makes it clear that she is completely in control throughout.



Looking back, this was clearly the starting point for the novel. It started me thinking about the relationship between Bettelheim, the camps and autism and how they could be written about. A starting point was to read Bettelheim's classic work on autism, *The Empty Fortress*. I was unimpressed by what I read:

*25<sup>th</sup> October 2003*

*The book is full of idiotic statements. For example, he views autism as more extreme than suicide.*

Suicide involves a goal-directed action that the autistic child seems even less capable of performing than the suicidal person. Infantile autism might be regarded as a position of despair where even the requisite energy to end it all is lacking ... (p. 90)

*It is impossible for me to accept that the eighteen-month-old child chooses autism rather than suicide. This supposes that a child of that age has both the cognitive and emotional ability to follow such a path, which of course is not the case.*

Other parts of the book, particularly the section on feral children and also the case studies were more interesting, however:

*Towards the end of the book, Bettelheim outlines his belief that feral children are a myth designed to explain autism. His account is confusing - it is unclear whether he believes there is no such thing as a feral child or whether it is the myth of being brought up by wolves that he has difficulty with. Seems to be the latter and eventually he does seem to say that these children may have been abandoned because of their autism. Uta Frith also suggests this:*



It may be inferred that an unduly high proportion of feral children suffered from autism before they were abandoned. Indeed autism, with its often severe conduct problems, may be the cause for the abandonment in the first place. ("Enigma", p. 41)

*In Bettelheim's book there is an interesting brief account of Anna (pp. 374 - 377) whose parents hid in the cellar of a peasant's house from the Germans during the war. The man had bargained for the hiding place and invited the woman to join him. He had wanted to have a relationship with her for many years but she considered herself his social better and had consistently refused him. However she was desperate to avoid capture and agreed to join him in the tiny space available. Eventually she gave in to his advances and Anna was born. The difficulties endured in these circumstances would make an interesting story.*<sup>13</sup>

Three weeks later I came back to that statement:

*15<sup>th</sup> November 2003*

*Just thought of another possible story, related to one of Bettelheim's case studies. He wrote about a case where a child was kept under the floor of a farmhouse in hiding with her family from the Nazis. What if the child was autistic - really difficult to control, screaming etc. and the parents decide to kill her in order to save themselves and their other children? They then get captured anyway and have to come to terms with what they've done and how similar it is to the eugenics of the Nazis. It's too complex for a short story though and would most probably need to be a novel.*

*16<sup>th</sup> November 2003*

*Some more thoughts on a possible novel from Bettelheim case study - child under floorboards - family in hiding from Nazis -*

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<sup>13</sup> The full account from *The Empty Fortress* is included as Appendix 1.

*child is autistic - cries - one day house is searched and mother suffocates child when she is trying to stop it crying. It is a deliberate act but she tells her husband it was an accident. Life goes on. Grief, guilt. Justifies it by telling herself that she was protecting her family. They are caught and transported to Auschwitz. Other children are seized at the selection. She realises that she has sacrificed the child for nothing. Hopelessness sets in. She redeems herself by taking the place of one of the other women in a selection (how can she do this when they are all marked? - need to think about and research this.)*

*The father is a Polish communist. That is why they are in hiding. They live in Krakow but escape to the countryside to the family farm.*

*Had a go at starting this story - idyllic scene of heroine (Katerina) suckling her baby on a hot summer evening, drowsy, contented. Idyll is smashed by a comrade coming to her flat looking for her husband, Piotr. Poland has been invaded... That's as far as I've got - a few hundred words and already I can see huge problems - I know nothing about life in Poland at that time, how they lived, what facilities they had etc. Certainly the visits we made in the summer to the traditional wooden houses on the border of Slovakia and Poland suggest a very basic lifestyle. I also know hardly anything about the war in Poland - the invasion was on 1<sup>st</sup> September 1939 - was it hot? Probably, but I don't know for sure.*

**18<sup>th</sup> November 2003**

*Supervision ... discussed possible plan for novel. We had a long chat about the possibilities of doing longer linked pieces. For example: piece on Bettelheim in concentration camp, then the novel idea and then maybe 'Same As Me'.*

At this point I realised that in order to write convincingly about this period I would have to research into Poland and the concentration camps. This was a



daunting prospect and I put it off as long as I could, concentrating instead on finishing another short story about autism, *Realisation*. Once this was finished though, it was time to think about the first part of this trio of stories: Bettelheim in the concentration camps:

*10<sup>th</sup> January 2004*

*Read some more of Bettelheim's work - Surviving and Other Essays. Perhaps the most interesting was Individual and Mass Behaviour in Extreme Situations. Bettelheim describes his experiences in Dachau and Buchenwald where he was interned for around a year in 1938/39 and claims he carried out behavioural observations in order to help him endure life in the camps. His method was to talk to prisoners (over 600 in Dachau and 900 in Buchenwald) and to repeat things over and over to try to memorise them. He also recruited two others to discuss his findings with and as soon as he was released he wrote it all down. Bettelheim claimed that prisoners' reactions to the camps varied according to class and political education. For example, criminals were gleeful at finding themselves in with the middle classes, leftists seeing themselves as important enough to be imprisoned, middle classes seeing their incarceration as an error.*

*24<sup>th</sup> January 2004*

*Started a new story today. It is from Bettelheim's point of view and concentrates on the transit to the camp.*

*8<sup>th</sup> February 2004*

*Over the past week I have been doing some research on Bettelheim. I haven't managed to get hold of any of the biographies yet but information from searches on the Internet has*



*given me a lot to think about. One of his biographers, Stephen Pollak, was the brother of a child Bettelheim had treated. He was interested in Bettelheim because of this and interviewed him. Pollak was dismayed by Bettelheim's attitude towards his parents - he claimed the boy's mother had totally rejected him - and by his insistence that his brother had killed himself (he died in an accident which was witnessed by Pollak). Pollak, a journalist decided to research Bettelheim's life and found several anomalies including false claims about his qualifications, doubts about whether Bettelheim would be able to interview so many people in the camps or whether he accurately recalled what he heard from them. It seems that he was not a very pleasant man. I am not comfortable now with writing any more from Bettelheim's point of view so I have changed the story to make it from the point of view of a young girl.*

Looking back on this journal entry it is difficult to tease out the exact reasons for changing from Bettelheim's point of view to that of a young girl but these are worth discussing even in retrospect. I was genuinely upset by what I had read about Bettelheim. Before starting this work, I had known little about him; only that he had been highly thought of at one time because of his work with disturbed children. When I read *The Empty Fortress*, I found I disagreed strongly with what he had written about autism but I accepted at face value his claim to be an expert. Now it was apparent that he was far less qualified to write about autism than he had maintained. Pollak's biography of Bettelheim makes it clear that he lied about his qualifications and his experience in order to pass himself off as better qualified than he actually was. In addition, although Jewish himself, he was decidedly anti-Semitic. At a meeting in the late 1940s he told the Jewish people there "If you assimilated there would be no anti-Semitism. Why don't you

assimilate?” (Pollak, p. 227). He saw Jews as afflicted with a ghetto mentality and in part blamed them for the death camps. In 1943 he had written about his experiences in concentration camps in *Individual and Mass Behavior in Extreme Situations*. In this he said he had asked more than one hundred political prisoners if they would sound the alarm about the camps should they manage to escape. Only two said they would; the rest preferred the possibility of revolution. However Pollak points out that he later revised this view substantially:

By 1963, speaking to the Chicago chapter of the American Council for Judaism, Bettelheim was telling the story this way: The Gentile inmates were nearly unanimous in wanting to tell the world of Nazi atrocities, but the Jews were divided. Some agreed with the Gentiles; others preferred caution, then and in the future. “Thus,” he said, “it was Jewish procrastination, in the face of their annihilation as self-respecting persons, that gave the Nazis time to develop a policy of physical annihilation.” (p. 229)

Given these revelations, I felt that what I had written was too sympathetic a portrayal of him so I changed the viewpoint to that of Anna, a young well-educated girl.

One month later I had decided that there would be another story linked to this one with this being from the point of view from a different character. The story I had been working on was that of Anna, a girl of eighteen who has been captured in Warsaw and transported to Auschwitz; the second story would be from the point of view of Ewa, a woman whom Anna meets early on in her incarceration. This story would be a flashback to Ewa’s life before the concentration camp when she was hiding in a cellar. Her story would be the tragic one that I first thought of the previous November, of the mother who



sacrifices her child in the hope of saving her family. For a brief period I thought about writing in the first person but soon changed my mind:

*22<sup>nd</sup> February 2004*

*Started Ewa's narrative with a clear idea of where it's going. It wouldn't be right to have it in the first person as I don't want the reader to know whether she means to kill Tomasz or not. The novel will start with Ewa in the cellar and concentrate on the build up of fear and frustration in the claustrophobic atmosphere of their confinement. It will culminate in the killing of her son Tomasz when the house is being searched. Although we will know that Ewa did it, we will not know whether it was deliberate or not. The narrative voice will then change to Anna's. We know nothing of Anna's past - only that she has parents and a brother. On the train to the concentration camp (most probably Auschwitz), she is almost raped by a soldier. Later in the journey she is beaten up by the soldier and on arrival at the camp she is taken to the hospital where she meets Ewa for the first time. Ewa has a miscarriage which Anna witnesses. They part when Anna is released. Traumatized by what has happened to her, Anna finds the first few weeks in the camp difficult and considers suicide. On the march back to camp one day from the factory she finds a note from Ewa's husband Marek who is trying to find his wife and child. Anna sets herself the goal of finding Ewa. When she does eventually find her, she tries to befriend her but Ewa is difficult to reach - she has given up hope. Despite this she clings to life. Anna's worst fears are realised and she comes face to face with the soldier who tried to rape her. This time he succeeds. Anna becomes pregnant as a result and tries unsuccessfully to abort the child. She gives birth to a boy. This event revitalises Ewa and she formulates a plan to protect the child. In this way she redeems her previous action. She reveals to Anna that she killed Tomasz in a vain attempt to protect her family.*



Although this brief synopsis is very different to the final draft, nevertheless this is the point at which the novel I went on to write becomes recognisable as such.<sup>14</sup> A professional interest in autism, a visit to Auschwitz, the discovery of a link between them; these are the seeds of the idea. How they germinated into a novel is the concern of the next chapter: research and the writing process. I have chosen to write about these together as they are so interconnected. What I was writing affected what I chose to research just as what I found out in the course of the research affected what I actually wrote.

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<sup>14</sup> A synopsis of the novel at this stage is included as Appendix 2 and a synopsis of the final draft as Appendix 3

## Chapter Two

### Research and the Writing Process

Part of *Yesterday's Shadow* is concerned with the Holocaust, arguably the most horrific event of the twentieth century, and as such it was necessary to be aware not only of the events of the Holocaust but also of the ethics surrounding writing about it. I read survivors' accounts, historical texts, a selection of Holocaust fiction as well as critiques of fictional accounts while I was writing the novel. The critiques of Holocaust fiction led me in turn to the ethical issues, which are touched on in this chapter but are discussed in greater detail in the final chapter, *Representing the Holocaust*.

For several months I continued to write the novel and avoided reading anything about the Holocaust. The imperative was to work through a substantial part of the narrative and I felt that reading would distract me from this. Eventually I reached a stage, however, when I felt that it was necessary to start the research process.

### Beginning the research

*28<sup>th</sup> March 2004*

*Read Sue Vice's book, Holocaust Fiction ... There is a great deal of criticism and suspicion about non-Jews who write about the Holocaust. Many writers and critics think it is not a suitable subject for fiction. For example, Claude Lanzmann, who directed the film Shoah said (about Spielberg's depiction of the gas chambers in Schindler's List) 'I deeply believe there are things that cannot and should not be represented.'* (Guardian Weekly, 3

*April 1994, p14. quoted in Vice, p. 5) Throughout Shoah, Lanzmann used only interviews with survivors and perpetrators. He used no footage from the Nazi era, nor did he reconstruct any of the events of the Holocaust.*

This diary extract highlights three issues that had to be faced: is it ethical to write about the Holocaust; what right does anyone who is neither a survivor nor a Jew, have to write about this topic; are there limits to what should be represented?

In a review of Norman Mailer's recent novel about Hitler, *The Devil's Work*, Justin Cartwright asserts that (it is) "axiomatic that there can be no limits on what a writer may or may not write about. The only obligation a writer has to truth is, in the end, to artistic truth, and this is a very fluid category".<sup>15</sup> Cartwright goes on to state that "in relation to the second world war, writers have some obligation to the facts, which is not necessarily the same as the truth". This leads us to the possibility that one may write about this subject but should do so in an ethically responsible way, using facts judiciously. Schwartz discusses this in *Imagining the Holocaust*, referring to the "high seriousness and intense attention to the actual facts that we expect if not require of Holocaust narratives" (Schwartz, p. 36).

A number of writers of fictional accounts of the Holocaust take this further by using actual documents of the Holocaust in their writing. The most notorious example is perhaps DM Thomas's *The White Hotel*. Young (1988) discusses how Thomas was accused of plagiarism by a letter writer in the *Times Literary Supplement* for basing his account of the massacre at Babi Yar on that

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<sup>15</sup> *The Guardian*, 3/2/2007



written in the eponymous novel by Anatoly Kuznetsov.<sup>16</sup> Thomas defended himself by saying essentially that there are some events no one has the right to imagine:

It would have been perfectly easy for me to have avoided the possibility of such attacks as Kenrick's, through some spurious "imaginative recreation"; but it would have been wrong. The witness's testimony was the truthful voice of the narrative at this point: "It started to get dark," etc. This is how it was – for all the victims. It could not be altered. The time for imagination was before; and, in my novel, after. Imagination, at the point quoted by Kenrick, is exhausted in the effort to take in the unimaginable, which happened (quoted in Young, p. 205).

This seems to be a reasonable explanation for using Pronicheva's eye-witness testimony. Thomas wrote about a real event in his novel, one of many horrendous atrocities that took place. He could have extended the horror by writing more about it, but it is difficult to know what would have been gained from this. We know that the massacre took place and that in itself is horror enough. Anything else could be seen as prurient.

Young goes on to discuss the motives of writers who use this documentary approach:

If this rhetoric of fact is intended to provide an unusually compelling reading experience, merely to move the reader, then Adorno's objections to poetry out of Auschwitz retain a certain validity. For in this case the authors would indeed be wringing pleasure from the naked pain of victims. If, on the other hand, these works want only to refrain from conferring an essential fictionality on actual historical events, then we might take into account both the legitimate impulse to document events

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<sup>16</sup> Kutnetsov had based his novel on an eyewitness account by a survivor, Dina Pronicheva, but had acknowledged this even in the title *Babi Yar: a Document in the Form of a Novel*.

and the manner in which ‘real past events’ are inevitably fictionalised by any narrative that gives them form (p. 213).

Using the testimony of witnesses in a fictional account, merely to ‘move the reader’ would be unethical and would detract from any serious intent. Whether it could be said that the authors are ‘wringing pleasure from the naked pain of victims’ however, is another matter. This implies a truly cynical use of testimony, which it is to be hoped would be avoided.

Another example of writers using testimony in their work is Harold Pinter’s play, *Ashes to Ashes*, which is about a woman being interrogated by her husband about her former lovers. Geoffrey Hartman discusses this play in an essay, *Tele-Suffering and Testimony*. At the end of the play, the female character speaks about the loss of a child. The words used are very similar to those of a survivor of the Holocaust quoted in Lawrence Langer’s *Admitting the Holocaust*. The Holocaust is not directly mentioned in the play, though there are hints; this speech, claims Hartman, “clinches the matter” (“Reader” p. 443). He then goes on to consider whether or not this use of imagery from the Holocaust for an essentially private moment in the female character’s life, is an appropriate development, worrying that such usage may be exploitation. Hartman concludes however, that through using a general anxiety – that of losing a child - it helps us empathise, although he does go on to point out that empathy is not an unlimited resource and there is a danger of compassion fatigue.

Hartman also discusses Benjamin Wilkomirski’s *Fragments: Memories of a Wartime Childhood*, greeted on publication as “the most authentic depiction so far of a child survivor of the Holocaust” (ibid p. 441) but now completely

discredited.<sup>17</sup> *Fragments* was published in 1995. In it, the author recollected how, as a very young child, he survived both Majdanek and Auschwitz. In 1998, a young Swiss Jew, Daniel Ganzfried revealed the author's true identity. Benjamin Wilkomirski was born in the Swiss town of Biel and given the name Bruno Grosjean. He was illegitimate and was taken into the care of the town authority before being first fostered and then adopted by a childless couple, Kurt and Martha Dössekker. In the early nineteen eighties, he began to call himself Benjimin Wilkormirski after recalling memories of being in a concentration camp as a very young child. In an article about Dössekker/ Wilkormirski, Elena Lappin discusses the concerns of Raul Hilberg (author of *The Destruction of the European Jews*) about the so-called memoirs. Hilberg points out how destructive such publications can be: "these kinds of pseudo-memoirs may do real damage to survivors by rendering each Holocaust memoir suspect" (quoted in Lappin, p. 49). *Fragments* is discussed in greater detail at the end of the next chapter.

Anyone wanting to write fiction about the Holocaust must take account of these and other concerns. Instinctively I felt it was vital to be as historically accurate as possible:

*27<sup>th</sup> April 2004*

*Read Women in the Holocaust edited by Dalia Ofer and Laure J. Weitzman. Concentrated on Women in Teresienstadt and Family Groups in Birkenau (Ruth Boudy) and Memoirs of Auschwitz Survivors: the burden of gender (Myrna Goldenberg).*

*The first of these is extremely useful in confirming ideas/thoughts I'd had and also in providing other details. The*

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<sup>17</sup> See Blake Eskin's book *A Life in Pieces* for a detailed account of Wilkomirski's belief that he was a survivor of the Holocaust. Wilkomirski met with Eskin when he toured America after the publication of *Fragments* and believed for a while that they might be related. Ultimately however, it was found that Wilkomirski could not be who he said he was.



*cessation of menstruation, the talk about food, clothes distributed at random, the gruel like soup.*

*Goldenberg's paper about Auschwitz discusses the memoirs of three Jewish women. These concentrate on the women's strong concern for one another as well as their dependency, their adaptation of homemaking skills into coping skills and the effects of their physical vulnerability and fear of rape. One of the memoirs is that of a Jewish communist and this would seem to be a particularly useful one to try to get hold of. It covers many of the things I have been thinking/writing about such as women conspiring to deliver babies in silence and secrecy (and then killing the infants in order to save the mother's life). Another of the memoirs tells of 3½ days in a cattle truck with 75 other people (I chose 68 at random, knowing nothing of how many there would be) <sup>18</sup> with one bucket for drinking water and another for human waste.*

Historical texts as well as accounts written by survivors provided the detail that I needed.

*2<sup>nd</sup> May 2004*

*Understanding the Holocaust by Dan Cohn-Sherbok.*

*Factual information about transports: description of transport train (p. 158). Small windows covered with planks and/or barbed wire. In some places planks were missing and human faces peered through gaps - the prisoners were not allowed water.*

*Some facts about the camps: they were set up originally to re-educate those opposed to the aims of the state. Standard barracks were approximately fifty metres by eight metres; the*

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<sup>18</sup> Throughout the writing of the novel there are examples like this of what Lessing calls the 'creative dark'. I can only suppose that although I did not consciously remember facts about the Holocaust from films seen and books read, I unconsciously brought them forth during the writing process. Recently I saw the film *The Pianist* for the first time though I read the book some years ago before starting my own work. I was startled by a scene with a young woman grieving over the death of her baby whom she had killed while hiding from the Nazis and must acknowledge this as a very strong possibility of the source of Ewa's suffocation of her son in the cellar.

