**We the Third: Personal Journeys of Third Generation Holocaust Survivor Poets**

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**The Zero Point of the Holocaust**In the seminal poem “The Vow” (1943), composed in the Land of Israel while European Jewry was being ravaged by the Holocaust, the poet Avraham Shlonsky bids us “to remember – and nothing forget.” This behest in its later reiteration, “remember and never forget,” is still instructive to this day of how the State of Israel and Israeli society shape the personal and national memory of the Holocaust. However, 75 years after the end of World War II, Israeli society is also still struggling with the questions: What should we remember, and how? What should we forget, and why? After all, remembrance and forgetting – both on the personal and the collective fronts – represent two opposing forces, both of which are essential to our continued existence.

The concept of “second generation survivors,” referring to the trauma transferred by Holocaust survivors to their children, began to be developed and gain prominence in the 1980s. This transfer was principally, and paradoxically, characterized by the culture of silence created around the subject of the Holocaust. In response to their parents’ silence, second generation survivors, as they became adults, turned to literature, poetry, music, film, and theater as a means to express their childhood experience, growing up in the shadow of parents dealing with post-traumatic stress. Today, the cultural discourse around the Holocaust includes not only the second, but also the third generation, the grandchildren of survivors. Not only that, but Israeli contemporaries of these grandchildren, who have no direct biological connection to Holocaust survivors themselves, but who have sociologically inherited the memory of the Holocaust through the education system, organized trips to Poland, and Holocaust-related content in Israeli media and politics, also directly participate in this discourse.

However, as point zero retreats further and further into the past, the creative output of third generation survivors begins to take on more varied shapes and facets, ranging from collective-national to personal-private memory, and from the documentary to the imaginative. And as the memorialization of the Holocaust continues to move in this direction, we begin to ask ourselves more pointed questions, such as: How much space does the Holocaust take up in the lives and artistic works of third generation survivors? What does the Holocaust mean to them? And how did the education system, the expeditions to Poland, and cultural creation in Israel shape their Holocaust memory and even their adult identities?

As two adult poets and third-generation survivors in the fourth and fifth decades of our lives, who have already become parents to the next generation of survivors, the present essay seeks to outline the place and role of the Holocaust in our lives and work. Namely, we wish to explore why we choose to write about the Holocaust, how we go about it, and how present the Holocaust is in our work and in our lives. Despite the fact that self-documentation and self-reflection are both common in postmodern writing – their goal being to overcome the basic assumptions of the self, to understand them, and to share them with one’s environment – it is clear to us that such an attempt cannot withstand the test of generalization; this essay therefore constitutes only an open-ended invitation to a discussion of this phenomenon.

The poems included here were written by us after visiting the death camps in Poland, individually and on different occasions. These visits served as creative triggers for each of us, even though the Holocaust was already ever-present: at home, in conversations with our grandparents and parents, and in the world at large. Something in our encounters with Polish soil ignited the need for each of us to write, as well as the need to decipher that writing, to speak about it, to understand its origins, and to make it a point of discussion. Poets are rarely required to explain themselves. Nevertheless, in this case, we would argue that the discourse about this work is just as important as the work itself.

**The metaphor of the “empty chair”**

The seventy cast-iron and bronze chairs scattered around the Plac Bohaterów Getta in Krakow, Poland, a memorial known as the “Square of Chairs,”[[1]](#footnote-1) constitute a monument intended to emphasize what has been left behind by those who are no longer there. The memorial, situated on the very square where the Jews of Krakow’s ghetto were rounded up to be shipped off to the camps, not only symbolizes the fact that the people who left this place are no longer among us and will never return, but also that what the victims left behind is nothing but hollow symbols, empty of meaning. The “empty chair” belongs to those who have vanished from sight, but whose memory is meant to remain etched upon the collective Polish (and some would say German) consciousness until the end of time.[[2]](#footnote-2)

A similar artistic statement was made by the creators of the “Shoes on the Danube Bank” memorial (Cipők a Duna Parton) in Budapest.[[3]](#footnote-3) This composition consists of a multitude of cast iron shoes in different sizes and styles, each one different from the rest, placed right on edge of the embankment on the Pest side of the city. They are likewise testaments to lives that were there one moment and gone the next, lives that were cut short in an instant in a horrendous act of hatred and cruelty. Just like the empty, abandoned chairs, this “empty shoe” represents those who went missing and are still missing from the city; their presence, however, is preserved in the collective Hungarian memory as an eternal and painful reminder thanks to its signifier – the memorial.

