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

Vered Tohar and Adi Wolfson

**Introduction**

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 in the way the State of Israel and Israeli society shape our 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 question: what should we remember, and how? As well as: 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 develop and come into use 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 the 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, so 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 it 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 the cultural creation in Israel shape their Holocaust memory and even their identity as adult human beings?

In this present essay, we seek to outline the place and role of the Holocaust in our lives and art as two adult poets and third-generation survivors dealing with and writing about the Holocaust in the fourth and fifth decades of our lives, having ourselves already become parents to the next generation of survivors. 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 our lives. Having said that, even though self-documentation and self-reflection are both common acts 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, and this essay therefore constitutes but an open-ended invitation to a discussion of the phenomenon.

The poems included herein 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 had always been there, at home, in conversation with our grandparents 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 the writing, to speak about it, to understand its origins, 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 the work is just as important as the work itself.

**1. 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 is 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, represents not only the fact that the people who had left this place are no longer among us and will never return, but also that what is left behind the victims is nothing but hollow symbols of lost meaning. The “empty chair” is the chair of those who had vanished out of 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, each different from the rest, dozens of shoes in different sizes and styles, placed right on edge of the embankment on the Pest side of the city. These are likewise testaments to lives that were there one moment and gone the next, lives that were instantly cut short in a horrendous act of hatred and cruelty. Just like the empty, abandoned chair, the “empty shoe” represents those who had gone missing and who are still missing from the city, whose 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 most importantly, through emptiness and absence. The memorial affects the viewer via their imagination, inviting them to fill in the gaps by way of deduction. It creates the contour of a body no longer there; it reminds one of matter that has gone from this world. Moreover, the material composition of these objects, being cast out of metal, makes them cold, hard, alien even, not only in order to call attention, by contrast, to the warm human bodies that are now missing from them, but as 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, the subject that 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 where millions of people pass through every day, both locals and tourists. These exhibits fit into the urban landscape so seamlessly as to create the risk of indifference or even disregard toward them on behalf of the locals. Their locations are very different from those of the concentration and extermination camps that had been set up 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 memorial monuments, 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 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 come to a standstill and the visitor gets to see the complete process of annihilation that appears to have been interrupted in the middle and can therefore potentially 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 demarcate 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 symbolic of 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 lack. These 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.

Yet, is it possible to use a similar model to the metaphorical one presented by the creators of the “empty” memorials to explain the processes we ourselves undergo? Is it fair to say that, 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, what remains is a deep lack – a lack we are compelled to try and make for through poetry?

The lack, the gap and the absence are, to our minds, the cornerstones of our work, when it comes to the subject of the Holocaust in particular, but also generally speaking. Furthermore, the lack, the gap and the absence do not prevent us from writing, which means that they are not a barrier; on the contrary, they drive us to look for ways of expressing the gaps and perhaps filling them in. Through poetry, we first and foremost seek to understand ourselves, to describe the writing motives and processes informed by our third generation survivor experience, here and now, 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.

**2. 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 pick up on 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 participates 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 just a private role, but a universal one, which has a broader social statement to make, 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 that war, and to perhaps serve as an antidote to the memorial voyages (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 roughly 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 limited circle, 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, expeditions 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 undergoing the process of becoming aware of their national history and internalizing collective memory. In parenthesis, let us note that our fourth generation survivor children, even more so 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 had grown up. At most, we are witnesses of our grandparents' private life stories, even if these are stories made up of fragments, fundamentally mangled tales. Thus, our third generation journey to our grandparents' Holocaust memories is a journey across a multitude of fog screens. Theirs 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 a willing audience in us, 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’ve kept with us, that which wasn’t, we’ve pieced together ourselves through other means. Therefore, our art is also a way 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 Israel, 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. These are all commemorated events whose mythological dimensions grow in proportion to their distance from the present.

**3. 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 social-cultural belonging. It even contributes to the constitution of identity and its preservation. In this sense, memory can be said to be personally and collectively constructive. On the other hand, memory can also threaten the integrity of identity, to destabilize it in irreversible ways, to be painful, debilitating, devastating and destructive. That is why forgetting can also be a positive and welcome phenomenon in some contexts, for it has the ability to balance out the effects of memory. This dual system of memory and forgetting, which create an equilibrium of forces, can be found represented in texts as early as Greek mythology, in the complementary images 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, it goes without saying that memory and forgetting, and indeed also memorialization and obliteration of memory, are subject to personal and public interests.[[9]](#footnote-9)

Anne Whitehead argues the importance of the “art of memory,” alongside “the art of forgetting,” specifically in the context of wars and global events. Whitehead claims that the profusion of memorial museums and monuments in the public space, 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 the responsibility for memory from the private individual.[[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 degree of responsibility does each individual take on 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 a 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 the post-traumatic stress of our grandparents been passed down to us as well? According to Professor 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 is writing that is turned, 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 “origins” expeditions in the hopes of finding our roots, but due to the distance of time, we find almost no vestiges 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, looking at relocation options in 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 a lot of 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 are lines up in narrow rows inside the rectangular space where once stood the synagogue incinerated during the 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 granit, whose perimeters mark where the two World Trade Center towers used to stand. The pits, titled “The footprints of the Twin Towers,” symbolize the dialectic between absence and presence in space. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. In this context, we would be remiss not to mention two articles by the architect and cultural researcher 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 5/9/1997. 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 Institude 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 Institude 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)