*dayroom was nine metres by six metres and the dormitory twelve metres by eight metres. Bunk beds had three tiers. Each barracks was planned to house one hundred and fifty prisoners but in fact they held up to four hundred or more. The day started at four a.m. with bells, whistles, sirens. Roll call was three quarters of an hour later, followed by assembly points and the march to work. At noon there was another roll call and the prisoners were fed with soup. Work finished at dusk or five - six p.m. in the summer. After work there was another roll call (in the camp, which would take up to two hours). Then came the evening meal and free time.*

*Chapter 20 is about the euthanasia programme. It seems to have started with social Darwinistic ideas about the survival of the fittest and arguments that nature should be allowed to take its course. Ideas put forward in early thirties (or even before - Hitler talked about it in 1929). By August 1939 a committee had been formed to deal with euthanasia of children who possessed hereditary or congenitally based diseases. They were starved to death or given lethal injections.*

*3<sup>rd</sup> May 2004*

*Read Five Chimneys by Olga Lengyel, a woman doctor from Transylvania who wrote about her experiences in Auschwitz. It is a particularly difficult read as she blames herself for the death of her parents and sons. Her husband was to be deported and she chose to go with him and persuaded her parents to come too. On arrival at Auschwitz, she made another terrible error.*

Our turn came. My mother, my sons, and I stepped before the selectors... The selector waved my mother and myself to the adult group. He classed my younger son Thomas with the children and aged, which was to mean immediate extermination. He hesitated before Arvad, my older son.



My heart thumped violently. This officer, a large dark man who wore glasses, seemed to be trying to act fairly...

'This boy must be more than twelve,' he remarked to me.

'No,' I protested.

The truth was that Arvad was not quite twelve, and I could have said so. He was big for his age, but I wanted to spare him from labours that might prove too arduous for him.

'Very well... To the left.' (p. 27)

*She then went on to ask if her mother could go with the boys and once again the selector agreed. Not long after, she learned that they would have been sent straight to the gas chambers.*

I read several survivor accounts, critical readings and history texts about the Holocaust. The more I read, the less 'qualified' I felt to write about the Holocaust:

*10<sup>th</sup> May 2004*

*Started rewriting Part II. It is surprisingly difficult. I didn't think it would be easy but after more than two hours I've only managed four pages. I was very conscious of the survivors' accounts while I was writing and of the need to be accurate. At the same time this was making me uneasy about the creative process. If what I write has to be 100% accurate (in my mind at least) then am I actually being creative? Am I not just rewriting someone else's story - becoming a parasite on another person's pain and grief? But there is also the whole question of the subjectivity of the survivors' accounts and the fact that (through no fault of their own) they were not written contemporaneously. As a result they will not be 100% accurate. This is not to say that any of the accounts are lying but recent research into memory suggests we build up schema for past accounts and that these schema are influenced by all sorts of things. I need to think carefully about this. Each survivor's account will be coloured by their own*



*personal history and their own perceptions and cognitions about what has happened. For example, Fania Fenelon gives a slightly different account of a story that I've read about in two or three sources now. This is the story of a young couple (Edek and Mala)<sup>19</sup> who escaped from Auschwitz and were then recaptured, brought back to the camp and hanged in front of the prisoners. It would appear that the different accounts are validating the actuality of the event by triangulation but the details are different. I think what I'm trying to say here is that it is not necessary for me to be completely accurate about every detail as even eye witness reports cannot be this accurate. However where things are undisputed e.g. being brought to Auschwitz in crowded cattle trucks, then these should be adhered to. There is room within this for some creativity - for example, some reports mention that they had buckets of water in the trucks from which they could drink, and buckets for toilet facilities. Others describe trucks with no food, no water and where they had to piss and shit where they stood. Therefore there is the possibility of imagining the conditions within the truck that brings Anna to Auschwitz, although they should lie within the confines suggested by survivors' accounts.*

The first three drafts of *Yesterday's Shadow* are quite different from the final version from the novel. Initially it was a novel in three separate parts and the narrative was in chronological order. I had decided on chronological order, as it seemed simplest. The first part was from Ewa's point of view and covered three months in early 1944. Her narrative then overlapped with Anna's. Anna's narrative started on a transport to Auschwitz where she observes Ewa and her family before meeting with and befriending Ewa in the camp. It ends in January

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<sup>19</sup> Young suggests that this tale, along with others such as the shooting of a Nazi officer by a woman on the way to the gas chambers, may be apocryphal. Young (1988, p. 44)

1945 with the death march from Auschwitz. At one point, I considered having Part 3 start immediately after the war and follow Ewa out of Auschwitz and into Scotland. However this idea was quickly discarded and I decided to write the third and final part from Ewa's daughter, Hannah's, viewpoint in the first person.

Part 3 was troublesome. Hannah did not seem to come to life at all; I felt no real connection with her, even though I was writing in the first person. Writing in the third person didn't improve matters:

*29<sup>th</sup> May 2004*

*I'm also worried about what I've written of Part 3; it's dull, dull, dull. The first person point of view doesn't work at all and the third person, although better, is very pedestrian. But maybe it needs to be - Hannah is complacent, middle aged, etc and the revelations of her mother will be devastating - so a humdrum beginning may be ok.*

Later I looked closely at the various versions I had tried of Part 3, comparing the first paragraph of each attempt:

*15<sup>th</sup> June 2004*

Draft 1

I have always hated my name. When I was a child, it seemed too old for me. Now, too late, it is a name for the young. Twenty years ago, it started becoming popular again and now it seems every classroom has its Hannah, confident and bright and safe in the knowledge that theirs is an acceptable name, not so popular as to be common, but neither so uncommon as to be mocked.



## Draft 2

Hannah sneaked a look at her watch. Almost eleven o'clock; she had forgotten how interminable requiem masses could be. The priest stood to give the eulogy, impressive in his purple robes. Did nuns and spinsters still spend their time embroidering these or were they produced in bulk? Hannah had little idea of what went on in the Catholic world now; it was so many years since she had been a member of the church. Bland inoffensive statements about her mother washed over the congregation. Hannah listened carefully, trying to extract some meaning from his words... devout Catholic, devoted mother and grandmother, loving wife to the late James Connor. Hannah took in very little of what was said. She wondered about the devout Catholic bit. Her mother had never seemed particularly pious to her. Dad, maybe. Always praying and always involved in church life. But her mother had always kept herself a little apart, claiming her English wasn't good enough for all those church committees.

## Draft 3

Funerals bring out the worst in me. All that ceremony. The only decent funeral I ever attended was that of an old soldier and even then it was ruined by a hideous rendition of Keep the Home Fires Burning as the coffin disappeared behind the slow moving curtains. It wasn't meant to be funny the widow said later, as we struggled to keep our faces straight.

When I look at these three extracts my first feeling is that the second draft is perhaps the most polished. The first draft is terrible - the sentence construction makes Hannah sound very old, not like someone in her late fifties. The third draft needs a fair bit of work but I do feel that it establishes Hannah as someone unstuffy, perhaps a little intolerant or impatient and with a good sense of the absurdities of life. Hannah is immediately more human somehow in this draft.



The final draft of this scene owes most to the second draft. In the end I felt that Hannah as she was in the third draft was perhaps a little too facetious, too light hearted for the funeral of her mother:

#### Final draft

Hannah stifles a yawn and fiddles with the sleeve of her black suit, pushing it back so she can sneak a look at her watch. Almost eleven o'clock; she's forgotten how interminable requiem masses are. The priest crosses the altar to the lectern. It's quite a show. He is impressive in his purple surplice. And immense. When he turns sideways he looks like everyone's favourite Quality Street, the one with the hazelnut and soft toffee. He starts to speak and Hannah sits up straight, attentive. Bland inoffensive statements about her mother wash over the congregation. She tries to relate what he is saying to what she knows about her mother ... devout Catholic, devoted mother and grandmother, loving wife to the late Jack Connor. He's wrong about the devout Catholic bit. Her mother was never particularly pious. Dad, yes. Always praying and always involved in church life. But not a creeping Jesus or anything: a good man. They'd been able to talk for a whole ten minutes about him. Ewa on the other hand, always kept herself apart, claimed her English wasn't good enough for all those church committees, even though she spoke it better than most. (p. 193)

The difficulties with this part remained however. There were problems with how Hannah would find out about her mother's past. I had thought about Ewa leaving some sort of letter to Hannah which would explain what had happened but this worried me as I felt it would lead to too much telling and not enough showing. There was also the language problem to get over. Would Ewa's English be good

enough for her to write such a letter? I decided that after almost sixty years in Scotland, it would, though as the journal extract shows, there were various issues that needed to be sorted out:

*19<sup>th</sup> June 2004*

*Some interesting correspondence in the Guardian today about writing in another language other than the one allegedly spoken. It goes back to an article about Brick Lane and how Monica Ali has the main character as Bengali but depicts this in English.*

*Brick Lane* comes to us as if it were a work of translation. We have to imagine that most of its characters are talking in Bengali, even though dialogue is presented to us in clear English. What is more, the narrative shares the perceptions of a protagonist, Nazneen, present in every scene, who initially knows no English... she cannot literally be thinking in the words that Monica Ali uses for her thoughts... it draws attention to the peculiarity of using one language to give access to another. (*Elements of fiction: foreign thoughts by John Mullan, The Guardian 29.5.04*)

*I'm not sure about this. Surely this is the case for every work that is not written in the language of the country where it takes place: Helen Dunmore's *The Siege* is a recent example. A letter in the Guardian today makes a similar point:*

In *War and Peace*, Tolstoy often has his characters speak French. In *Anna Karenina*, his characters also (we are given to understand) speak French but Tolstoy renders it in Russian. (Letters, *Guardian* 19.6.04)



*This is relevant to what I'm doing. Parts 1 and 2 are set in Poland with Polish, German and Italian characters. I've used the occasional marker e.g. the diminutive form of Piotr, some German phrases but the narrative is in English. There will be problems when I come to write Ewa's journal. Either I could pretend it is in Polish and write it in coherent English or I could have her write it in English.*

**20<sup>th</sup> June 2004**

*I have decided that Ewa's journal should be written in English. I think her English would be good enough to write but she would make some errors especially with tenses and verb endings. I'll write her entries in the present tense and see how it goes. I don't want too many extracts from it. More should be written about Hannah's reaction to what she is reading. One of the notebooks will not be a journal but a notebook filled with fragments of memory, drawings, self-accusation plus references to a doctor seen in the past. This will lead Hannah to try to find out about him and eventually to find a book, or maybe a journal article written by him. This will be a case study of Ewa. I'm pleased with this idea as it not only brings in a different register, but is also a way of telling Ewa's story in a way that can bring autism right back to the heart of the story. The doctor will be a Bettelheim fanatic who will regard Ewa as a refrigerator mother and not recognize the signs of trauma in her.*

I was still unhappy with the structure however.

**12<sup>th</sup> July 2004**

*Part 3 is pedestrian and plodding. I feel a major rewrite coming on. This would mean intermingling the stories more. That is: start with the beginning of Part 3 and then when Hannah finds things in the diary flashback to part 1 and 2 as appropriate. In this way*



*we discover things at the same time as Hannah, which will be more dramatic. I might try this - do a bit of cutting and pasting to see how it goes.*

I decided to rewrite the novel with Hannah as the central character and with flashbacks to the past. However initially when I tried this, it didn't work. I felt that there was a loss of tension. I abandoned this attempt and returned to Part 3 to attempt once more to bring it to life. Eventually I found a possible solution.

***24<sup>th</sup> July 2004***

*I may have solved the problem. Part 3 will switch between two points of view, Ewa's and Hannah's. Ewa is slipping back into the past and is revealing more than she wants to. When I try this, it seems to work.*

It did work and within a month I was nearing completion of the first draft:

***18<sup>th</sup> August 2004***

*Corrections and additions have been made. The novel is now over 70,000 words so I feel the end should be in sight. However, a number of things are niggling at me. First of all – Hannah's trip to Poland. I think she would look for any surviving relatives and I am tempted to have a meeting between her and Anna's brother. This potentially could add a lot to the length. Secondly, I want to add in a section about Ewa and Marek before the war. This could be a prologue or it could be an entirely different part. A prologue would probably be enough to hint at the closeness of their relationship before it is ruined by the time in the cellar. This would have the advantage of starting the book off on a cheerier*

*note. Thirdly, the problem of autism is still there. I have not got to grips with this at all.*

*Tried to continue with the story but am disheartened by the above. I can't see how it will end at all.*

**19<sup>th</sup> August 2004**

*Supervision session. Part 3 has been difficult to write – what I had sent was the eleventh attempt (not including any editing) – and I was beginning to wonder if it was any good at all. (Supervisor) thought Ewa's voice was working well and that the voices were sufficiently differentiated. I had been very concerned about this as it's been hard switching between the two. Some points to consider with perhaps the most important one being to look at the relationship Hannah has with her sons. If her relationship with her mother was difficult then it is likely to have affected her own parenting style. She could reflect on this and also it might be a pointer to why she has an interest in autism (difficulties in communication etc). He liked the dream sequence but suggested that it should be Ben she dreams about, not Sam. He also talked about 'haunting' and I think I could bring more of this in. Hannah's breakdown perhaps needs to be expanded/slowed down/broken up more.*

**25<sup>th</sup> August 2004**

*Finished the first draft today, a little over 80,000 words. The ending is not quite as I had hoped but I do feel that the story is there and that with a lot of work I will manage to reshape it into something better. Wrote a brief prologue, which makes it clearer that Ewa and Marek had a good relationship before the war.*

Throughout the writing of the first draft I was very aware that there were structural problems. By having the central and largest part of the novel set in Auschwitz, the focus was on this rather than on what I had planned, which was an attempt to try to understand why Bettelheim might have confused the developmental disorder of autism with the withdrawal caused by trauma. I had also wanted to show the effect of Ewa's terrible experiences on her subsequent relationships. The prologue, which was added in after the first draft was finished, helped with this to some extent by showing the closeness that Ewa and Marek had before the war. It was necessary to be more explicit about this in order to show how situations could affect a relationship for better or worse. The extracts below contrast the teasing relationship they had with the tense one that evolved in the cellar:

### **Extract 1 (prologue)**

As they drew near the Jewish Quarter they could hear prayers being chanted. They stopped to listen for a moment, taking in the unfamiliar sounds. Marek took her hand and played with her fingers, stroking them, lifting them up to his mouth, licking the tips.

'I can't wait to get you home,' he said.

'I know.'

They ran the rest of the way, racing each other up the stairs. Marek fumbled with his key and dropped it. Ewa giggled as he scrabbled round the communal hallway looking for it; she'd covered it with her foot. After a few seconds she relented and pushed it towards him with her toe. 'You witch,' he said as he bent down to pick it up. (p. 4)



### **Extract 2**

Marek shakes me awake. I try to ignore him but he grows rougher and at last I give in and open my eyes. He wants something to eat. I get up and go to our store of food. There is nothing but a small piece of cheese.

I give the cheese to Marek and watch as he eats it. I wonder if he realises it's all there is. Surely he knows it will hours before Kasia comes with more rations, but he doesn't offer me any. I slide back into bed and lie with my back to him, not touching. (p. 43)

Without the prologue it is not so clear how much the relationship has changed. It would be easy to think that they were never particularly close even though Ewa thinks back at times to how things were.

### **Extract 3**

Sometimes I remember our lovemaking with a shiver; how he'd lie on top of me looking at me before kissing me all over, even in that most secret of places. The first time he did that, I thought I would die of bliss. Then he showed me how to give him similar pleasure. (p. 24)

Although these recollections of Ewa's give some impression of what it was like, the prologue, where their lovemaking is explicitly shown, makes it very much clearer.

The prologue also reflected the beginning of what was Part 3 when Ewa is dreaming about her life with Marek. In the dream she returns to the café where she and Marek met in the prologue. However she is not actually with Marek but is striving to be with him although he remains elusive.

#### **Extract 4**

On the wall behind him there was a mirror, ornate, framed with gilt. In its flecked surface I saw my reflection, my skin unlined, my hair long and dark, my eyes bright with love and hope. I walked across the room, my heart beating so hard I felt its pulse in my head. But although my stride was firm and confident, I could not reach him. My arms strained towards him as he faded, still smiling, into the darkness. A moment later, I awoke, devastated. I lay for hours as night turned to day, searching for his face in the corners of my mind (p. 8).

#### **The drafts**

Writers vary in their attitudes to drafting their work. For a few, the writing seems to come out fully formed, in perfect sentences, each word placed in precisely the right place. For others, myself included, there is a constant pressing need to edit, draft and redraft. You open up a file on your computer, read through what you've written to get yourself reacquainted with your work and you spot an unsightly adjective or an adverb gaily ruining your pristine prose so you start to cut. Your precious hours of writing pass, leaving you with fewer words than you had to begin with. Ian McEwan discusses this in an interview with Jonathan Noakes:

So I revise all the time. I'm constantly going back ... I revise the previous day's work first thing in the morning, that's the first combing though. When I get four or five thousand words together, a chapter, two chapters, I do a second ... then I don't look at them again until I've got the first draft down. I'm only revising just behind me, as it were, as I go forward (Reynolds and Noakes, p. 14).



This way of writing is similar to my own. I constantly rewrite even as I am writing. *Yesterday's Shadow* had five significant redrafts, which are discussed briefly below.

## **Draft 2**

This draft was mainly editorial, concentrating on tightening up the writing or adding details where necessary.

**21<sup>st</sup> October 2004**

*Finished second draft of the novel today. The rewriting took much longer than I had thought. Part 1 and 2 have remained largely the same though they have been tightened up with regard to language and edited extensively. The main difference is with Part 3. I looked over the suggestions made by supervisors and have incorporated most of them. I think the links with the autistic theme are now much more to the forefront: there is the report written by the psychiatrist, Hannah's notes for a lecture she does and also her musings on her own difficulties with communication. The process of redrafting this time was more difficult than previous attempts. I left it alone for about a month and worked on rewriting a short story instead. I avoided reading any more about Auschwitz in an attempt to ensure that I was being creative. Now I need to think about what I do next. It will need to be redrafted again, perhaps the whole structure needs to be looked at but I want to put a bit of distance between the book and me so that I can come back to it with a fresh eye. Even taking a month away was quite good. For example I saw immediately that the prologue was too sentimental and changed it to be more robust yet still keeping the sense of infatuation that Ewa has with Marek.*

*I watched part of Shoah recently and was horrified by the interviews with Polish people. Lanzman is interviewing a group of Poles about what happened during the war. Gradually their anti-*



*Semitism comes to the fore: starting with reminiscences of how they (the Jews) had all the money, going on to an outburst about how they were 'Christ killers' after all, with the unspoken 'and so they deserved what they got' hanging in the air. It was instrumental in reminding me that I had wanted to bring in a sense that fascism is still with us. In the end I inserted a small scene with a shopkeeper and some Israeli teenagers that identifies the sort of casual racism that so many people have and think nothing of. I hope it works. The other major change was in having Hannah do the death march on her own. I think that psychologically this is right for her. She needs to be alone to reflect on her relationship with Ewa and the knowledge she now has of her birth parents.*

### **Draft 3**

This redrafting was a frustrating and unsuccessful exercise. I had hoped to tackle structural problems but a way of doing this eluded me and so this draft did not result in the desired restructuring but concentrated instead on some points that had arisen through discussion with others about the novel. The main change was that Ewa was kept alive a little longer so that she could tell Hannah about some of her experiences.