These two minimalist memorials guide the onlooker to remember the Holocaust through the small and homely details of daily life – the chair and the shoe – but also, and more importantly, through emptiness and absence. The memorials affect the viewer via their imagination, inviting them to fill in the gaps by way of deduction. They create the contour of a body no longer there, reminding one of matter that has gone from this world. Moreover, the material composition of these objects, cast out of metal, makes them cold, hard, alien even. This not only calls attention, by contrast, to the absent, warm human bodies, but also brings to mind a kind of anti-matter and anti-volume that take the place of matter and volume through the transformative process of annihilation.

Another example of anti-matter and the employment of empty space as a metaphor for the awareness of loss can be found in the “Empty Library” exhibit in Bebelplatz, Berlin.[[4]](#footnote-4) This exhibit is located in the square where the Great Jewish Book Burning took place on Kristallnacht, and memorializes the traumatic event in the form of an empty room situated underneath the square, where empty library shelves await the return of books that no longer exist. The display depicts the absence of matter, even though books are symbols of the human spirit, and it too creates a contour of the missing subject, which illustrates its existence by way of its absence.[[5]](#footnote-5)

The three monuments we have mentioned – the empty chair, the abandoned shoe, and the empty library – are situated in the heart of bustling urban spaces, in city centers, places millions of people, both locals and tourists, pass through every day. These exhibits fit into the urban landscape so seamlessly that they risk locals reacting to them with indifference or even disregard. Their locations are very different from the concentration and extermination camps established in the countryside, in remote areas intentionally removed from population centers, even though today there are more and more modern roads, shopping centers, and luxury high-rises popping up around them, the whole playing a central role in Holocaust tourism over recent decades.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Unlike the abovementioned memorials, which exert a metaphorical power on the viewer, the concentration and extermination camps found on Polish soil provide the visitor with a tangible, “authentic” experience of the Nazi extermination machine, in the form of barbed wire fences, barracks, bunk beds, gas chambers, and incinerators. Visiting these camps can be likened to going through a time tunnel into a frozen bubble containing a piece of the past: everything looks as if it has just now come to a standstill. The visitor can see the complete process of annihilation, which appears to have been only interrupted, potentially to resume at any moment. The power of the former, on the other hand, is in their minimalism, in their ability to shed light, through small, marginal, even negligible details, on the biggest crime ever perpetrated by humanity against an ethnic group. Even more important, however, is their ability to indicate the difference between remembering in the sense of going back to the past, and remembering in the sense of moving forward.

The chair, the shoe, and the library are all images that symbolize the great and unimaginable event that was the Holocaust. The chair represents the material; the shoe, the physiological body; and the library, the spiritual and cultural heritage lost in the great cataclysm. Collectively and individually, these memorials seek to shape a consciousness of absence. They are metaphors created by plastic artists to deal with the issue of memory, recall, and remembrance,[[7]](#footnote-7) but they also raise the issue of forgetting, which is an integral part of the mechanism of human memory.

Is it possible that a something similar to the metaphorical model presented by the creators of the “empty” memorials can explain the processes we ourselves undergo? Because the shreds of memory that have been handed down to us as third generation survivors are partial, obstructed, censored, or fictionalized, for all sorts of reasons, is it fair to say that what remains is a deep absence – an absence we are compelled to try and fill through poetry?