Throughout the writing of this novel, I have felt it important to leave it alone for periods of time so as to reflect on it. Although at times I have made reflective comments in the diary, much of the reflection has been less overt, less conscious. By the time I came to write the fourth draft I had stopped writing down my thoughts about the process, mainly because when I did so I felt I was not adding

anything new to the reflective diary. As the changes were greatest in this redrafting, it was the most difficult to do.

#### **Draft 4**

I have already noted that I was unhappy with the structure of the novel. In July 2005, I decided that I had to make an intensive effort to try to restructure the novel so that the focus moved away from Auschwitz and towards the relationships between the characters in the novel. The novel therefore would begin in the present day and would flashback to the cellar in Poland and to Auschwitz. After the third draft the novel was 87,000 words long with 29,000 words in part 2, in other words, one third of the novel. Taken with all the references to Auschwitz in Part 3, this made it at least half the novel. I wanted to redress this balance.

Is this all it was though? At various times throughout the drafting of the novel, I came back to this point about 'getting away' from the Holocaust. Journal extracts suggest that reading and writing about the Holocaust was emotionally exhausting.

**28<sup>th</sup> April 2004**

*I couldn't resist any longer. For a couple of weeks now, I've been desperate to start Part 3. So tonight I did. Two reasons - firstly I had to put some distance between me and the concentration camp. It's hard writing about it and hard reading about it. Actually it's harder reading about it, as at least my story is fictional whereas what I've been reading is true and that makes it horrifically harrowing.*

At various times I was unable to write about what I'd read. For example I took no notes from a book called *Flares of Memory*, merely noting in my journal that *I can't say anything about it now – too harrowing. I'm exhausted.*

One supervisor wrote to me about “the niggling that goes on about not wanting the novel to be centred on Auschwitz...” stating that “you have to say what I think is closer to the truth anyway, that Auschwitz took over, overwhelmed you, and your work to find space for the autism topic could very well be a way of handling this, a form of tactical withdrawal from the trauma of Auschwitz within your own text” (e-mail correspondence from Adam Piette, 14/6/06).

There is some truth in this statement. I would return to the topic of autism at regular intervals, finding it more palatable than the concentration camp. It may have been less of a tactical withdrawal however and be more ‘autistic’ in nature using the term as it was originally used by Bleuler i.e. withdrawing from relationships with people and the outside world. I withdrew from relating to my characters and their suffering, focusing instead on autism. There is another element to the focus on autism however. There is a relationship between autism and the camps, not simply the obvious one of Bettelheim's influential ideas on autism arising from his experiences there but also that of the fate of children and people with autism who would have been exterminated by the Nazis. This relationship needed to be made clear if the novel was to be effective.

The start of draft four was comparatively easy to do. The prologue remained the same and Chapter One began with the original Part III. This seemed to me to



work much better than the original drafts which moved from the prologue straight to the cellar. The dream sequence that Ewa has in Chapter One clearly mirrors the beginning of the prologue where Ewa is sitting with Marek in the café. What was much more difficult was initiating the flashbacks. In some ways this was made easier by the fragile state of Ewa. At the beginning of the novel she is half living in a dream world; she is old and tired and she finds it hard to distinguish between the past and the present. She is beginning to let her secrets slip, making references to Tomasz in particular. It is one of these chronological slips that introduce the flashback to the cellar:

At seven o'clock, Hannah rises to go. I struggle to my feet to kiss her. There are strange sounds in the air. It is me, speaking Polish but I don't know what I am saying. I feel dizzy and sit down again.

'Thomas? Thomas who? How can I bring Thomas if I don't know who he is?'

Hannah's voice, angry and impatient, belies the smile on her face. I am stunned. What have I said? I don't reply for a moment, then mumble, 'I don't remember. No one.'

Hannah studies me; I can feel her scrutinising my face. 'Mm. I'll see you in a couple of days. I'll bring Dick and Harry too, if you like.'

'Very funny,' I say as she leaves. My mouth is dry and my heart is pounding as if it will break through my chest. I cannot believe I have said his name aloud, now, after all these years. It isn't possible. I go to the window to wave goodbye to Hannah, but she doesn't look up as she gets into her car. It is some minutes before she drives away and I wonder what she's doing. I watch the car until it leaves the street; she drives too fast. When I am sure she has gone, I go to my wardrobe. There in the drawer,

underneath the spare bedlinen, is the wooden box where I keep my secrets. I take it out and put it on the table beside me. I am reluctant to open it for I know that when I do, the past will be with me once again.

But I have to do it. I must think about my life and about what to tell Hannah before it is too late. My hands tremble as I prise open the lid (p. 16).

This then segues into the second chapter beginning a sequence of chapters about Ewa's life in the cellar.

There was more than one reason for changing the structure of the novel. I have already mentioned that I wanted the novel to be more about relationships, particularly difficult ones but also there needed to be more tension in the story. With the previous structure all the drama was at the beginning of the novel: Tomasz's death, the capture of the family, Anna's death and Ewa's rescue of the baby. The reader knows that Hannah has to discover this so there is no dramatic tension. By using flashback we discover Ewa's past at the same time as Hannah, thus increasing the tension. This also alleviated the need for repetition. In earlier drafts there were several renditions of the death of Tomasz in the novel: the actual death, Ewa's retelling of it to Anna and Karla in Auschwitz, an account in her diary, an account in a letter to Hannah and an account in the Psychiatrist's report. Although I had hoped that these would work as a metaphor for the need for working through trauma that some people have by going over an event countless times, in the end it was repetitive and I decided they had to go. While there was still more than one version of the death in draft four, they are more immediate and dramatic.



## Final draft

By the time I had finished the fourth draft I was satisfied with the general shape of the novel. I felt it had an arresting beginning and that it moved between past and present with ease. However for some time I had been uneasy with the chapters involving Ewa in the cellar. I decided once more to try writing in the first person for this part of the narrative and rather than put it in the past tense, I kept it in the present.

In chapter one, Ewa is confused and bewildered. By continuing to use the present tense when the narrative moves from the present to the past, the confusion between past and present for Ewa is highlighted:

My breath misting in the cold, damp air. A shawl round my shoulders. Tomasz running from one side of the cellar to the other for hours on end. Trying to see in the gloom. Lighting a candle would help but there's only two left and they are in short supply. One, two, three, four ... I count Tomasz's steps, it's a habit, my own little ritual. When he reaches the outside wall, he touches it with the forefinger of his right hand, turns and runs near to where I am sitting and hits the wall behind me. Each time I think he'll run into me but he veers to the left and misses. Once I would have tried to stop him, to break into his rhythm, but not now. He screams if thwarted and that makes Kasia nervous. Poor Kasia, always so anxious, not wanting us here but family duty wins. She must look after Marek, her baby brother (p. 17).

This is more immediate than the previous version as this short extract from an earlier draft shows:

Ewa sighed into the gloom of the cellar, her breath misting in the cold, damp air. She pulled her shawl tighter round her shoulders and rubbed her hands to try to warm them; her fingers were white at the tips. Tomasz had been running for thirty minutes now. She



could barely see him. Lighting a candle would help but she only had two left and they were in short supply, or so Kasia claimed. One, two, three, four ... she counted the runs. She forced herself to stop; it was becoming a habit, her own little ritual.

In addition, by using the first person for Ewa's story in the cellar, the difference between her story and Anna's is accentuated. Ewa would not have known what happened to Anna, she could only imagine, whereas she knew exactly what happened to her.

There was one other major change in this final draft. Although I had always argued that the change in Marek's personality was down to the circumstances in which the family found themselves, several critical readers persuaded me that this was too harsh on him. Marek therefore was given a back-story, or rather the detail to his back-story was filled in. It was always the case that the reader knew he was wounded when fighting for the resistance. It was simple therefore to add a section where he told Ewa about his experience in the forest when he witnessed a massacre. His testimony is an example of what Langer, in his 1998 book about oral testimony calls "tainted memory". Langer defines this as:

a narrative stained by the disapproval of the witness's own present moral sensibility, as well as some of the incidents it relates. Tainted memory is nonetheless a form of self-justification, a painful validation of not always admirable conduct. ("Preempting", p. 122)

In the extract below we see Marek struggling with his memory of what happened:

'Jan wanted us to try to help them but I wouldn't let them. I was too much of a coward.'

‘No,’ I say as firmly as I can. ‘You were sensible. You knew it wouldn’t work.’

Marek shakes his head. ‘Some of the women knelt as if praying. They were yanked up by their hair and forced to stand. One of them pleaded with the soldiers, begged them to let her baby live. A soldier grabbed the baby from her arms and threw it to the ground. Two of the soldiers kicked the baby as if it were a ball, passed it from one to the other.’

‘Dear God,’ I whisper. I don’t want to hear any more but now he has started to tell me, he is unstoppable. I try not to listen to what he is saying but it is impossible.

‘Then there were more shots and it was over. It was getting lighter and from the tree, we could see that the Jews had been forced to stand at the edge of a giant pit. When they were shot they fell into this mass grave. Ten of the soldiers were filling it in. Up in the tree, we were terrified that we might be caught and thrown into the pit. We stayed there for hours after the soldiers had gone. At last we climbed down, Josef grabbing the package of guns on the way. We shared them out. I thought I might kill myself but I was too much of a coward so I threw it down. It caught on a stone and exploded, sending a bullet into my knee.’

Marek is silent at last. I stroke his forehead, ‘You can’t blame yourself.’

‘I can and I do.’ (pp. 59-60)

Memory is an important theme throughout *Yesterday’s Shadow*. It was vital I felt, that the ways in which Ewa remembered what had happened to her were realistic. The following chapter looks in some detail at how trauma is remembered and relates this to Ewa’s memory of events in *Yesterday’s Shadow*.



## Chapter Three

### Memory of Trauma

It has been observed by psychologists that survivors of traumatic events are divided into two well-defined groups: those who repress their past en bloc and those whose memory of the offence persists, as though carved in stone, prevailing over all previous or subsequent experiences. Now, not by choice but by nature, I belong to the second group. Of my two years of life outside the law I have not forgotten a single thing. Without any deliberate effort, memory continues to restore to me events, faces, words, sensations, as if at that time my mind had gone through a period of exalted receptivity, during which not a detail was lost. (Primo Levi, *Moments of Reprieve* quoted in Howe, p. 252)

Levi's experience of traumatic memory is the more common one. Most victims of trauma, far from being able to repress it, are very vulnerable to intrusive memories. In fact the idea of repression, in particular how it works, is a contentious one. In his extensive review of psychological research into memory for trauma, Richard McNally begins by stating:

How victims remember trauma is the most divisive issue facing psychology today. Some experts believe that rape, combat, and other horrific experiences are engraved on the mind never to be forgotten. Others believe that the mind protects itself by banishing traumatic memories from awareness, making it difficult for many people to remember their worst experiences until many years later (p. 1).

McNally goes on to argue that the evidence in this area points to three conclusions. The first is that people do remember horrific experiences, the second is that sometimes victims do not think about their trauma for long periods



of time with the exception of those who experience events that are overwhelmingly traumatic; these 'rarely slip from awareness'. And lastly, there is no reason to propose a mechanism of repression or dissociation to explain why victims don't think of their trauma all the time.

In this chapter I propose to examine memory of trauma, focusing on the following questions: what is the evidence for repression and dissociation, what does research tell us about the nature of memory for trauma, how does this research relate to how Holocaust survivors recall their trauma and is the way Ewa recalls her experiences in *Yesterday's Shadow*, an accurate reflection of this. This will be followed by a discussion of how memory is treated in Benjamin Wilkomirski's controversial 'memoir', *Fragments*.

## **Repression and dissociation**

The ideas of repression and dissociation are influential, with many therapists asserting that trauma survivors can develop ways of expelling disturbing material from consciousness i.e. they can repress them. Theories of repression arise from Freud's treatment of hysteria. He thought that hysteria develops when a person has a sexually traumatic event after puberty and the memory of this, along with the emotion from the event, is repressed into the unconscious. He proposed two possibilities as to why repression occurs: either a person dissociates during a trauma and therefore fails to encode the event or the experience is incompatible with one's self-concept and is therefore banished from consciousness.

To date there is little evidence to support these ideas. Although sufferers of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) often claim to have poor memories,

research shows that this is not the case. Several studies (Axelrod and Milner, 1997; Stein et al, 1999, Zalewski et al, 1994) reveal that there is no evidence of general memory impairment in people with PTSD. Those who do show worse memories have other disorders in addition to PTSD.

The idea of dissociation is often posited with regard to repeated incidences of trauma such as sexual abuse in childhood, with many therapists claiming that children dissociate while being abused. Others claim that an avoidant encoding style is adopted, which allows them to cope with the trauma by disengaging their attention from what is happening, concentrating on a patterned wallpaper for example. Leonore Terr, a psychotherapist specialising in the treatment of sexually abused children, proposed that there are two forms of trauma syndrome in children, Types I and II. Type I results from a single unexpected event, e.g. witnessing a murder, whereas Type II results from repeated predictable events e.g. chronic sexual abuse. Type I is remembered in vivid detail while Type II abuse is encoded in such a way that it is difficult to recall in later life. She argues that this is because of the predictability of Type II abuse, which allows children to anticipate it and therefore use denial, self-hypnosis and amnesia to blunt the impact. Although there are many studies to support the existence of Type I abuse, the only evidence for Type II is from a study by Terr of twenty children who were traumatised before the age of five. Of the seven who had experienced prolonged abuse, three were unable to verbalise what had happened to them. However these children were six months, twenty-four months and twenty-eight months when the abuse stopped. Even with the oldest of these, it is unlikely that they would have had the verbal skills necessary to encode a narrative version that they would then be able to reproduce later.

This is a more likely reason for them being unable to recall it than the reasons suggested by Terr.

It seems that there is little evidence to suggest that memories of traumatic events are repressed in the way suggested by Freud. It is more likely that the event was not processed. For those traumatic events, which are processed however, there is an abundance of evidence about how they are remembered.

### **The nature of traumatic memory**

Psychological research has given us empirical evidence about the nature of traumatic memory. Research in the area of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) identifies several ways in which trauma is remembered: intrusive recollections; nightmares; flashbacks and psychophysiologic reactivity.

Intrusive recollections are the most commonly reported. These are disturbing thoughts and images of the event that come to mind even though the person does not want to think about it. An example is New York firefighters who reported being haunted by visions of people jumping from the World Trade Centre after the terrorist attacks of September 2001 (McNally p. 105). Nightmares are self-explanatory: disturbing dreams of the event. Flashbacks are intrusive recollections, which are so vivid it is as if the event is actually happening again. The person may experience smells or sounds or visions of the event. Finally psychophysiologic reactivity refers to physical reactions that the person may have when reminded of their trauma, for example shaking or heart palpitations.



These accounts of how trauma is remembered can be related to what Charlotte Delbo calls *mémoire profonde*, deep memory. She uses a metaphor of a skin covering the memory of Auschwitz:

Sometimes, however, it bursts and gives back its contents. In a dream, the will is powerless. And in these dreams, there I see myself again, *me*, yes *me*, just as I know I was: scarcely able to stand ... pierced with cold, filthy, gaunt, and the pain is so unbearable, so exactly the pain I suffered there, that I feel it physically, I feel it again through my whole body, which becomes a block of pain and I feel death seizing me. I feel myself die (quoted in Langer, "Preempting" p. 7).

It is clear that Delbo has no control over this type of memory. It is indicative of PTSD and combines nightmares with psychophysiologic reactivity. Delbo goes on to make a distinction between *mémoire profonde* and *mémoire ordinaire* (ordinary memory), which tries to narrate what happened in Auschwitz. *Mémoire profonde* "constantly tries to erupt in the course of any survivor narrative" (Langer, "Preempting" p. 6)

An excellent example of this is in this account by Piera Sonnino as she discusses the death of her sister Bice and how her body lay for four days in the snow:

She [the kapo] went away without a glance at that lifeless body. In the afternoon they came to take the body. They carried it out of the stable and placed it on a bench near the door of the latrine. It was snowing. They threw over my sister a sack that barely covered her flattened stomach. Her face, encircled by the blue hood, was exposed to the snow, as were her hands and legs. The next morning, before the roll call, during the time when we were allowed to go to the latrine, I passed Bice. I went past again in the evening, and again the day after, and yet another day. After four days, very little of Bice emerged from under the snow. And from

that moment, my memories become confused, detached, impersonal. My subconscious holds them like an evil nesting inside me. I know that I should free myself of them but I cannot. I am not capable of bringing them to the surface of consciousness (pp. 138 – 139).

Sonnino also writes of the difficulty of imagining her parents' death: "Even today, if I try to recreate within myself the reality in which they perished, I feel my mind waver as if streams of black liquid had invaded it" (p. 107). Sonnino appears to be aware of the dangers of *mémoire profonde* pushing its way through. She tries to narrate what happened to her but at times language fails her:

What awaited us when we came out of that place where we had spent the night has no reference in the human language. My memory itself, which surely recorded it, refuses today, at a distance of fifteen years,<sup>20</sup> to restore it to thought and reason. No matter how great an effort I make, the images run in rapid confusion across the screen of my mind, like a film projected too fast (pp. 105 – 106).

In *Yesterday's Shadow*, Ewa has a number of unwanted recollections of her time in Auschwitz before she begins to recount her experiences to Hannah. These are mainly intrusive reactions and flashbacks, the most notable flashback being when Hannah's son, Ben, speaks in German to her:

He starts to tell me about his new job, something in computers. Incomprehensible.

'It involves travel everywhere,' he says. 'But mainly Germany and France. Of course I'll have to learn German. My schoolboy French should get me by but German's another matter. Limited to old war films. Schnell, achtung, that sort of thing.'

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<sup>20</sup> Although first published in Italy in 2004 five years after the author's death, the account was actually written in 1960 as a family record, not intended for publication.

The room tilts. I feel faint. Everything is blurred, darker. I don't know where I am. I can smell turnips and I think I am going to be sick (p. 52).

In this extract, Ewa experiences a flashback with associated psychophysiologic reactivity, i.e. the smell of turnips which as becomes apparent later in the novel is associated with her time in Auschwitz. However remembering trauma is not just about unwanted intrusive memories: sometimes, as with Ewa's recollections, they are deliberately brought to mind. How then are traumatic incidents remembered and is this different from how we remember ordinary everyday events? In particular what does research have to say about how Holocaust survivors remember their trauma?

### **Holocaust survivors and memory of trauma**

Research suggests that there is a difference between how we remember traumatic events compared to how we remember everyday happenings. Briefly there are two ways that long-term memory is currently categorized: declarative memory and nondeclarative memory. Declarative memory can be expressed in language and it can be episodic (the conscious recollection of one's experiences) or semantic (knowledge of facts). Nondeclarative memory "comprises a diverse group of capacities whose only common feature is that they do not require conscious recollection for their expression" (McNally, p. 30). Examples include procedural memory (riding a bike) and classical conditioning (where a stimulus leads to a learned response). It is declarative memory that is of most interest for how we remember trauma especially autobiographical memory.