The absence, the gap, and the lack are, to our minds, the cornerstones of our work when it comes to the subject of the Holocaust in particular, but also more broadly. Furthermore, these lacks, gaps, and absences do not prevent us from writing. They are not a barrier; on the contrary, they drive us to look for ways to express the gaps and perhaps to fill them in. Through poetry, we first and foremost seek to understand ourselves, to describe the motives and processes informed by our third generation survivor experience, here and now, and by the attempts of our generation, which was born in this country, to grapple with the Holocaust memories of our grandparents and by the ways in which belonging to the third generation of survivors has shaped our identity as human beings and as writers.

**Writing poetry as a way of taking responsibility**

In reference to the concept of testimony, Shoshana Felman writes that “to testify is thus not only to narrate but to commit oneself, and to commit the narrative, to others: to *take responsibility* – in speech – for history or for the truth of an occurrence, for something which, by definition, goes beyond the personal, in having general (nonpersonal) validity and consequences.”[[8]](#footnote-8)

To take up Felman’s statement, the claim we would like to develop here is that even though the poetry we write is not testimony in the literal sense of the word, it does first and foremost seek to go back, to tell the human story and to commit the essential truth of events to writing, thereby transferring them from the realm of the personal to that of the general or collective. Such poetry does indeed take responsibility for memory, but it also strives to examine the role of memory and how it can serve as a basis for shaping better, kinder people, who are more aware of and more sensitive to others and society at large. Writing about the Holocaust, for our generation, while constituting a locus for the commemoration of the personal-familial-individual, is also a statement about the presence of the Holocaust in our world today. Furthermore, since our poetry is intended to reach a readership and to participate in public discourse, the fact that we are dealing with the Holocaust in our work indicates that we have taken on a role in the world. It is not only a private role, but instead a universal one that seeks to make a broader social statement and looks to the future rather than just the present. Our poetry seeks to interpret and even fill in some of the voids and blanks still left gaping since the Second World War, and to serve, perhaps, as an antidote to the memorial trips (youth expeditions to Poland, the March of Life, “Witnesses in Uniform” trips organized by the IDF, etc.) in which Israelis return to touch the past and its atrocities and become witnesses again, even though the Holocaust ended some 75 years ago.

Our lives today are informed by two kinds of Holocaust memories. On the one hand, we have the private-familial memory, generated by contact with survivors within our own limited circles, namely our biological grandparents and family members of their generation, as well as our parents and relatives who are second generation survivors. On the other hand, there is the collective-social memory created by Holocaust discourse in Israeli society, in the media, and in politics. This collective memory is also shaped by exposure to historical research, to works of art (music, theater, cinema, literature) and institutional content (educational curricula, school trips, ceremonies, trips to Poland, army classes, roots projects, etc.). Collective memory may even prove more powerful and influential than private-familial memory in shaping our experience of the Holocaust, since most of our grandparents have long since passed away. As third generation survivors, we are parents to children who are at this very moment themselves becoming aware of their national history and internalizing collective memory. In parenthesis, let us note that our fourth generation survivor children, even more than us, are exposed to a Holocaust experience that is almost exclusively second-hand, since the number of Holocaust survivors still living among us is dwindling. In turn, their children, our grandchildren, the fifth generation of survivors, will naturally be even further removed from the source.

As members of the third generation, the biological grandchildren of Holocaust survivors, we did not, of course, witness the historical event known as the Holocaust. Not only that, but we were also lucky enough not to experience the post-traumatic symptoms of the survivors with whom our second-generation parents grew up. At most, we are witnesses to our grandparents’ private life stories, even if these are stories made up of fragments, fundamentally mangled tales. Thus, our third generation journey through our grandparents’ Holocaust memories is a journey across a multitude of fog screens. Their is a story transmitted to us mostly orally, rather than in writing, and told to us over and over again at different ages, in different words, in different ways, by grandparents, parents, and other family members. In fact, when all is said and done, it can really only be considered a kind of “second hand” or even “third hand” testimony. Those who told us their stories felt the need to speak and found in us a willing audience, but at the same time, we can assume that they also wanted to protect us from the full horror of the truth. The Holocaust was both told to us and withheld from us. That which was told we have kept with us, that which was not we have pieced together ourselves through other means. In this sense, our art is also a means of seeking completion.

As a result, we are left dealing with the paradox of trying to remember and preserve the past based on the memories of our predecessors. This situation is not entirely bleak, since this is how both private and societal or national myths are established. In fact, some of the most traumatic events in the history of the Jewish People, which took place in ancient and medieval times, have shaped our collective memory in exactly the same way: for example, the destruction of the First Temple, the destruction of the Second Temple, the expulsion of the Jews from Spain, the 1948 riots, etc. The mythical dimensions of all these memorialized events grow in proportion to their distance from the present.

**Third generation survivors’ poetry as an invitation to a journey**

Memory has two faces, one positive and one negative. On the one hand, it helps define identity and socio-cultural belonging. It even contributes to the constitution of identity and its preservation. In this sense, one can say that memory is personally and collectively constructive. On the other hand, memory can also threaten the integrity of identity, destabilize it in irreversible ways, be painful, debilitating, devastating, and destructive. That is why forgetting, as a balance to the effects of memory, can be a positive and welcome phenomenon in some contexts. This dual system of memory and forgetting, which creates an equilibrium of forces, can be found represented already in Greek mythology, in the image of Lethe, the river of oblivion, and Mnemosina, the river of memory, flowing side by side in the realm of Hades. However, beyond their existence as natural, physiological mechanisms, memory and forgetting – and indeed memorialization and obliteration of memory as well – are subject to personal and public forces.[[9]](#footnote-9)

Anne Whitehead argues for the importance of the “art of memory,” alongside “the art of forgetting,” specifically in the context of war and global events. Whitehead claims that the profusion of memorial museums and monuments in the public sphere, as well as the increased incidence of public, institutional apologies, confessions, and admissions of guilt, are means of transferring the responsibility for memory into the public arena, thereby removing private individuals’ responsibility to remember.[[10]](#footnote-10) This raises the question: What is the role of the individual, as part of the collective, in remembering and memorializing history, and what is each individual’s responsibility in the process of constructing the memory of the collective past? Whitehead maintains that the transfer of responsibility from the individual to the public creates links between forgetting and forgiveness. Jacques Derrida and Paul Ricœur likewise wrote a great deal about the questions of memory, forgetting, and individual versus collective history, as well as the relationship between forgetting, responsibility, and forgiveness, including the paradoxical nature of forgiveness which is often immoral in and of itself.[[11]](#footnote-11)

Is it possible, following this line of reasoning, to claim that we, as third generation survivors who write about the Holocaust, refuse to forgive? That our insistence on preserving fragments of memory in our poetry expresses a resistance to the natural process of time? Have we taken on a personal responsibility not to let our familial and/or national past fade away? Or has our grandparents’ post-traumatic stress been passed down to us as well? According to Yolanda Gampel’s writings about the intergenerational transference of trauma, the latter is very much a possibility.[[12]](#footnote-12) However, we believe that our writing about the Holocaust turns, in large part, toward the future and not just the past.

The world we live in as third generation survivors is very different from that of the second generation. We go on “heritage” trips in the hopes of finding our roots, but due to the distance of time, we find almost no remnants that could verify the stories we heard told in our childhood. We accompany our children through the “indoctrination chain” of the Israeli educational system’s Holocaust curriculum, but are able to stand back and observe the process with sober and critical eyes. We no longer shy away from buying German-made cars or appliances, considering relocating to Berlin, or flying over to Warsaw for a bit of pre-Christmas shopping at the mall. We follow Eva.Stories on Instagram, search for our family origins on JewishGen.org, and, as members of the global village, have routine, normalized relations with colleagues from all over Europe, including the ex-Soviet countries whose lands had once served for the establishment of extermination camps. Our generation has broken many taboos relative to our parents, the second generation of survivors, and so the Holocaust is absent-present in our lives differently from the way it was present in our parents’ lives.