Autobiographical memory includes both episodic (recollection of events in one's life) and semantic factors (recall of facts about oneself):

Recalling one's past is not like replaying a videotape of one's life in working memory. When we remember an event from our past, we reconstruct it from encoded elements distributed throughout the brain. There are very few instances in which remembering resembles reproducing. These include reciting poems, prayers, telephone numbers and other material memorized by rote (ibid, p. 35).

If events are repeated they tend to blend into a schema of the event in question. Thus if we were asked to remember a family Christmas, we would be unlikely to reconstruct one single day accurately but would blend a number of memories into what our schema of a family Christmas might be. If asked what happened the Christmas before last, we might recall how the cat knocked over the Christmas tree, the turkey was dry, our presents were disappointing and gran drank too much wine. However, it is likely that these events took place over several different occasions. We have reconstructed a schema of Christmas. The more often something is repeated the less likely we are to remember details and to distinguish them. However, the generic memory will be very strong.

With relation to traumatic events this means that one single traumatic event is likely to be very vivid in our memory but it would be difficult for say a repeatedly abused child to remember the details of one single abusive event. Nevertheless their memory of being abused would be very strong.

There are specific studies of memory amongst survivors of the Holocaust. In general these suggest that survivors have excellent memory for trauma. One study by Wagenaar and Groeneweg in 1990 looked at memory for trauma among

concentration camp survivors, comparing what survivors had said in their original evidence about the camp with what they remembered forty years later. They found that the survivors remembered the camp in great detail. They also found that although the survivors might not immediately remember incidents they almost all did when shown their original evidence.

Why should it be the case that survivors of trauma remember so well? One suggestion is that high emotional arousal during an event leads to vivid and detailed memories. This is confirmed by both laboratory studies and field studies. For example, in the laboratory studies it was found that subjects clearly remembered traumatic slides inserted amongst neutral slides (Kramer et al, 1991). It was also found that subjects who watched a series of slides depicting a boy being knocked down remembered this better than those who viewed a neutral series (Christianson, 1984). These studies and others found that peripheral events or slides were not encoded and remembered, i.e. the attention was taken up by the traumatic event or slide. Field studies also provide evidence that shocking events are remembered vividly. Yuille and Cutshall (1986) interviewed witnesses to a fatal shooting 4-5 months after the event and compared their accounts to those given to the police at the time. Although as a whole the witnesses' recall was very accurate, those who had been most distressed at the time had significantly more accurate memories (cited in McNally, p. 57).

The emotional stress of the arrest of Piera Sonnino's entire family seems to have ensured that she remembers the details of that day vividly:

October 12, 1944, was a day that began under an intensely blue sky, crystal clear, with summer fading and the first cool autumn breezes.



Torrents of light from the garden inundated our house on Villa Montallegro. I remember every moment of that day, every image (p. 69).

It is apparent from the research evidence that Ewa would have vivid memories of her time in the camp, especially of traumatic events. I had wondered about making her memories more fragmented but it is clear from the research that survivors have narrative reconstructions of what they experienced not just intrusive memories of the type associated with post traumatic stress disorder. Ewa's telling of her story to Hannah could therefore be coherent but at the same time she could experience flashbacks and intrusive memories consistent with those experienced by survivors of trauma. But what of other fictional accounts? In the final section of this chapter, I intend to examine how memory is represented in the infamous *Fragments: Memories of a Childhood, 1939 – 1948* by Benjamin Wilkomirski.

## **Fragments**

This book was written and published as a memoir. Originally published in German in 1995, it was greeted with rapturous reviews when published in English the following year. A review by Jonathan Kozol in *Nation* states "This stunning and austere written work is so profoundly moving, so morally important and so free from literary artifice of any kind at all that I wondered if I even had the right to try to offer any sort of praise" (*Nation*, Oct. 28, 1996 on <http://writing.upenn.edu/~afilreis/Holocaust/children-camps-bk-reviews>, accessed 17/3/07). The book went on to win several literary prizes including the



1996 National Jewish Book Award for Autobiography/Memoir and the Prix Memoire de la Shoah.

Although the book was generally well received, there were doubts about its authenticity almost immediately. Daniel Ganzfried, who had himself written a fictional account of the Holocaust based on his father's experiences, was the first to express these in print. He wrote an article accusing Wilkomirski of fabricating the whole story, including his identity. Ganzfried had discovered that Wilkomirski was actually Bruno Dössekker, the illegitimate son of a Swiss Protestant woman, Yvonne Grosjean, who had been adopted by the Dössekkers. Far from spending the war years in two concentration camps as he had claimed in *Fragments*, Wilkomirski had been safe in Switzerland. Several other exposures<sup>21</sup> followed this and a Swiss historian, Stefan Maechler, was commissioned by the publishers to fully investigate the claims made by Ganzfried. Maechler concluded that the facts he uncovered about Wilkomirski/ Dössekker did not in any way support his claim that the book was a memoir and the book was withdrawn.

Some critics, including Lawrence Langer and Deborah Lipstadt, regard the book as having literary merit. In fact, according to Eskin, Langer thought it was fiction when he first read it (p. 71). Later on, Eskin recounts a conversation with Langer where Langer states, "I still think that the book is a very compelling work of literature ... the book is outstanding anyway. One has to separate the quality of the work from the intentions of the author. What puzzles me is why he didn't call it fiction?" (Eskin, p. 107)

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<sup>21</sup> For detailed accounts of the scandal, see Blake Eskin's *A Life in Pieces* and Elena Lappin's *The Man with Two Heads*. Lappin's is perhaps the more interesting, as it focuses purely on Wilkomirski/ Dössekker whereas Eskin's account is more personal as there was a time when Eskin's family thought they might be related to Wilkomirski.

There are many possible reasons why Dössekker might have chosen to write his story as a survivor rather than as a fiction. There has been speculation that he set out to be fraudulent; he benefited financially from the book, winning a number of prizes, most of which were disallowed after the revelation of his real identity. The paltry money however was not reclaimed. Ganzfried in particular is highly critical of him; others however, are more understanding. Lappin feels that he may have chosen a Jewish identity to “remove himself as far as possible from his native environment” (p. 65). It is also the case that fictional accounts are often thought of as highly suspect. According to Eskin, Raul Hilberg sees them as “nothing more than the price our society pays for freedom of expression” (p. 107). Survivors’ accounts are, however, usually treated respectfully, no matter how badly written. Eskin quotes a publisher of Holocaust memoirs who says, “Most reviews of Holocaust books don’t say whether the book is good or bad; I think they don’t want to hurt the feelings of the narrator” (p. 191). For the purpose of this chapter, I will treat *Fragments* not as it was written, i.e. as a memoir, but as a work of fiction.

*Fragments* is a short book of only 155 pages. It is not a straightforward narrative with a beginning, middle and end. Episodes from the narrator’s wartime years are interspersed with chapters about his later life in Switzerland. There is a loose chronological sequence to this. The narrative begins with scenes from very early childhood: first a happy scene of sledging on a frozen moat then a series of terrifying pictures, “They’re like a wall of solid black between me and the sparkling and the sun” (p. 5). The narrator goes on to describe how his family are discovered and a man “Maybe my father” (p. 6) is killed in front of him. The

narrator is separated from the rest of his family and transported first to Majdanek then to an unnamed camp, near Krakow. I will refer to it hereafter as Auschwitz, since although it is not named in the text it is generally accepted that it is the second camp.

In the camps, he witnesses terrible scenes: a young boy has his skull smashed in by a vicious guard, during what seems to be a game of football; another is executed for soiling his berth during the night; he sees two bundles on the floor; they are babies with white arms but black hands and fingers. The babies suck their fingers, “perhaps to warm them” (p. 70). In the morning however it becomes clearer what they were doing:

Their hands were black, as they were the night before, but now their fingers were white – snow-white. Except they weren’t proper fingers. What I could see were tiny little white sticks that looked broken, each pointing in a different direction.

I pulled anxiously on Jankl’s arm.

“What’s that, Jankl – look – their hands!” I said, and Jankl took a long look over the edge of the bunk.

“Bones,” he said, “just bones” (pp. 70 – 71).

Other scenes are even more disturbing, reminiscent of the grotesque scenes of violence in Jerzy Kosinski’s *The Painted Bird*: the narrator sees a pile of corpses, one of them a pregnant woman, but something is not right, the belly is moving. He thinks it must be the child in the womb but he is wrong:

Now I can see the whole belly. There’s a big wound on one side, with something moving in it. I get to my feet so that I can see better. I poke my head forward, and at this very moment, the wall of the stomach lifts back,



and a huge, blood-smeared, shining rat darts down the mound of corpses (p. 86).

After the war, the narrator is in an orphanage in Krakow, where he meets a young girl, Mala, whom he had known in Auschwitz. From there he was taken to Switzerland and adopted. His adoptive parents encouraged him to forget what had happened to him ““You must forget that now. Forget it – it’s a bad dream. It was only a bad dream,” she kept saying. “You must forget everything. I’m your mother now.”” (p. 122). Several incidents however, remind him of the camps:

The lady opened a semicircular cover, took the shovel, threw some coals inside, and I could see the flames. In deathly fear I stared at the monster.

So, my suspicions were right. I’ve fallen into trap. The oven door is smaller than usual, but it’s big enough for children, I know, I’ve seen, they use children for heating too (p. 125).

He is reassured only when the coal system is replaced years later by an oil-fired one, though “that didn’t mean people were to be trusted” (p. 126).

When is he ten, maybe twelve years old, the narrator is taken on a ski trip. There he meets Mala once more. They refuse to go on the chair lift, believing it will take them to their deaths. Nowhere, it seems, is safe.

Finally, a teacher at school is sympathetic enough for the narrator to confide in. For years, he has been told that children have no memories and to forget his time in the camps. Now, at last he can reveal what has happened though it is not until he finds out about Children of the Holocaust societies that he decides to write down his fragments of memory.

As noted earlier, *Fragments* has been totally discredited as a memoir. Not only do all the official documents point to the author's true identity being Bruno Dössekker, but also there are numerous inaccuracies in his memoir. These include: his memory of a cry of "Watch it! Latvian militia." – they were not called militia until the Soviet occupation but would have been known as bendeldike (men with green armbands); his memory of a German woman finding him in a Polish farmhouse and telling him he is going to Majdanek – the uniform he describes is one worn only in concentration camps and the Germans spoke of Lublin, not Majdanek; his memory of being transported from Majdanek to Auschwitz – no children were ever transported in this way.

The memories reported in *Fragments* are unreliable. This, along with the other evidence about the author's identity was sufficient for the book to be discredited. Putting that aside, how convincing are the memories in the context of remembering trauma?

As discussed earlier, there are several ways in which trauma is remembered: intrusive recollections; nightmares; flashbacks and psychophysiologic reactivity. Early in the book, there is an example of an intrusive recollection when Wilkomirski remembers a happy time sledging, "But this picture is quickly scared off by other ones, dark and suffocating, which push into my brain and won't let go" (p. 9). The memories he refers to here are those of being captured and his (maybe) father's death. There are also several examples of psychophysiologic reactivity. One example is in the orphanage in Krakow after the war, when the children are being collected by adults:

I gasped for air – more children were led away by grown-ups – and I couldn't see where they were being taken.

That was the way it had been before, too. Only then it was gray uniforms that took them away with angry gestures (p. 15).

A further example, which could be seen as a flashback with psychophysiologic reactivity, is at the birth of his first child when he is reminded of the rat coming out of the dead woman's belly:

The first thing that slowly became visible was the half round of the baby's head. As a first-time father, I didn't know how much hair a newborn baby can have. I wasn't ready for this little half-head of hair. All I could do was stand still and stare at it, and once again, like an echo from before, I heard the ringing and crackling noise in my chest (p. 87).

There are also references to nightmares. One in particular "would repeat itself mercilessly in the years that followed, image by image, detail by detail, night by night, like an unstoppable copying machine" (p. 38). The nightmare is of insects crawling all over him and is a memory of being made to sleep in a dog's kennel:

The kennel was full of bugs. The darker it got, the more I began to sweat with fright, the more I tried to brush the creatures off my body, and the more greedily they seemed to start crawling up my legs again. Lice began to run over my face in racing, trickling streams to my mouth, nose and eyes. No amount of wiping or scratching helped. They always came back (pp. 41-42).

Finally, although the memories are very fragmented, there is a narrative of sorts, just as the research shows survivors have. It seems therefore that although the memories have been shown to be false, the reconstruction of them fits with what we know of memory of trauma.



In conclusion, Wilkomirski seems to have constructed a narrative which could be that of a surviving child. Had he not insisted that it was a memoir, had he published it as a novel, the judgement of Langer and others that it was a fine literary work would still stand. However, it was presented as a true story and this makes it difficult now for it to be judged as another work of fiction.

Reviews of the book when it was first published were highly favourable and it was difficult not to be aware of what sounded like a remarkable piece of work. However, I did not read it at the time; it took Lappin's article in *Granta* to rekindle my interest. At the time it seemed unimportant whether *Fragments* was a fictional account or a memoir; my view was that this should not detract from the literary merit of the work. Now that I have read the work,<sup>22</sup> this opinion seems to me to be unsustainable. The book is tainted by the author's deception. When we read fiction, we do so knowing that it is not true from the very beginning. We nevertheless empathise with characters, but their anguish is not felt in the same way as that of a real person. The fact that an event actually happened affects us deeply. I found this over and over again when I read survivor's testimony. Reading *Fragments*, there was little but irritation at the narrator because it had been exposed as fraudulent. More pertinently, knowing that the work is cited on Holocaust denial websites as evidence that the Holocaust did not happen – they argue that this work was made up but was taken seriously as a witness account, therefore how can we rely on any testimony of so-called survivors – makes it difficult to feel anything other than anger towards the author.

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<sup>22</sup> I found a copy in a local library; it is out of print, having been withdrawn by the publishers. I have never defaced a library book but I am tempted to insert an addendum slip to alert readers to the true provenance of the book.

## Chapter Four

### Women's Experiences of the Holocaust

The rarity of women's voices is striking in the contemporary discourses about the Holocaust... How we think about and how we teach the Holocaust has been based predominantly on the testimony – written and oral – of male survivors. (Horowitz, p. 369)

The need for accuracy in portraying the events of the Holocaust has been discussed in Chapter Two. Part of *Yesterday's Shadow* is set in Auschwitz and is focalised through a young woman, Anna. It was therefore particularly important to read about women's experiences of the Holocaust, especially in the death camps. This chapter will examine some of the concerns that are specific to women and discuss these in relation to my own work and to another work of fiction, *Lovely Green Eyes*, by Arnošt Lustig.

It has been argued that here, as in other areas of life, the experiences and views of women have been marginalized. In the introduction to *Women in the Holocaust*, Dalia Ofer and Laure Weitzman argue that discussing women's unique experience "provides a missing element of what we must now see as an incomplete picture of Jewish life during the Holocaust" (p. 1). They also claim that in putting together the book, they encountered not only resistance but also hostility. Some fear that a focus on gender could detract from the fact that the Nazis "defined their targets as Jews", (p. 12) or could trivialise the Holocaust.

Yet the experiences of women must be properly examined if we are to gain a full picture of the Holocaust. It is hard to believe that doing this will lead



to the Holocaust being trivialised. If we do accept this argument we might as well accept that women's experiences are somehow less valid than those of men. Fewer survivor accounts by women exist. There are a number of possible reasons for this. One of the most poignant is depicted in the graphic novel, *Maus*, where Art Spiegelman tells in comic strip form of how his parents, Vladek and Anja, survived the Holocaust. By the time Spiegelman decides to write about their lives, Anja is dead so he has to rely on his father's descriptions of what happened. Vladek tells his son about their arrival at Auschwitz. "... and when they opened the truck, they pushed men one way, women in the other way. Anja and I each went in a different direction and we couldn't know if ever we'll see each other alive again" (p. 160). This is the first time in the narrative that Spiegelman's parents have been separated and therefore Vladek can no longer speak for both of them. Spiegelman responds to this by referring to his mother's diaries, which will "give me some idea of what she went through when you were apart" (p. 160). Vladek's response can be seen as dismissive, "I can tell you ... she went through the same what me. Terrible!" (ibid). Spiegelman is not convinced however and suggests they try to find them. It transpires that Vladek has destroyed them.

It is worth looking at this exchange in some detail. Vladek's assumption that his wife's experience was the same as his can be interpreted in two ways. It may be that he is trying to change the subject so that his son won't pursue the matter of the missing diaries or it could be that he genuinely believes this. If so, he is not alone, as will be discussed later in this chapter. There is also the question of his response to his son, "Yes, it's a shame! For years they were laying there and nobody even looked in" (p. 161). This too can be interpreted in



two ways, either as a straightforward comment or as a reprimand to his son that it has taken so long for him to show interest in his mother's experience. The comment that follows suggests that the latter is more likely. Art asks Vladek if he read the diaries and if he remembers anything about them. Somewhat surprisingly, Vladek remembers only one thing, "... only I know she said, "I wish my son, when he grows up, he will be interested by this"" (p. 161).

This destruction of one diary may be symbolic of one reason why there are fewer accounts from women survivors. There are others. Schwartz wonders whether "women were thought less valued as skilled labor, and thus fewer survived the *selections* for the gas chambers?" (p. 5). But value as skilled labour was not the only consideration. All children under a certain age were immediately sent to the gas chamber. Women arriving with young children, or who were visibly pregnant were sent to die with their children whether or not they were fit for work:

Any woman in the selection line holding a child, her own or someone else's, was sent to the gas chambers, but women who were in their early months of pregnancy and looked fit for slave labor, escaped immediate death and some managed to deliver in the camp (Goldenberg, in Ofer and Weitzmann, p. 336).

Langer (1991) discusses one woman's oral testimony, which describes how a ten-year-old girl, knowing what "selections" meant, refused to go to the left. She had to be held down by three guards as she yelled at her mother to save her. The mother, asked by the SS if she wanted to accompany her daughter, said no.

Terrible as it is to read about this, we can only imagine how much worse it would be to witness it. It is difficult to refrain from somehow blaming the mother even though we know this is unreasonable. The witness, to her credit,

although admitting “This left a tremendous effect on me,” also added, “Who am I to blame her? What would be my decision in a case like this?” (quoted in Langer “Ruins” p. 12). We are left wondering whether our response is so strong because it was a mother refusing to go with her child and not a father. Cultural expectations of women are such that we expect nurturing from them and this scene goes against these beliefs.<sup>23</sup> There are other accounts, which fit in better with our cultural notions of what motherhood is such as that of Leon H. whose wife, although not selected for the gas chamber “refused to leave the baby and so went to her death with the rest of the family” (quoted in Langer, “Ruins”, p. 98)

Ringelheim is confident that more women than men died. She states that:

Research suggests that more Jewish women were deported than Jewish men and more women than men were selected for death in the concentration camps. Jewish men did not stand in line for Jewish women when it came to the killing operations; Jewish women stood in their own lines and were killed as Jewish women (in Ofer and Weitzman, p. 349).