Our poetry is therefore an invitation to a journey. It is not a journey of concrete, material displacement, but a voyage of mind: out of our own private experience into the great myth of the Holocaust, and from there, onward to the present and the future.

1. Conceived by the architects Piotr Lewicki and Kazimierz Łatak and erected in 2005. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. This piece is also in dialog with a less famous composition, the empty chair memorial at the Leipzig Synagogue, consisting of 140 bronze chairs lined up in narrow rows inside the rectangular space once occupied by the synagogue incinerated during Kristallnacht. The memorial was created by Anna Sebastian and Helm Dilengite in 1998, symbolizing the wait for the worshippers, as if they are about to return to the synagogue and take up their usual places at any moment. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Geyula Pauer and Can Togav, 2006. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The work of Israeli sculptor Micha Ullman, 1995. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. A similar logic is reflected in the design of the 9/11 Memorial in Manhattan, inaugurated in 2011 and planned by the Peter Walker architectural firm in collaboration with the Israeli architect Michael Arad. The memorial is composed of two square pits lined with black granite, whose perimeters mark where the two World Trade Center towers once stood. The pits, entitled “the footprints of the Twin Towers,” symbolize the dialectic between absence and presence in the space. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. In this context, we would be remiss not to mention two articles by the architect and cultural critic Tali Hatuka about embedding memory into the urban space. Hatuka claims that memorial sites located in city centers fill the space with absence. See Tali Hatuka, “On Memory and Poetics in the Town Square,” 16 March 2016 [https://urbanologia.tau.ac.il/%D7%A2%D7%9C-%D7%96%D7%99%D7%9B%D7%A8%D7%95%D7%9F-%D7%95%D7%A4%D7%95%D7%90%D7%98%D7%99%D7%A7%D7%94-%D7%91%D7%9B%D7%99%D7%9B%D7%A8-%D7%94%D7%A2%D7%99%D7%A8/](about:blank) [accessed 27 February 2020] [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. See also the “Twelve Empty Chairs” monument to the memory of the Shayetet 13 soldiers who lost their lives during the Ansariya ambush in Lebanon on September 5, 1987. This underwater memorial is located near Shavei Zion beach. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Shoshana Felman, “In an Era of Testimony: Claude Lanzmann's ‘Shoah,’” *Yale French Studies*, no. 79, 1991, pp. 39–40. Emphasis in the original. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. For a thorough overview, to name one among many, see Tamar Ketko, *Separating Memories from Stones: The Ethics of Retelling the Holocaust*, Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuhad, 2010 [Hebrew], pp. 54–79. For an overview rooted in a Jewish point of view, see Yehuda Ben-Dor, “Memories, Worldviews and Identities,” in Yotam Benziman (ed.), *Memory Games: Conceptions of Time and Memory in Jewish Culture*, Jerusalem and Tel Aviv: Van Leer Institute and Hakibbutz Hameuhad, 2008 [Hebrew], pp. 29–50. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Anne Whitehead, *Memory*, London and New York: Routledge 2009, p. 153. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Jaques Derrida, *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness*, trans. Mark Dooley and Michael Hughes, London and New York: Routledge, 2001; Paul Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, trans. Kathleen Blamery and David Pellauer, Chicago and London: Chicago University Press, 2004. See also Yotam Benziman, “Memory, Forgetting and Forgiveness,” in Yotam Benziman (ed.), *Memory Games: Conceptions of Time and Memory in Jewish Culture*, Jerusalem and Tel Aviv: Van Leer Institute and Hakibbutz Hameuhad, 2008 [Hebrew], pp. 163–189. Benziman also analyzes the concept of the “unforgiveable” in the context of the Holocaust. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Yolanda Gampel, *The Parents Who Live Through Me*, Jerusalem: Keter, 2010 [Hebrew]. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)