Different reasons have been given for this discrepancy between the sexes. The fact that slave labour was so important to the Third Reich is one possibility. One survivor of Auschwitz, quoted in Smith, puts it succinctly:

Men were at a tremendous advantage because many were in their twenties and thirties and they had professions, and the Germans needed their skills in the camp ... now the women were mostly teenage girls; older women were not allowed into the camp; first of all they were of child bearing age so they may have been pregnant and of course no

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<sup>23</sup> It is possible that we react particularly strongly to scenes like these because we don't know what we would do in the same situation. While we might want to believe that we would not desert the child, if that choice were forced on us, what would we actually do?



pregnant woman was allowed to live, all women and children were taken straight to the gas chambers (p. 176).

So men, because of their physical strength and skills, were less likely to be selected immediately for the gas chambers. Other suggestions as to why more men than women survived include those of Rudolf Hoess, commandant of Auschwitz. In his memoirs, Hoess hypothesizes that more women died because of their psychological state, created by the loss of their families. However, he also states:

Everything I have said is also true of the women, with one difference: for the women everything was a thousand times harder, much more depressing and injurious, because the living conditions in the women's camps were incomparably worse. The women were allocated smaller living space, the hygienic and sanitary conditions were greatly inferior... and when women reached the 'point of no return' the end was not long in coming (quoted in Ofer and Weitzman, p. 306- 307)

The exact numbers of women and men killed during the Holocaust are not known and in some ways it is irrelevant to categorise deaths in this way. As Ruth Bondy wrote: "Cyklon B did not differentiate between men and women; the same death swept them all away" (in Ofer and Weitzmann, p. 310). Nevertheless the question of why there are fewer accounts from women is important, not least because the experience of women in the Holocaust is different. Horowitz argues:

Missing from male versions of survival are experiences unique to women, such as menarche, menstruation and pregnancy in the concentration camps; the strategies some women devised to endure and survive; the ways other women met their deaths; the subsequent effect on women survivors in family, friendship and care relations; and the way women reconstruct shattered paradigms of meaning in the face of cultural and personal displacement (in Ofer and Weitzmann, p. 366).



The biological differences referred to above are important and lead to diverse experiences. For example, women are more vulnerable because of the threat of being raped and the possible repercussions of this. Although it was not unknown for men to be raped (see for example an account in Smith, p. 178) they could not become pregnant, give birth and as a result be under a death threat simply because of their biology. Any woman who gave birth in Auschwitz would be sent to the gas chambers within twenty-four hours with her newborn child. This could never happen to a man. Whatever the reason, there is good reason for the attestation of Sara Horowitz that “women’s experiences are rarely central to the presentation of a ‘typical’ Holocaust story” (in Ofer and Weitzman, 1998, p.369).

Nevertheless, some writers note their discomfort about focusing on gender difference. Ruth Bondy for example wrote: “any division of the Holocaust and its sufferers according to gender seemed offensive to me” (in Ofer and Weitzman, 310). However, ultimately she decides that she should tell the story of women in Theresienstadt in order “to examine, for myself, in what way the lives of women in the ghetto differed from the lives of men, and how one could explain this distinction, if explanation is possible” (ibid).

Lawrence Langer is more confident in his belief that the humiliations and injustices of the Holocaust are beyond gender:

The origins of humiliation were often dissimilar for men and women, because womanhood and manhood were threatened in various ways. But the ultimate sense of loss results from victims in a violated world beyond gender. (“Preempting the Holocaust”, p. 57)

Much of what Langer appears to be attacking in this chapter is the notion that women helped each other in the camps by being more nurturing, more caring of each other:

In the testimonies I have studied, I have found no evidence that mothers behaved or survived better than fathers, or that mutual support between sisters, where possible, prevailed more than between brothers (ibid).

This presupposes that this is all there is to gender differences, i.e. that women reacted differently and better to their circumstances, that it degenerates into a competition about who was more resilient, caring or sustaining. Yet there is more to gender issues in the Holocaust than this. I would argue that at least some of the experiences women had forced them to act against cultural expectations in ways that were even more extreme than how men reacted. Although very often they appeared to be behaving in ways that were more nurturing as will be discussed later, it is also the case that some women found themselves in situations where they did not behave in this way.

In *Yesterday's Shadow*, the main characters are all women. In writing about the experiences of Ewa and Anna, I felt it was important to face some of the issues they would have had to deal with as women in the Holocaust, not only in order to ensure the veracity that fiction about the Holocaust demands, but also in a tiny way to address the inequalities of accounts about the Holocaust.

That there are inequalities is beyond doubt. Ringelheim examines the silence that surrounds gender issues and the specific vulnerability of women. Recounting an informal discussion at a conference in 1979, about fears that children of survivors have that their mothers have been raped and how this might reflect reality, she writes:



Without apparent hesitation, those of my colleagues who responded claimed that the children were describing not actual incidents of abuse but rather fantasies induced by the media's sexualization of the Holocaust. No one quoted any research; no one referred to any documentation or studies of interviews of survivors, male or female. There was just an immediate and resounding denigration of the question and the discussion ended (in Ofer and Weitzman, p. 340).

Various issues faced by women are discussed below. In no way is this list definitive. The ones I have chosen to discuss are relevant to the difficulties faced by characters in *Yesterday's Shadow*.

## Rape

The rape of Anna by a Nazi soldier is central to the plot of *Yesterday's Shadow*. Anna is sexually abused by the soldier, first on the transport to Auschwitz and then in the camp itself. She becomes pregnant as a result.

Rape or the fear of rape is one of the ways in which women's experience of the Holocaust is different to that of men. Myrna Goldenberg states that "women's narratives frequently acknowledge their vulnerability as sexual beings, and especially as menstruating or pregnant women" (quoted in Hardman in Leak and Paizis, p. 54).

It was not only Germans that were to be feared. Other prisoners and Kapos were potential rapists too:

The Kapos and their deputies came to rape the women at night and there were terrible screams and groans coming from their block ... it was a free for all, a sort of reward for the criminals, the German psychopaths who were sent to Auschwitz- Birkenau (Roman Halter, in Smith, p. 161).



One survivor told Joan Ringelheim of how she was molested by male relatives while she was in hiding:

[I was] ... physically developed for my age.... Constantly afraid of men.... Men would try to touch me. I was even afraid of the family – the sons (as well as the cousins, uncles, brothers-in-law, and other male relatives of the family), because I was constantly [fondled] ... [except] when the father was there (in Ofer and Weitzman, p. 342).

Another survivor, Judith Isaacson, risked death to avoid rape. During a selection, the women were herded into three groups, young girls to the right, the old and infirm to the left and the majority straight ahead. She was told to go to the right. She remembered being warned by her uncle to avoid girls' transports at all costs and realised that the group of young girls was headed towards the eastern front and mass rape. She grabbed her aunt, who was with her and dived into the group that was going straight ahead (to slave labour). To their amazement, although guns were pointed at them, no one shot at them. Her memoirs and those of many women give witness to the fear of rape that was pervasive in the camps.

## **Menstruation**

Many women testified to the cessation of menstruation during their time in the camps. For some it was yet another way in which their femininity was taken away from them. Others saw it as a blessing, because the sanitary conditions were terrible. Tesdeschi describes what happened when one naïve newcomer asked for cotton for her period:

You must be joking. You know what we use for bandages here? Paper! Pick up some rags, in the road, in the mud ... next month you won't need anything anyway (p. 20).

In her account of life in Theresienstadt, Ruth Bondy also refers to this:

Contrary to the view that the cessation of menstruation led to depression and worries about future fertility, in my own experience and observation it was generally received with relief. No sanitary napkins or cotton wool was available, and cotton napkins and folded pieces of linen absorbed poorly, chafed and were hard to wash (In Ofer and Weitzmann, p. 315).

Some claimed that bromide was used to suppress sexuality, saying they could taste it in their food:

As if there were any need for bromide! Those bodies that left their broth behind in the bowls at lunch break, huddling up on two stools or on a heap of shoes on the ground to snatch a moment's sleep despite the surrounding din, had neither vitality nor sex. Having lost their menstruations as a result of malnutrition and shock, the women no longer felt they were women (Tedeschi, p. 97).

In *Yesterday's Shadow*, Anna's periods cease after she has been raped but in a place where every woman ceases to menstruate she does not think of pregnancy as a possible reason even when her stomach swells.

Something about her belly worried her. It was a solid mass. She didn't like to touch it; it felt so strange. Anna thought of her grandmother, her lovely elegant grandmother with her soft white hair. Before she died, she had a stomach like this, all hard and rigid from a tumour. She didn't care whether or not she had a tumour but she wanted to know what to expect. They would all die one way or another. If this was to be her fate, so be it (p. 161).

## **Pregnancy and childbirth**

Of the issues that are unique to women, pregnancy is perhaps the most affecting. Sara R. Horowitz discusses narratives of heroism which often "focus on a secret



pregnancy with a baby born healthy and often hidden with its mother or smuggled to safety” (in Ofer and Weitzman, p. 371). However, accounts by women such as Olga Lengyel who attest to the killing of newborn infants in order to save mothers from the gas chambers are more common: “As soon as a baby was delivered at the infirmary, mother and child were both sent to the gas chambers” (p. 110). After seeing that women who had stillborn births were sent back to work and after agonising about it for some time, those working as doctors in the infirmary decided to try to save at least the mothers:

Unfortunately, the fate of the baby always had to be the same. After taking every precaution, we pinched and closed the little tike’s nostrils and when it opened its mouth to breathe, we gave it a dose of a lethal product. An injection might have been quicker, but that would have left a trace and we dared not let the Germans suspect the truth.... And so, the Germans succeeded in making murderers of even us ... The only meagre consolation is that by these murders we saved the mothers. Without our intervention they would have endured worse suffering, for they would have been thrown into the crematory ovens while still alive (p. 111).

It is not clear that the women who lost their children would necessarily see it this way. One survivor, Arina B. gave birth in the barracks helped by a midwife:

And she said, “You have a boy.” And she took away the boy and till today I don’t know where is the boy. I beg her, I hear crying and I beg her to give me the baby. I’m very, I said, “I don’t want to live. I want to die with my baby. I don’t have any, you know, I said I lost my, you know, strength and everything, I can’t fight any more. I want to die. (Langer, “Preempting the Holocaust” pp. 50-51)

Although this woman went on to survive the war, she aborted another child when she became pregnant, as she was so afraid of what might happen. Eventually she



did go on to have two children but described herself as “like stone. Sometimes I feel I’m stone you know – inside” (ibid, p. 52).

Infanticide was not only confined to the camps. Jerry Koenig, who was a Jewish child in Poland during the Holocaust, hid with his family and others on the farm of a Polish family. A shelter was dug out in the barn and was big enough to hide eleven people. Before long, it became apparent that one of the young women in hiding was pregnant. When the child was born they all knew that it would be impossible to keep the child in the shelter as “she did what all new-borns do – she cried” (Smith, p. 191). Koenig goes on to detail what happened next:

And so the conclusion was that the baby had to die. And Mrs Goral concocted a potion of poppies – opium – which the mother had to spoon-feed to her baby. And the baby just simply dozed off and died, never regained consciousness. This whole thing had a tremendously traumatic effect on the people in the shelter. My brother and I took it particularly bad – to witness this kind of thing was really a terrible, terrible experience (p. 191).

As discussed in Chapter 2, the idea for *Yesterday's Shadow* came from one of Bettelheim's case studies which narrated the story of Anna, who was born and spent her infancy in a confinement much more constricted than that described by Koenig. The child grows up deeply disturbed. The case study led me to reflect on the plight of parents in this situation: how would they cope with it, were there circumstances in which they might find themselves doing something terrible to one child in order to save themselves and others. This is discussed earlier (pp. 20 –21). Eventually, however, I decided that Ewa should not deliberately kill her child. I felt it was important in the context of the story,

that it should be an accidental act; otherwise it might be seen as a vindication of the refrigerator mother theory. We are left in no doubt that the killing is accidental:

The cry has disturbed Tomasz; he kicks out, his foot striking my anklebone. I stifle a cry and gather him in my arms to comfort him but he hates cuddles, tries to wriggle away. Sixth sense tells me he is going to scream. I whisper sorry as I hold him tighter, put my hand over his mouth, stroke his forehead to try to calm him. I'm losing him; any minute he'll break free. I try to visualise the space; there is enough room for me to lie down. Perhaps if I lie on top of him ... I tell Marek what I am going to do and he moves to give me more room. I lie on top of Tomasz, my hand over his mouth still, feeling him buck like a trapped animal beneath me. Please God; don't let me hurt him (p. 68).

Originally, when I was planning the novel, I wondered whether Ewa might do something to redeem her action (even though it wasn't deliberate) and it is from this that I think originated the idea of a baby being born and saved in a place where there was so much death. Rather than follow the most common outcome, that of death for the infant, I therefore opted for the more life affirming one of the child being saved.

### **The nurturing role**

Many accounts depict women caring for each other in practical as well as emotional ways. Bondy shows how women responded in more practical ways to incarceration:

The men, in hats with cut off brims and in trousers and coats thrown to them at random - too short, too long, too wide, too small - looked like sad black storks. The women, also wearing garments that had been distributed to them at random, had somehow succeeded in only twenty four hours in adjusting them to their bodies and sewing up the holes, using needles



made out of wooden splinters and threads pulled out of the one blanket allocated to them (in Ofer and Weitzmann, p. 323).

In her memoir, *Auschwitz and After*, Charlotte Delbo writes about the resources that women had at their disposal and how this differed from the men:

Although their distress was just as great, the women still had some resources, those always possessed by women. They could do the wash, mend the only shirt, now in tatters, the men wore the day of their arrest, cut up blankets to make booties. They deprived themselves of a portion of bread to give it to the men (p. 118).

Earlier in her memoir, Delbo had written of how women saved some bread for the men and of the indifference of the men to the women's sacrifice:

One morning, we carried bread under our jackets. For the men. We failed to meet a men's column. We awaited the evening impatiently. On our way back we heard their tread behind us. Drei, Vier, Links. They walked faster than us. We stepped aside to make way for them. Poles? Russians? Pitiful men, bleeding from misery like all men here.

As soon as they were abreast with us, we took out our bread and tossed it to them. There was a mad scramble. They caught the bread, fighting over it, snatching pieces from one another. They had wolves' eyes. Two of them rolled into the ditch with the bread that had escaped from their grasp.

We watched them fight and wept.

The SS shouted, setting his dog on them. The column reformed, resuming its march. Links, Zwei, Drei.

They did not even turn their heads in our direction (p. 21).

In some accounts there are descriptions of the homemaking skills of the women prisoners, for example they would talk about favourite recipes. One survivor



claims “we occupied ourselves by cooking, in our minds, cakes with twelve eggs and four pounds of butter” (quoted in Smith, p. 233).

Such fantasies were not confined to food. In this extract, Delbo describes how when working in a field one day, the SS allowed the work party to enter an abandoned farmhouse:

We stare at the house as though we had forgotten what a house is like, and we find a whole unused vocabulary. “This is a nice room” – “Yes, good light.” – “The table must have stood there.” – “No, this is a dining room. Look at the paper. There’s still a scrap of paper hanging there. If it were up to me, I’d put a sofa here, near the fireplace.” – “Country-style draperies would look good. You know, a nice chintz.”

The house bedecks itself with all its comfortable, familiar pieces of furniture, polished by time. Although it is now completely furnished, we are still adding small touches. “There should be a radio next to the sofa.” – “They use storm windows here. You can grow succulent plants.” – “Is this what you like? I prefer hyacinths. You place the bulbs in water and next spring you’ve got flowers” (p. 77).

Delbo and others attest to how scenes like these helped give them hope. Goldenberg asserted:

Such bonding was not exclusive to women but it is difficult to find consistent evidence of men’s caring about one another to the extent that women did. Elie Cohen found that comradeship was ‘occasional’ if not rare among men and was conspicuous by its absence... Men, many survivors assert, had to learn behaviours that women already knew’ (in Ofer and Weitzman, p. 337).

In *Yesterday’s Shadow*, there are several instances of such caring and bonding. Karla takes on a nurturing role when Anna is raped:

Anna turned round. It was difficult to focus; she was tired and terrified and there was little light. She did not want to speak, feared that if

she opened her mouth she might start screaming and never stop. The woman's face was kind, her eyes soft. Anna looked away. There was too much understanding in them, as if she knew what Anna had been through. The woman patted her on her shoulder and whispered, 'Try not to think about it. You'll go mad if you do.' She left Anna curled up in a corner of the washroom on the cold stone floor, rocking herself backwards and forwards. Karla found her like that some minutes later and took her in her arms. Anna pushed her away. Too much sympathy and she would break down, might never put herself together again. Karla, thank God, understood. She disappeared for a few minutes and came back with some food. Anna tried not to grab it. How had Karla managed to find the one person who had something to give or, as was more likely, sell? She nibbled at the dry biscuit, grateful for the scrap of comfort.

'Want to talk about it?'

Anna shook her head.

'It might help.'

'No.' But it was hopeless; she would have to let go. Karla held her as she cried, murmured motherly words, stroked her until she calmed down.

'What would I do without you?' said Anna as she wiped her face.

Karla was more serious than Anna had ever seen her. 'If we don't stick together, we might as well be dead. I've talked to a lot of people in the time I've been here. People who've been around for years. They all say the same – you've got to have someone to trust and you've got to have hope. It helps to have someone to care for. If I didn't care for anyone, I wouldn't care for myself and then what would happen.' (pp. 152 – 153).

Later in the novel, on the death march from Auschwitz, the three women look out for each other and try to protect each other from the brutalities of the soldier and the weather:



They waded on through the snow, the soldiers growing ever more frenzied. They decided the women weren't going fast enough so they made them run. Fortunately no one could go very fast but even so, it was hard to keep going. Karla fell behind, weaker than the others because of her age and because her shoe was falling off. When they stopped for their next break, Anna saw that Karla's shoe was in tatters. She tried to make Karla swap shoes but she refused. Anna persisted, knowing that Karla's chances were slim if she didn't do something.

'How often do I need to tell you? The important thing is that you and Sarah survive.'

'No. It's more important that we all survive. If we take it in turns to wear the dodgy pair of shoes then we're more likely to stay together and that way we'll get through this.' Try as she did, Karla kept on refusing until Anna gave up. (p. 184).

Some doubt, however, has been cast on such examples of comradeship and fortitude. Schwartz quotes Istvan Deak, who is scathing about many memoirs of Holocaust survivors:

Although many of his family members perish, the author's dignity and readiness to help others keep him alive ... it was almost always someone else, hardly ever himself, who stole a spoon, a needle or a slice of bread from a neighbor, who lorded it over the prisoners or who escaped the gas chambers at the loss of a fellow inmate's life (in Schwartz, p. 12).

This leads to the difficult question that faces all Holocaust narratives, that of veracity. We need to consider whether the women's accounts are true or whether they are misleading themselves in remembering comradeship. My own feeling had been that women would have behaved differently from men in the camps and several accounts seem to support this belief. There are others, however that do not and it is possible that some women survivors referred to in this chapter



deluded themselves that women were more cooperative because it is culturally accepted that women are the caring gender. This could lead to their memories being tainted by this cultural expectation. For every woman who remembers a positive moment of sharing there may be another who counters this with an act of meanness.

It is perhaps futile to look for a universal truth from all the testimonies of the Holocaust. It has often been argued that there is no general experience of the Holocaust, that each person experiences it in his or her own way. The experience of Auschwitz depends on many factors: the date of arrival, being Jewish, being a child for example.

For Giuliana Tedeschi, the comparatively late date of her arrival in April 1944 meant she kept her hair. "A week before we arrived, no prisoner had been admitted to the camp without having first been brutally deprived of every female grace, every aspect of her femininity" (pp. 4-5).

Yet it is almost too obvious to say that because every experience is different that we should not try to find commonality. This seems to me to be like saying each person has their own experience of life and there is therefore no point in trying to generalise from it. Yet as humans we do try to find similarities in the experiences of others to our own. We have a need to understand and to learn from our understanding. Empathy, the ability to put oneself in the place of another person, helps make us human.

Women's experiences of the Holocaust were different from those of men by nature of their biology: their bodies made them more vulnerable. Without a systematic analysis of all survivors' accounts, it would be impossible to state categorically that women were more nurturing than men in the camps but there is

evidence that some women formed ‘family’ groups and that these helped to sustain women in the most dreadful of circumstances when they might otherwise have perished. *Yesterday’s Shadow* focuses almost exclusively on women’s experience of the Holocaust. The women in Auschwitz, especially Ewa and Anna, go through periods of dark despair, but they are helped by the ‘family’ bonds, by the care of other women. This is not to romanticise the nurturing role of women or to suggest that men never bonded or helped each other in their own ways.

In the final section of this chapter, the novel *Lovely Green Eyes* is discussed in relation to some of the issues above.

### **Lovely Green Eyes**

This novel was written by Arnošt Lustig, a Czech Jew who emigrated to America after the Prague spring in 1968 and is now an academic there. He is a survivor of Auschwitz and has written several novels about the Holocaust. His work is widely acclaimed and *Lovely Green Eyes* was nominated for the Pulitzer Prize in 2003.

*Lovely Green Eyes* tells the story of fifteen-year-old Hanka Kaudersova, known as Skinny, who has been transported to Auschwitz-Birkenau from Terezin. Her family are dead: her father threw himself onto the electrified fence at Auschwitz, her brother went straight to the gas chambers from the ramp and her mother followed him some time later. In Auschwitz, Skinny works as a cleaner for a surgeon who makes the mistake of transplanting Jewish skin onto a German soldier. For this he is sent to the Eastern front, leaving Skinny to her



fate. She has no doubt that, as a witness to the surgeon's faux pas, she will be exterminated. By chance she finds herself amongst a group of women who are being selected to work as *Feldhuren*. With nothing to lose, she passes herself off as Aryan and is chosen to be one of the thirty prostitutes. She has to service twelve soldiers a day, every day. Fortunately for her, the war is almost at an end and the experience lasts only twenty-one days. However these twenty-one days have a lasting effect on her. The man who became her husband narrates the novel but the action is mainly focalised through Skinny.

Rape is central to this narrative for it can hardly be said that Skinny is a willing prostitute. For her, it was a choice between that and death:

It was not the first time her life had been in the balance, but each time felt like the first time. She hung on to what had so far always helped her. Something that made her rely on herself and hope she would be lucky. It was not quite rebellion, but there was a touch of rebelliousness in it (p. 15).

Skinny does not have to worry about becoming pregnant; she is sterile. One of the camp doctors has used x-rays on her. She tries to depersonalise her experience to cope with it: "A girl was a bottle into which they emptied themselves." (p. 31) Nevertheless she is acutely aware of what is happening to her:

With his palms he parted her legs. He half opened his mouth. She could see his strong white teeth. He was breathing hard. He pressed down on her with his chest so that she felt the wood of the bed against her back and her hands. She knew he would manage even without the oil. She knew by now what the strength of a man meant, multiplied by anger.



Twelve times a day – by way of exception today only once with the captain – she let a stranger do with her body whatever he liked. She felt ashamed not only for herself, even though there were no witnesses. She must not show it. She must not think of whose turn it would be next. The second, the third, the twelfth man. She concentrated on the fire in the stove, on the firewood she had put on it. (p. 37)

This concentration on the environment rather than what is happening to her is reminiscent of an attempt to dissociate. Yet it is unsuccessful; as this passage shows, she is only too aware of what is being done to her:

She felt a pain in her crotch, a swelling of her skin. Everything was the captain's body and then her body. Behind her she heard the voices of her father, mother, her brother. She did not want that. She shut her eyes, but she could not shut her ears. She thought of big Leopolda Kulikowa's advice. The soldier is a snake; the girl is a gullet. She felt in herself water, emptiness. Then fire, friction, pain.

She understood something she had not understood about her first drop of menstrual blood. At 15 she realized there were things she would not confess even to God (p. 38).

Skinny's pain is not only that she has become a whore, but also that she has denied her Jewishness in order to survive. She is forced to listen to the racist supremacist views of Sarazin, a sadistic but impotent *Obersturmführer*, who is a personification of the degradation and decline of the Nazi state. Sarazin wants Skinny to know that it "was an honour to be with him" (p. 109). During his visits to her, he gives a running commentary of his views on Jewish women:

The fact that Jewish women can't read doesn't mean they're not cunning. There's treason all round. Nothing is innocent. A well. A room. A cellar. We've searched Russia, the Ukraine and Poland with a fine-tooth comb, like the lice-infested head of a giant (p. 119).

Sarazin rejoices in killing, yet when it comes to having sex with Skinny, he needs to be tied up and dominated, his voice as he tells her what to do, sounds “sick, pitiful, helpless and angry” (p. 118). If it weren’t for the fact that Skinny has no choice in the matter, we could almost rejoice in the knowledge that he has slept with a Jewess as for him it would be “better to be blown up by a shell than sleep with a Jewess” (p. 120). Ultimately she has her revenge for the hours of having to listen as he brags about what he has done and seen:

Huge numbers of rats were scurrying among the bodies, gnawing at the dead, creeping into their mouths and other orifices, into their armpits and between their legs (p. 122).

Skinny drops poison into his flask as he sleeps. We are not told for certain that Sarazin subsequently dies but this is what we have to conclude.

In Skinny’s story there is none of the “dignity and readiness to help others” that Istvan Deak finds so difficult to believe in survivor narratives. Skinny does what she must in order to stay alive:

“You’re not very good, but you’re better than bad,” he said. It was something between a commendation, a reproach and a warning. She did not know what she could have done better. She had simply been there, letting him maul and grind her body. She was with him, he was with her. That was what was keeping her alive, just as her work in Dr Krueger’s surgery had done at Auschwitz- Birkenau, or her work on the railway carriages, or catching fish, collecting eggs from gulls’ nests or pulling drowned bodies from the Harmanze pond. She wondered if it was worth the price paid for it, but she was better off than tens of thousands of others. She kept repeating this to herself. She was better off. She was paying for her life with her crotch, her thighs, her arms, legs, lips, fingers, tongue – and her soul (p. 39).

Skinny is a marvellously complex character. We are in no doubt about the moral ambivalence of her actions and that she finds them so:

He signed her questionnaire at the bottom. She followed every one of his movements wordlessly. He put the questionnaire into his briefcase. That someone else would go into the gas chamber in her place in the morning so the numbers would be right – this she did not think about (p. 18).

As is the case in so many testimonies given by women, there are instances of kindness throughout the novel. The women in the field brothel help each other. They share food, the brothel madam guesses that Skinny and another girl, Estelle, are Jewish but she doesn't tell the Germans: "You couldn't tell anything from a girl's crotch." (p. 86) Most importantly, Estelle trusts Skinny enough to ask questions that will betray her Jewishness:

"Is it a sin to want to die?"

"Why do you ask me?" Skinny said.

"Is it a sin not to want to die?" Estelle asked.

"Some decide to die with honour if they can't live with honour. That's why my father killed himself."

"I know why you're saying this to me. You probably know why I'm asking."

"You too?" Skinny breathed.

It was out now. They had both betrayed themselves, simultaneously. (p. 89)

This exchange shows the relationship of mutual trust that has built up between the girls even in such adverse circumstances.



After the war, Skinny returns to Prague and seeks the company of a rabbi, Gideon Schapiro, to help her understand the evil she has been through. She uses him as a confessor:

He was the only person to whom – for some reason or another, perhaps to get it off her chest – she told everything. She stripped herself bare. She felt relief that it was behind her (p. 147).

Throughout the novel there are indications of Lustig's views on the need to tell the stories of survivors. The rabbi says to Skinny, "Each one who has survived is a messenger" (p. 148). Schapiro seems to represent our attempt to understand the Holocaust:

Her experience conflicted with all the sacred and civil codes that he was acquainted with. He searched his mind: what had become of morality? Where did the idea of the worthlessness of human life come from? How did the difference between giving and taking life disappear? How was injustice measured? (p. 149).

*Lovely Green Eyes* does not skirt round issues of gender. This is at the heart of the story. Unlike many women who died because of their gender, Skinny survives precisely because of it but at a cost to her self worth. She is her harshest judge:

She could not forgive what was unforgiveable. She did not get free of the net in which they had caught her.

Looking back, she tried to sort out what had been important at No.232 Ost. She had arrived there unprepared, and survived. She had asked her body to hold out, and it had. She had asked her soul and her conscience not to condemn her. But how could she have talked to, lain

with, breathed the same air as, her murderers, the murderers of her parents and brother? (p. 247).

The answer is, of course, that she had no choice. It was that or death. As Primo Levi wrote in *The Drowned and the Saved*:

It is illogical to demand of them, and it is rhetorical and false to maintain that they all and always followed the behaviour expected of saints and stoic philosophers. In reality, in the enormous majority of cases, their behaviour was rigidly preordained. In the space of a few weeks or months the deprivations to which they were subjected led them to a condition of pure survival, a daily struggle against hunger, cold, fatigue and blows in which the room for choices (especially moral choices) was reduced to zero; among these, very few survived the test and this thanks to the coming together of many improbable events; in short they were saved by luck (pp. 33-34).

Levi knows from his experience that moral certainties have no place in what he called the 'grey zone.'

## Chapter Five

### Representing the Holocaust

Throughout the process of writing *Yesterday's Shadow*, the same question came up repeatedly, that is: why is representing the Holocaust so controversial? Within this question lie several issues: the uniqueness (or otherwise) of the Holocaust; how the Holocaust is represented; whether it is ethical to write fiction about the Holocaust and, if so, are there limits that should be set in terms of imagination and taste? This chapter will discuss these issues. As with the previous two chapters, this will end with an examination of how these apply both to *Yesterday's Shadow* and to a recent work of fiction.

#### Is the Holocaust unique?

It would be naïve to think that one could write about the Holocaust without getting caught up in politics and controversy: from those who deny its very existence to those who use it to justify the persecution of Palestinian Arabs. Even using the term 'Holocaust' is not straightforward. Young explains the historical and religious context of the terms used, namely churban, sho'ah and holocaust. The first two terms are rooted in the Jewish tradition<sup>24</sup> whereas holocaust is not:

Like sho'ah, the English term "holocaust" derives from more broadly descriptive, generic references to disaster (usually by fire), without reference to specific past conflagrations. But like sho'ah and churban, "holocaust" also carries a certain theological load in its etymons, which has led some writers to question its appropriateness as well. Derived from the Greek holokauston, which literally means "whole burnt", it referred in the Septuagint specifically to sacrifice by fire, assonant with the Hebrew

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<sup>24</sup> Churban and Shoah are Hebrew terms used to refer to previous disasters or destruction in Judaism.



term for sacrificial offering *olah*. Wary of the archaic Christian notion of a Jewish calvary in the Holocaust, many Jewish writers and theologians continue to resist this term altogether (“Writing and Rewriting”, p. 87).

In addition, as Lydia Kokkola discusses, some prefer to use the term genocide, sometimes prefixing it with Nazi to distinguish it from other acts of genocide (p. 5). Some writers who use the term “Shoah”, argue that the events of the Holocaust are unique in history and for that reason are more horrendous than any other act of genocide that has ever taken place. They take particular issue with any analogy between how the Palestinians have been treated by the Israelis and how Jews were persecuted by the Nazis. Kali Tal outlines the argument given by one orthodox rabbi:

According to Landes, Leftists “misappropriate” the Holocaust in three ways: erasing the specifically anti-Semitic character of the Holocaust; universalizing the Holocaust; and equating “Jewish Israelis with the Nazis and Arab Palestinians with the persecuted Jews” (p. 27).

Other definitions of the Holocaust are broader, like that of the Sound Archivists of the Imperial War Museum who interpreted it to “include not only the millions murdered or imprisoned by the Nazis during the period 1933 – 45, but also those whose lives were affected by Hitler’s policies, or who were witnesses to the persecutions and atrocities” (Smith xi). However, some historians and critics take exception to this, arguing that the Holocaust is unique because of the systematic way in which Jews were targeted. While they accept that others may eventually have been targeted in the same way, they argue that we should only talk about what actually happened and not what might have been.

Finkelstein goes further in his exposition of what he calls “capitalising the Holocaust”. He argues that “the “Holocaust” is an ideological representation of the Nazi holocaust” (p. 3) and that “its central dogmas sustain significant political and class interests” (ibid).

Finkelstein, whose parents were survivors of the Warsaw ghetto and Nazi concentration camps, claims that as a child he was unaware of any concerns about the Holocaust. He compares the recent proliferation of books, articles and films about the Holocaust with the fact that between the end of the war and the late sixties there were only a handful of books and films on the subject. Finkelstein does not accept what he calls the “standard explanation” (p. 13) that Jews were so traumatized by the Holocaust that they could not speak about it. Instead he argues that the dearth of books and films was related to the conformity of the American Jewish leadership. The Nazi holocaust was forgotten when West Germany became a crucial ally of America during the Cold War. Remembrance of the Holocaust came to be seen as a communist cause because “Leftist Jews who were opposed to the Cold War alignment with Germany against the Soviet Union, would not stop harping on about it” (p. 14).

Finkelstein goes on to argue that the 1967 Arab Israeli war changed this. Not because Israel’s isolation during the war brought to mind the Nazi extermination – this, he argues, could have been the case in 1948 when America did not support Israel – but because America was impressed by Israel’s strength and saw how they could be a strategic asset in the Middle East. Finkelstein claims this led ultimately to remembrance of the Holocaust by the conservative Jewish elite and in turn to the growth of the Holocaust industry.



This question of the uniqueness of the Holocaust seems to me to underpin many of the ethical questions that are raised and therefore should be examined in some detail.

Various commentators and historians have suggested there is nothing else like the Holocaust in human history. Steven Katz, a Professor of Jewish History, argues that the Holocaust is unique because “never before has a state set out, as a matter of intentional principle and actualized policy, to annihilate physically every man, woman and child belonging to a specific people” (in Rosenbaum, p. 19).

Others disagree and have suggested a number of possibilities to support their view that the Holocaust is not unique. These include the slave trade; the genocide of the Armenians by the Turks; the great famine in the Ukraine during Stalin’s time. Ian Hancock proposes that Gypsies (the Roma and Sinti people) were targeted in the same way as the Jews and in so doing makes the most convincing case. He outlines several ways in which the Holocaust is said to be unique and demonstrates how each of these could be said to apply to Gypsies as well as Jews. For example, on the question of scale, he argues against Berenbaum who stated: “Even though the Romani were subject to gassing and other forms of extermination, the number of Gypsies was not so vast” (in Rosenbaum, p. 49). Hancock points out that Jews outnumbered Gypsies nine to one at the beginning of World War II and that “in terms of overall percentage, the losses of the Roma and Sinti people almost certainly exceeded those of any other groups” (p. 49).



In spite of these and other arguments, it is hard to counter the claim that in terms of industrialisation and normalisation, the Holocaust is unique.

### **Representation of the Holocaust**

Auschwitz is very often regarded as a synecdoche for the Holocaust perhaps because so many died there. Part of the camp is now a World Heritage Site with signs detailing how many million have visited it. Yet many feel uncomfortable with how it is presented. Dwork and van Pelt describe how the Auschwitz that is seen by the world differs from the real Auschwitz. They outline how the museum is a sanitized presentation, and not “almost exactly as the Russians had found them forty years ago” (Young, “Writing and Rewriting”. p. 174). Most visitors go first to Auschwitz 1 and may only visit Birkenau as an afterthought. In Auschwitz 1, the main part of the camp, the corridors of each barrack are lined with the photographs of prisoners who died there. For hundreds of thousands who died, however, there is no photograph. Those who were selected and gassed on arrival were not tattooed, nor did they have their photograph taken. There is no official record of their death. It is not only the camp that misleads, however unwittingly. One guidebook, *Eyewitness Travel: Poland*, has very little to say about the mass exterminations that took place there. There is less than a page devoted to Auschwitz, five paragraphs to be precise and one of these concentrates on the martyrdom of the Polish priest, Maximilian Kolbe, who volunteered to die in the place of a Jewish father (Czerniewicz-Umer, 2007, p. 160).

Others have different views. I overheard another tourist discussing Auschwitz and complaining that there was too much emphasis on the Jewish experience, “you’d think they were the only people to die there”. While it is true that Jews were not the only people to die at Auschwitz, they were by far the principal group<sup>25</sup> and this seems an unusually insensitive if not downright anti-Semitic remark to make. It is also at odds with my own observations, which were that certainly in Auschwitz I, there was a great deal of information about the Polish prisoners who died there. In comparison, the site of Birkenau is sparse with little information, a fact that some find offensive. Yet the simplicity of the site is deeply moving. There are no guides, only notices to point visitors towards what they ought to see: the destroyed crematoria for example. Dwork and van Pelt describe it thus:

For Jewish visitors at least there is a sense of relief as the absence of interpretation at Birkenau at least spares them the pain engendered by the official interpretation provided at the main camp (p. 243).<sup>26</sup>

It is clear that a subject which arouses controversy over its very naming and in how its best-known death camp is shown to the world will stir up strong feelings about how it is represented. This is an ongoing debate that is far from over for many critics. Some feel that silence is the only way to respond to the horror of the Holocaust; others realize the importance of allowing testimonial responses. Finally there are a growing number who accept that it is possible and even desirable to represent the Holocaust in poetry, art and literature.

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<sup>25</sup> Recent estimates suggest that one million Jews, 70,000 Poles and 19,000 Roma died there,

<sup>26</sup> By this they mean the official Polish interpretation, which emphasizes Polish deaths. Dwork and van Pelt go on to discuss how Auschwitz has been appropriated by Polish Catholics describing statements by the late John Paul II that seem inept and offensive. For example, at the memorial for the six million dead, he took this to refer to the six million Poles who died.



## Silence as a Response

There have been many who argue that the only possible response to the Holocaust is silence. Philosophers and critics such as Adorno and Steiner are the most celebrated proponents of a tradition enjoining silence, but there were other writers who also took this view. The Yiddish poet, Aaron Tsaylin proclaimed:

The Almighty himself would be powerless to open his well of tears. He would maintain a deep silence. For even an outcry is now a lie, even tears are mere literature, even prayers are false. (Quoted in Howe, 1988, p. 174)

Aharon Appelfeld has also written about this, discussing the impossibility of explaining to those who were not there what happened:

What could we do, young boys of 12 and 13, with so many memories of death? Tell them about them? ... The questions from the outside were useless. They were questions full of misunderstanding ... having no contact at all with the world from which we came ... So we learned silence. (in Hartman, "Holocaust Remembrance", pp. 149 – 150)

This view that silence is the only justified response is now less popular than it once was. It was however for some time highly acceptable. The critic and writer George Steiner was a strong advocate of this position, arguing that not only were words unreliable in representing what has happened but that in many ways (at least in the form of the German language) they were responsible. In his controversial essay of 1959, 'The Hollow Miracle', he wrote:

For let us keep one fact clearly in mind: the German language was not innocent of the horrors of Nazism. It is not merely that a Hitler, a Goebbels, and a Himmler happened to speak German. Nazism found in



the language precisely what it needed to give voice to its savagery. Hitler heard inside his native tongue the latent hysteria, the confusion, the quality of hypnotic trance (p. 99).

Steiner argues fiercely that a language misused and abused in the way German was during the Third Reich cannot be trusted. “The thing that has gone dead is the German language” (p. 96). In the same essay he outlines grim examples of the way the language was twisted:

The unspeakable being said, over and over, for twelve years. The unthinkable being written down, indexed, filed for reference. The men who poured quicklime down the openings of the sewers in Warsaw to kill the living and stifle the stink of the dead wrote home about it. They spoke of having to “liquidate vermin.” In letters asking for family snapshots or sending season’s greetings. Silent night, holy night, *Gemütlichkeit*. A language being used to run hell, getting the habits of hell into its syntax. Being used to destroy what there is in man of man and to restore to governance what there is of beast. Gradually words lost their original meaning and acquired nightmarish definitions. Jude, Pole, Russe came to mean two-legged lice, putrid vermin which good Aryans must squash, as a party member said, “like roaches on a dirty wall.” “Final solution,” *entgültige Lösung*, came to signify the death of six million human beings in gas ovens (p. 100).

Steiner overstates his case in this essay, as he later realized.<sup>27</sup> However, his point about the depersonalisation of the language used is a good one. It has been argued that the relationship between language and thought is deterministic. Benjamin Whorf, a linguist, proposed two hypotheses concerning the relationship between language and thought: language determines thought;

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<sup>27</sup> In an addendum to this essay when it was republished in 1970, Steiner says that “understandably, this essay written in 1959, caused much hurt and anger” (95).

thought (and thereby culture) is shaped by language. The first proposition is not generally accepted today as it essentially states that there is no thought without language. However, the weaker form of the hypothesis is supported by research into concepts that different cultures have and the words they use for them. For example, Peter Gordon looked at the language used by the Piraha tribe in Brazil (Gordon, 2004). Gordon stated that the tribe is innumerate because they have only three counting words: one, two and many. His experiments showed that their numerical cognition of numbers greater than three was remarkably poor. Although the adults had great difficulty, the children of the tribe were able to learn to count, thereby suggesting that it is not some cognitive deficit that leads to this problem but a function of the language. We can see therefore that by referring to Jews as “vermin” or mass killings as “the final solution”, Germans were able to avoid thinking about the reality of what was being done.

Steiner was not alone in expressing concerns about how the Holocaust is depicted. It is ironic that in voicing their unease about this, critics like Steiner were themselves providing their own representation. Presumably the caveats they so sternly issued did not apply to their own work.

The argument for silence is one that is hard to accept. For one thing, it was vital for survivors to give testimony about what happened. In the simplest of terms, they had to speak and write about their experiences for justice to happen. Yet perhaps there is something to be said for understanding the need for silence in the way that we are sometimes shocked into silence, see for example the child narrator in Jerzy Kosinski’s *The Painted Bird*, who stops speaking after he is pulled half-drowned from a cesspit. However, as time goes on, the need to speak surpasses the need for silence. This is shown in *Yesterday’s Shadow*. Initially,



Ewa doesn't speak of her trauma to anyone. Instead she keeps her counsel for many years, only bringing herself to write snatches in Polish in a hidden notebook. Even then she cannot write what actually happened. She can only allude to it:

I pick up one of the other notebooks. It is written in Polish. This is the one in which I wrote all my secrets. I thumb through it. I have jotted down memories of Marek, the pen has skimmed over the paper, marking it lightly as if I was ashamed of what I wrote, of my betrayal: Today is my wedding anniversary; we would have been married forty years. Marek's hair will be grey now, like mine but his eyes will still have the same light as they had when he looked at me that first night. How he loved me, and I, him. As I read through my musings, I wonder if he is alive, if he ever thinks of me, or our children. There are drawings of Piotr and Tomasz. Beside one of Piotr I have written: Is this how he looked? Oh how I wish I could remember. Sometimes his face flashes in front of me, a fragmentary illusion, and I try to hold on to it but it slips away, as elusive as a dream. I look at the drawing closely. When I drew it, Sam was a baby. He looked like Piotrek I always thought. I used to sit and gaze at him for hours, pretending he was mine. Now, looking at the picture for the first time for many years, I find I cannot remember anything individual about him, anything that made him Piotrek rather than Tomasz or Sam or any other child. He was a baby, a beautiful baby but aren't they all? When you have no memory of what someone was, how they were or what they looked like, it is hard to believe they ever existed. I shudder, thinking of all the children who died at Auschwitz and how most of them are forgotten, their mothers killed at the same time. Dear God, why am I thinking about this now? The notebook is in my hands and I think I should arrange to destroy it (p. 86).

Ewa first speaks about her experiences after she has a breakdown on her fiftieth birthday and only in the context of what she thinks is a therapeutic relationship.

It is many more years before she can talk about it to the person who matters most to her, Hannah. This too is typical of many survivors; they do not want to speak of what happened but feel ultimately that they have to let their family know. Piera Sonnino, an Italian Jewish woman whose three brothers, two sisters and parents died in Auschwitz and Belsen, wrote down her memories of life during the war, for her daughters. They were published after her death to critical acclaim. Throughout the memoirs, Sonnino alludes to the difficulties of telling what has happened. Of the family's last night together (in Auschwitz), she says:

Whatever I could say of that time, it wouldn't make sense translated into words; it would be a thin shadow of that reality. I would be stealing it from myself, from what is mine, desperately mine alone (p. 103).

To be silent about the Holocaust is not a sustainable position. Survivors had to be allowed to work through their trauma in whatever way possible. Humanity had to be told about what had happened so that justice could be done and lessons could be learned. Yet the argument about whether it is possible or justifiable to try to represent the Holocaust has been ongoing since the end of the Second World War. Adorno's famous statement, 'After Auschwitz it is barbaric to write poetry' has been widely debated; almost every book or article about the Holocaust uses this quote at some point. Adorno was concerned that people would take aesthetic pleasure in poetry written about the Holocaust or in literature and that somehow this might diminish the suffering of those who died under the Nazis. In his words:

squeeze aesthetic pleasure out of artistic representation of the naked bodily pain of those who have been knocked down by rifle butts ... Through aesthetic principles or stylization ... the unimaginable ordeal

still appears as if it had some ulterior purpose. It is transfigured and stripped of some of its horror, and with this, injustice is already done to the victims (quoted in Berel, p. 179).

As far as I am aware, it is rarely if at all that the motives of those reading Holocaust fiction are questioned, though Schwartz claims that Jews respond in different ways from non-Jews to Holocaust texts:

Each reader responds differently to a text, but as a Jew who was three years old when the death camps were discovered, Holocaust narratives ... play a large part in my understanding of what transpired. Certainly Jews respond to the Holocaust differently than non-Jews do ... is it a particular feature of Holocaust narratives that Jews remember them differently from the way non-Jews do and that they enter our dreams and nightmares as if they were our own experience? We see ourselves in these ghetto places, these streets. In our nightmares we are deported and suffer the horrors of the camps (Schwartz, p. 5).

This leaves us then with the unstated question of why non-Jews read Holocaust narratives and what the actual differences are in how they respond. Schwartz cites no evidence of any sort for this assertion and is, I think, ignoring the capacity of humans to empathize. It would be surprising if non-Jews reading of the atrocities of the Holocaust did not recall them in nightmares in the way that Schwartz describes.

### **Testimonial accounts of the Holocaust**

The second view is that autobiographical or biographical accounts of the Holocaust are necessary testimony. These include diaries, memoirs and oral testimonies. Many who have given their testimony, whether oral or written,



explain how difficult it is to do this. Some have written about how they feel no one wants to hear and how painful this is for them. Others want to speak but feel the inadequacy of words for the task. Langer discusses this in *Holocaust Testimonies: The Ruins of Memory*. A survivor, Irene W. struggles with the problem of how to talk meaningfully about her experiences:

She first encountered this dilemma immediately after the war, when she returned briefly to the town of her birth and tried to tell people there what had happened to her family. She remembers thinking that “My family were killed” was totally inadequate, because “killed”, she says, was a word used for “ordinary” forms of dying. But to say matter of factly that “My mother and brother and two sisters were gassed” as soon as they arrived at Auschwitz seemed equally unsatisfactory, because plain factuality could not convey the enormity of the event. She was especially reluctant to reduce her family’s disappearance to a mere statistic, because she was sure that was how her audience wanted to hear about it. That night, she insists, she could not describe it that way, but her refusal had nothing to do with the oft repeated view that perhaps silence was the only appropriate response to such catastrophe. The seeds of anguished memory are sown in the barren belief that the very story you try to tell drives off the audience you seek to capture. Those seeds often shrivel in the further suspicion that the story you tell cannot be precisely the story as it happened. Reluctance to speak has little to do with preference for silence. (Langer, “Ruins of Memory”, p. 61).

Even these accounts are not without their critics. Some, like Young, argue that diarists are seen as more reliable because they are writing from “within the whirlwind” (Young, “Writing and Rewriting”, p. 25). This, he says, gives readers the perception that their accounts are more authoritative, more objective. Yet, as we know, diaries are not truly contemporaneous accounts. It is highly

unlikely that anyone keeping a diary would write down events as they actually happen. Also, as Young goes on to point out, diaries kept in the camps would have to be strictly edited and controlled in case they were discovered. Even as they tried to keep notes so as to bear witness after the war, they had to ensure that anything that might be found could not be incriminating. There was also the issue of how the Nazis manipulated reality:

as authentic as the prisoners' perceptions were at the time, even these eyewitness accounts were necessarily determined by the ways the Nazis had orchestrated camp and ghetto realities. One of the most frustrating and agonizing insights of all for the eyewitness narrators was the realization that as victims in the ghettos and camps, they were at the mercy of their persecutors in all ways – even in their attempts to testify against them (Ibid, p. 33).

In other words, although the diarists wrote in good faith about what they saw, what they saw may not have been the truth. An extreme example of how the truth was distorted so that eyewitnesses would be deceived was the model camp or ghetto at Theresienstadt in the occupied Czech lands. In 1944, there was an international inspection of Theresienstadt by the International Red Cross (it was previously inspected by the German Red Cross in 1943):

Dr Maurice Rossel, the representative of the International Red Cross, was accompanied by two Danish delegates on a carefully choreographed tour of Theresienstadt, which he described in a glowing report: 'Let us say that to our complete amazement we found in the ghetto a town which is living a nearly normal life ... This Jewish town is remarkable ...' He then went on to enumerate everything the SS had made sure he saw. Rossel even sent photos he had taken at Theresienstadt to Eberhard von Thadden



at the German Foreign Ministry, including pictures of children playing in the park (Stargardt, p. 222).

Other writers have cast doubt on some accounts by survivors (this has already been briefly discussed in chapter 5). The same writer, Istvan Deak, is sceptical about total recall of conversations: “And who can believe that so many writers have perfect recall, enabling them to reproduce verbatim conversations they had, or overheard, half a century earlier?” (quoted in Schwartz, p. 12)

Such caveats, however, do not detract from the body of testimonial accounts, which have been and continue to be so invaluable in representing the Holocaust to us. Although some eyewitness accounts may be flawed as noted above, triangulation (the application and combination of several research methodologies in the study of the same phenomenon) can confirm much of it. Not only do memoirs and contemporaneous accounts generally present us with consistent pictures of what life was like during the Holocaust, but traditional historical research also helps to validate it.

### **Fictional Representations**

As time passes, however, survivors will die out and new representations of the Holocaust will of necessity be either second-hand (the accounts of children of survivors) or fictional. Many writers and critics have been sceptical of the need for fictional representations. Inga Clendinnen accepts the fiction that has arisen from direct knowledge of the Holocaust such as *This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen*, written by a Polish survivor of Auschwitz, Tadeusz Borowski. Of such fiction she writes:



I am persuaded that the authority of a Tadeusz Borowski or an Isaac Babel or those other writers who present us with ‘fiction’ made out of experience, owes a great deal both to the fact and to our knowledge that they have ‘been there’; that they are reporting (and selecting, shaping and inventing) out of direct observation and participation. I cannot effectively separate their texts from the greatest texts of that other genre, ‘survivor testimony’ (p. 169)

However, she does not accept that fiction which is not written from direct experience of the Holocaust. This is because of the different relationships between writer and reader that, she claims, history and fiction demand. “Had I discovered the nature of Humbert Humbert’s secret joys in real life,” she writes, “I would have had him locked up ... Snug between the covers of the fiction called *Lolita* I can revel in them” (p. 170). Clendinnen goes on to explain further:

Once inside [the fictional world] I have no responsibility beyond my responsibility to respond to the text. I may tremble for its people, I may weep for them – but I want to relish their anguish, not heal it ... in the end my compassion is a fiction too, because they are fictions (p. 170).

I find this response unsettling. While I would agree that there is a difference in how we respond to real life tragedy and to fictional tragedy, I do not think that we relish the hurt that characters feel. We empathise with them, in some ways it could even be said that they help us rehearse for anguish in our own lives. Fictional accounts can be a way into other lives and experiences; they can help us understand them. As Schwartz notes:

Holocaust literature is the voice of all those who all along believed in the ethical and aesthetic dimensions of literature and culture and are once again being heard. Leslie Epstein, author of *King of the Jews*, has argued

that “our very idea of what the Holocaust was ... depends upon what artists make of it” (Lang 269), while Epstein’s words may seem hyperbolic, they are nevertheless more and more true as the survivors pass away and the written and oral records they leave behind become necessarily the material for future imaginative reconstructions ... it is the artistic rendering of the Holocaust that will keep it alive in the imagination particularly as memoirists dwindle. The word and the image have rescued the Holocaust from oblivion even if they cannot bring back its victims (p. 23).

This is not the only reason however for admitting fictional representation. Fictional accounts of the Holocaust give a voice to those who cannot speak for themselves. They also allow different voices to be used. It has already been noted that women’s accounts are fewer than those of men. The voices of children are even fewer and it may be that this is an area where there will be a growth in fiction in years to come. As well as allowing the stories of women and children to be told it is also possible that more unusual ways of recounting the Holocaust will be explored. As we have already seen, the favoured way to write fiction in this area is to be as historically accurate as possible, to the extent that some have used actual documentary evidence in their writing, for example D.M. Thomas in *The White Hotel*. Yet others have started to move away from these realistic depictions to more allegorical accounts, for example Art Spiegelman’s *Maus*. This is in essence a survivor’s account but from the point of view of a child of a survivor. The writer/artist uses cartoon mice to represent the Jewish victims of the Holocaust, the Nazis are depicted as cats. Schwartz argued that as time goes on this may be a more acceptable way of narrating the Holocaust.

Ironically but understandably, many of our authors revert at times to the very polemical and pontificating stance of the world in which the

Holocaust took place, a world in which Nazi language and forms dominated and deprived them of space for playful and innovative kinds of discourse. The paradox is that perhaps at this distance of years the Holocaust may be better grasped within the human ken of understanding rather than when isolated as a sacred event apart from human history (p. 302).

In order to discuss some of the issues raised above, I have chosen a recent novel by John Boyne, *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*. This is a book originally written for children. However since publication in 2006, it has become a 'crossover book', that is, a book marketed to both adults and children. This book is of interest because there are several factual inaccuracies in it and the writer seems to have disregarded the need that so many writers, myself included, have for historical accuracy.

### **The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas**

*The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* begins in Berlin. A young boy, Bruno, comes home from school one day to find his mother packing. They are going to move house. Soon, he finds himself in a desolate place called Out-With, where there are no other children (other than his sister) to play with. It becomes clear that his father is in charge of this place, a situation which his mother is unhappy about and which she blames on having had the Fury to dinner. Bruno no longer goes to school; instead he receives lessons at home from Herr Liszt who likes history and geography, subjects in which Bruno has little interest. Bored and frustrated with his existence, he goes for a walk one day to explore his surroundings, to find out more about the people who live beyond the fence, some of them in uniform, most of them in striped pyjamas.



Bruno walks along the fence for several miles until he sees a speck in the distance. He walks on and it becomes apparent that this is a boy. Bruno and the boy, Schmuel, become friends and tell each other about their lives. To their amazement, not only are they the same age, they share the same birthday. Through Schmuel, Bruno learns he is in Poland, a place he believes to be in Denmark. They continue to meet regularly with Bruno still not realising what is really going on, but sensible enough to know that he has to keep his meetings secret.

One day, however, Schmuel tells Bruno that his father has disappeared. Bruno decides to cross over into the camp to help his friend search for his father. Schmuel brings a pair of striped pyjamas to Bruno and Bruno goes under a loose piece of fence and into the camp, leaving his own clothes and boots behind. His head has been shaved because nits were found in his sister's hair and so he is indistinguishable from the other inmates. Within two hours he and Schmuel have been caught up in a selection and gassed. A huge search for Bruno ensues and his clothes and boots are found. Eventually his father realises what must have happened.

The novel is described as a fable and like all fables it is decidedly moralistic. It ends with the words: "Of course all this happened a long time ago and nothing like that could ever happen again. Not in this day and age" (p. 215).

*The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* has been well received. The naivety of Bruno is well depicted, so much so, that we might almost call him simple. The relationship between the two boys is touching; the ending is understated but powerful. Yet there is much about the novel that in my view is dissatisfying.

There are a number of inaccuracies about Auschwitz that are disconcerting. Auschwitz is a series of camps and the one depicted in *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*, must be Auschwitz II or Birkenau where the gas chambers were to be found. Birkenau would not have been visible from the commandant's house as this was situated near Auschwitz I. The fence surrounding the camp was electrified so even if there had been a loose piece, Bruno would have died trying to get through to the other side. Children under the age of twelve were immediately selected for gassing. It is highly unlikely that Schmuel would have survived the initial selection on arrival, and even if he had, he would not have been allowed to wander freely around the camp. There is no mention of the smells of the camp. Survivor accounts almost unfailingly mention two things that they noticed on arrival at Auschwitz: the smell of bodies burning and the mud. There is a mention of mud towards the end when Bruno takes off his shoes:

At first it felt horrible putting his bare feet into so much mud; they sank down to his ankles and every time he lifted a foot it felt worse. But then he started to rather enjoy it (p. 204).

In contrast, Piera Sonnino's description of the mud at Birkenau is deeply disturbing, not at all a substance that you would rather enjoy wallowing in:

It didn't seem like earth and water: but something organic that had decomposed, putrefied flesh that had turned liquid. And at the same time, it had a presence of its own. As if death had given birth to monstrous, vermin-like form of life, treacherous and perfidious, which grabbed us by the ankles and kept us from moving quickly as we had been ordered (p. 106).



Other aspects of the novel are puzzling. Bruno is nine years old, yet knows nothing about the war. This seems extremely improbable. By April 1940, all ten-year-old boys had to be members of the junior branch of the Hitler Youth, the *Jungvolk*. (Stargardt, p. 32) With his father a high ranking Nazi and a sister of the age to be in the *Jungmadelbund* (the junior branch of the League of German Girls) it seems impossible that Bruno would be so ignorant. This ignorance shows itself in other ways, for example, when his tutor chides him for his lack of knowledge about his country's history, about the Fatherland, Bruno muses:

He wasn't entirely sure that Father had any land, because although the house in Berlin was a large and comfortable house, there wasn't very much garden space round it. And he was old enough to know that Out-With did not belong to them, despite all the land out there (p. 98).

This is a very literal interpretation of Fatherland and seems unlikely given the propaganda that there would have been in Germany at the time. It seems to be more typical of a much younger child and it is this, along with other aspects of Bruno's character, which makes one think that he is perhaps a little delayed for his age. His mispronunciations of Auschwitz and Führer are also those of a younger child. Although these work well in English as Out-With and Fury, they don't work so well in German. There is a German word, *Furie*, but it refers to the Furies from Greek mythology. German nouns are gendered; *Furie* is feminine and would therefore have the definite article of 'die', whereas *Führer* is masculine and would be 'der'. It is therefore unlikely that Bruno would make this mistake.

Does any of this matter? If we accept the argument outlined earlier in this chapter, that attention to detail in this area is vital, then yes, it does matter. This



novel was written originally for children and may be a child's first introduction to the Holocaust. It could be argued that it is even more important to be faithful to the facts of the death camps when writing for an audience that may know nothing about the Holocaust than when writing for the more educated reader. There is also the concern that inaccuracies such as this can lend credence to Holocaust deniers.

Yet the novel is not easily dismissed from the mind. There are no graphic horrors, Boyne has barely even hinted at them and everything is left to the reader's imagination. The scene in the gas chamber is an example of this:

Schmuel may well have opened his mouth to say something back, but Bruno never heard it because at that moment there was a loud gasp from all the marchers who had filled the room, as the door at the front was suddenly closed and a loud metallic sound rang through from the outside.

Bruno raised an eyebrow, unable to understand the sense of all this, but he assumed it had something to do with keeping the rain out and stopping people from catching colds.

And then the room went very dark and somehow, despite the chaos that followed, Bruno found that he was still holding Schmuel's hand in his own and nothing in the world would have persuaded him to let it go (p. 212).

Had the novel been set in a non-specific time and place, it would have worked brilliantly as a fable, for it is a tale with a moral that is easily comprehended. In the twenty first century, as fewer survivors remain there is a danger of the younger generation forgetting the Holocaust. As noted in the Introduction, two years ago, a poll in Britain showed that 60% of young people under the age of

thirty-five did not know what Auschwitz was. It is imperative that we continue to remember the Holocaust even if we find we cannot fully understand it. Works of fiction are perhaps a way of stimulating interest in the Holocaust. This is as important for young readers as it is for adults and *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* may be such a portal. As the temporal distance from the Holocaust increases, I feel that the current concerns of many writers and critics about total historical accuracy will lessen and this novel will come to be regarded as a classic of Holocaust literature. It would be difficult to argue that we would be better off without this novel as it offers so much to help complete the puzzle that is the Holocaust. In the words of Daniel Schwartz:

Fifty years later the Holocaust lives because the Nazis genocidal efforts to erase all traces of a people and to deprive Jews of their private selves have been flouted by word and image (p. 23).

Fictional accounts may not fully explain the Holocaust but they do help to explain what happened.

Although I admire *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* a great deal, my own work in *Yesterday's Shadow* aims to be more historically accurate than Boyne's. Details were checked against both historical accounts and survivors' testimonies. These are discussed earlier in Chapter Three. However, for some time, one detail continued to trouble me; the sexual assault on Anna when she was being transported to Auschwitz. At one point I deleted this scene, as I could not find any account of prisoners being allowed out of the cattle trucks during the transport. However, Piera Sonnino's memoir has just such a description:

On the third day the train stops. We hear a chorus of cries coming from the men's car. 'Water! Water!' A German guard slides open the door of our car and indicates to some of us to get out. My ankle hurts badly, but I can't resist and I, too, get out. We find ourselves in the middle of a plain beneath a leaden sky. Gusts of freezing winds hit us. A small abandoned house and, nearby, a fountain. The men continue to cry 'Water! Water!' We fill the few containers we have with us – some cans and a tin cup – and turn to the guards. We ask if we can give water to our relatives, our brothers. The guards say yes, as long as we hurry. (p. 95).

If I had not found testimony to support the assault scene on Anna, to show that it was possible for prisoners to be let out of the cattle trucks for even a short time, I would have deleted the scene. While I respect that other writers may choose to be more flexible with historical details to the extent of ignoring them, I found that I felt a responsibility to the victims of the Holocaust to be as truthful as I could.



## Conclusion

I set out to try to describe the process of writing a work of fiction, to examine the various factors that have to be taken into account: the ideas, the research and the writing process. Willa Cather stated that writers get their basic material before they are fifteen and I believe that this is at least partly true in my case. Although the Second World War ended ten years before I was born, its shadowy presence was there throughout my childhood. It was there in the nightmares that disturbed my father's sleep, nightmares that originated in his experiences of being torpedoed. It was there in the flickering television set with its films and documentaries that sometimes included skeletal figures whose agonized faces haunted me. It was there in my school library when I picked up *The Diary of Anne Frank* for the first time and thrilled in the voice of this young girl who thought like me, who could be me and yet came from a different age and culture. The world that surrounded me in my formative years has led to themes that are present not just in *Yesterday's Shadow* but in other pieces I have written: inequalities in relationships, the atrocities carried out in World War Two, the cold war; they are all present and I doubt I will ever be entirely free of them. Nor would I want to be.

Doris Lessing described the writing process as the 'creative dark'. Undoubtedly the process will be different for every writer, some will spend years doing research, some will use their imagination. Some will only write about a place they have visited, others will trawl the internet looking for descriptions of far off places to save them getting on a plane. Some will spend hours formulating the perfect sentence which once written down will remain forever unchanged.

Others will write a whole novel in a few weeks then draft and redraft in a literary equivalent of sculpting their creation from a rough piece of marble or wood.

Every writer will have his or her own issues to deal with. In my case I needed to deal with several concerns that arose during the writing of *Yesterday's Shadow*. The first of these was how we remember trauma. I wanted Ewa's memories to be psychologically consistent. The evidence from psychological research suggests that there are various involuntary ways in which trauma is remembered, such as flashbacks and psychophysiologic reactions. These were incorporated into Ewa's story. In addition, research into how Holocaust survivors remember their trauma suggests that they have very vivid memories long after the event and that when they recall events they do so in a narrative fashion. This was relevant for the way in which Ewa told her story to Hannah. The story is told to Hannah as a straightforward narrative though how Ewa remembers it can at times be different from this.

There was also the matter of women's experiences of the Holocaust. Fewer accounts by women survivors exist and the question of why this should be so was addressed, leading to the conclusion that women's biology not only had a significant effect on how they experienced the Holocaust but also to their chances of survival. Pregnant women or women holding a young child would be immediately sent to the gas chambers. For those who did survive this initial selection it seemed that the need to bond and make a 'family' group was vital. Several survivor narratives suggested that women had more resources at their disposal than men because of cultural expectations of women. They were able to mend clothes, help each other in ways, which were not so familiar to men. This is not to say that men did not also stress the importance of forging bonds within the



camps. The importance of the women making these strong 'family' ties is echoed in *Yesterday's Shadow* with Ewa, Karla and Anna joining up with Sara and Luisa to make a family. The deaths of Sara and Luisa almost cause the breakup of the 'family' but it is reunited with the birth of Sarah/Hannah.

Throughout the process of writing *Yesterday's Shadow*, the ethics of writing about the Holocaust was ever present. Attitudes to this have moved from initial reactions that the most appropriate response is one of silence, to an acceptance of testimonial accounts through to a feeling that literary representations can be acceptable providing they are sensitively written. There is a resonance of this argument in Ewa's story. For many years Ewa is silent, unable to speak of her anguish. Many survivors describe a reaction like this, in particular the feeling that words are not up to the task of describing what they have experienced. After a breakdown, Ewa finally manages to speak about what happened to her, both the death of her son, Tomasz, and her experience of Auschwitz. The betrayal of her therapist, who rather than help her, judges the accidental suffocation of Tomasz as a deliberate act means that she is silenced once more. Over the ensuing years she manages to occasionally write about her feelings but only when she is very old and facing death does she find the strength to tell Hannah the truth about her background. This is equivalent to a testimonial account. The need for accuracy that so many writers feel was one that I instinctively felt even before I read anything about the ethics. As time passes, writers may feel that there is not as much need to be accurate but at the moment with the shadow of Holocaust deniers still with us and fascism once again on the rise in Europe, it would seem that many believe in the necessity of being as precise as possible.



## **Appendix 1**

### **Case study of Anna taken from Bettelheim, *The Empty Fortress*, pp. 374-378**

Some of Anna's behaviour has already been described. She entered the Orthogenic School at the age of about ten, but for years, before then, her wild uncontrollable behaviour made things unbearable for her family. Her brother, considerably younger than she, had been in constant danger for his life and had to be guarded at all times. Neighbours had had to call for police protection because Anna's violence endangered their children.

Before she came to us, several efforts at placing her in treatment institutions had failed. For example, in one well-known institution for disturbed children she lasted barely half a day, for in those few hours she managed to throw the institution into so much turmoil she could not be kept. Even in a psychiatric hospital she could only remain a month because it too, was not equipped to handle such a wild child. There she had to be placed in a maximum-security room, that is, a room without any furniture, where she spent her time naked because she tore off any clothes that were put on her. Most of the time she crouched in a corner in total withdrawal; from this she emerged for short periods of wild screaming, running, jumping and pounding on walls and door. Since her behaviour made it impossible to keep her in the children's ward, the hospital was forced to place her in the adult maximum-security quarters; it was felt that such an arrangement was too unsuitable to be continued.

Anna's life began in a dugout under a farmer's house in Poland, where her Jewish parents were in hiding to escape extermination by the Germans. Her parents were ill-mated. The mother found the father utterly unattractive and had rejected his courtship for years. Both parents felt they were of opposite

temperaments and background. By the time World War II broke out the father had given up hope of winning the mother, but the invasion of Poland suddenly changed things.

Foreseeing what would happen once Germany had occupied Poland, the father collected a large amount of wool and made arrangements with a gentile peasant friend to staple it in a dugout under his farmhouse, together with a loom. When the Germans began to exterminate all Jews, Anna's father took permanent refuge in his small earthen cellar. But first he tried to persuade the woman he loved to join him. This proposal she again firmly rejected. She had no use for him, she said, and would sooner be killed by the Germans than be his wife.

Soon things worsened and most of her family was killed. The father, who could no longer leave his hiding place, sent word to her again through his peasant friend, asking her to join him. By this time she was homeless and alone. So very much against her will, she took refuge with the father, since he alone could offer her safety in his hole under the ground. There, his friend was willing to let both of them hide out. Her condition for accepting was that they would have no sexual relations.

The father managed to support both himself and her, and in part also the peasant who hid them during the whole of the German occupation, by weaving in his underground hole. The peasant sold the sweaters that were woven, and by spending what he got for them (clothing being at a premium) he and the couple in hiding were able to live. But the dugout was so small there was not enough space for the parents to so much as stretch out at night unless the loom was taken down. Only then could they bed themselves down for the night, using the wool for both cover and bed. So every night the loom was taken apart, and every

morning it was reassembled. Several times the Germans searched the farmhouse but never stumbled on the two in their cellar; it was secured by a trapdoor covered with stamped earth, like the rest of the floor in the farmhouse. At least once (or according to other stories they told us, several times) the Germans shot into the farmhouse.

With the passing of time, life under these conditions became ever more difficult, the two being forced on to each other without respite. Nevertheless, Anna's mother refused her body to her husband for more than a year. She rejected him because physically he repelled her and both culturally and socially she felt him beneath her. According to the father's account he respected her wishes and did not force himself upon her, though embittered by her continued refusal.

About what then happened, the parents' stories differ. According to the father, they had to tremble for their lives every day, but he at least had his work to keep him going, while his wife was beginning to lose the will to live. In desperation he decided that if she had a child, it would restore her interest in living and might even make her accept him. So he convinced her to have a child, and she agreed to have sex relations for this purpose alone. These were the circumstances in which his wife became pregnant.

According to the mother, the father had never ceased his sexual pursuit. After a year of this, he was no longer willing or able to stand the presence of a woman whom he wanted so much and who rejected him, so he threatened to drive her out of their refuge. Either she slept with him as his wife, or she had to leave – which was tantamount to a death warrant. Under such duress she gave in.



As one can imagine, both before and after Anna was born, there were many fights – the mother screaming how she hated him, couldn't be his wife, had no use for him, and he fighting back in bitterness. To make matters worse, the peasant feared for his life if they should be heard, and threatened to kick them both out unless they remained absolutely still and kept their peace. So life proceeded, the two hating each other and yet thrown together by the unrelenting danger they shared. Only on rare nights did they dare to venture outside their hole for exercise or air.

When Anna, the child of this relation, was born, she did occupy the mother and give her some interest in life, but it made living still more difficult in their narrow confinement. When Anna tried to cry, as infants do, one of the parents had to hold a hand over her mouth since any noise, particularly a baby's crying, would have given them away. The peasant, who had reason to fear for his life if it were learned he was harbouring Jews, became more and more fearful and angry when the infant made any noise or otherwise complicated matters. So the parents and the farmer, each afraid of the Germans, did their best to see that Anna was totally still at all times, and as little bother as possible in all other respects.

As long as the mother could nurse Anna, the infant had at least enough food. But her milk gave out before Anna was a year and a half old. Then all the parents could feed her were raw vegetables, or such like, since they could not cook in the dugout. Only in 1945, when the Russian occupation replaced that of the Germans, did things improve a bit. But by that time Anna was unmanageable. She would run about nightly, jump up and down and scream, sometimes for hours, sometimes all night. She never fell asleep before two or three in the

morning. When she was not screaming or being violent, she was doing nothing, “thinking, thinking, sitting by herself and thinking her own life.”

Things were finally a bit better when the parents managed to reach Germany and entered a DP camp. But once in Germany and relative freedom, the mother took a lover. When her husband learned of it he was beside himself, and new and violent fighting broke out. The mother wanted to leave her husband once and for all, taking Anna with her, but her lover did not want the child. So Anna stood in the way. Then the mother was ready to give up the child and start a new life, but was not ready to let the father have Anna. So she suggested that her own mother should care for Anna. This the father refused to agree to; he wished to emigrate to the United States where he had relatives, and to take Anna along.

During the years in Germany, the parents frequently considered divorce, but at the last moment the father could never accept it. He was too afraid that the mother would get custody of the child and felt she had no more use for Anna than for him. This period was characterised by violent outbursts in front of Anna. As the father said of his wife: “I so often gave my life for her and she only betrayed me.”

Long before Anna came to this country, and before her brother was born, she was examined by an American physician in one of the German DP camps and immediately recognised as an autistic child who needed to be placed in a treatment institution. Since we are here concerned with what the background of so-called feral children may have been, and since Anna was recognised as both wild and autistic when she was five or six years of age, nothing more needs to be said here of her later life.



## **Appendix 2**

### **Synopsis of Yesterday's Shadow: First draft**

*Yesterday's Shadow* explores the repercussions of the Holocaust in the lives of three women.

Part 1 is set in the cellar of a Polish farmhouse where Ewa, a young Polish woman is in hiding from the Germans with her family. During a search of the cellar, Ewa accidentally kills her older son. The family are later captured and sent to Auschwitz.

Part 2 starts at this point but is from the point of view of Anna, an 18 year old girl. Anna and Ewa become friends and together with three other women form a 'family' whose support is essential to their survival. Anna is raped by a Nazi soldier and gives birth to a baby girl. Part 2 ends with Anna's death on the Death March from Auschwitz.

Part 3 is set in the present and alternates between the points of view of Ewa, now in her eighties, and her daughter Hannah. They have a difficult relationship. Ewa's mind is beginning to wander and she lets slip names from her past. This intrigues Hannah; she knows little about her mother's history. She finds a journal, which mentions Marek, Tomasz and Piotr and makes her mother tell her who they are. Ewa tells her about hiding in the cellar and the death of her son. She is unable to tell Hannah the truth about who she is and leaves a letter in which she reveals that Hannah is actually the daughter of Anna. Hannah is devastated by the discovery that she was conceived as the result of a brutal rape. She visits Auschwitz to try to understand what Ewa and her birth mother endured. In doing so, she comes to terms with who and what she is.



### **Appendix 3: Synopsis of Yesterday's Shadow (final version)**

Hannah, a child psychiatrist in her late fifties, is torn apart by her responsibilities: work, an elderly mother, three sons, four grandchildren.

Her mother Ewa, Polish by birth, lives in an old people's home. Her mind is wandering. Who is the Thomas she keeps asking to see? Why does she get so upset when her grandson, Ben, jokingly speaks to her in German? But when Hannah confronts Ewa she refuses to speak about it. Desperate to know the truth, Hannah reads through an old diary of Ewa's. There she discovers that Ewa was once married to a man called Marek and that they had two sons, Tomasz and Piotr.

Ewa reluctantly tells her about her past. Marek fought in the resistance during the occupation. They went into hiding in the cellar of her sister-in-law's farmhouse. During a German raid, the terrified Ewa accidentally suffocated Tomasz. From Ewa's description, it is clear Tomasz was autistic.

Hannah thinks one of her grandchildren is autistic. Not long after his death, the farmhouse was searched again, the family captured and taken to Auschwitz. In flashbacks some of what happened to Ewa there is revealed: she is separated from Marek and Piotr, attacked by a soldier and miscarries as a result. A young woman, Anna, befriends her.

Hannah finds these revelations difficult to cope with. Rather than discuss them further with her mother, she immerses herself in her work. She is writing a chapter for a book on the history of autism. This is about the 'refrigerator mother', an outdated concept blaming parents for their children's autism. It was

believed that autistic children withdrew into themselves because their parents did not love them and indeed wished they were dead.

Meanwhile, Ewa is sinking more and more into the past; she remembers incidents from Auschwitz: how Anna was raped by a soldier, how two Italian Jewish girls they befriended were beaten and left to die in the snow. She longs to tell Hannah her one remaining secret but Hannah is careful not to be alone with Ewa. Ewa realises that she may never have the opportunity to tell Hannah her secret face to face so she writes it down. She dies that night. After the funeral, Hannah collects her mother's belongings and finds the letter from her mother. In it, Ewa reveals that Anna became pregnant as a result of the rape. She had the baby in Auschwitz just before liberation. A few days later, she was killed on the death march and Ewa rescued the baby. The baby was Hannah.

Hannah has a breakdown; she cannot cope with the revelation that her father was a rapist and worries about the implications for her sons. With the support of her family she recovers and decides she has to visit Auschwitz to try to reconcile herself to her heritage. But her grandchild, Gabriella is being assessed for autism and she wants to be at home to support her family. Gabriella receives a diagnosis of autism but Sam's calm acceptance of the fact and love for his daughter reassures Hannah.

Just before leaving for Poland she discovers a psychiatrist's report on Ewa in which he claims that in suffocating Tomasz, she was acting out her unconscious wish for his death. He categorised her as a refrigerator mother. Hannah is saddened by the fact that she could have reassured Ewa that Tomasz' autism was not her fault.

In Poland, she visits Auschwitz. Her husband has traced Anna's surviving brother, Stefan and they meet. The novel ends with Hannah retracing the death march from Auschwitz. This brings her closer to both Anna and Ewa. Both women loved her and she is profoundly grateful for this fact.



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