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The Creation of a "Survivor" in Contemporary Israeli Holocaust Novels

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Introduction

According to Yad Vashem, the World Holocaust Remembrance Center in Jerusalem, Israel, the term "Holocaust survivors" is used to relate to "Jews who survived the Holocaust period in Nazi-occupied Europe" but it also "includes Jews who did not actually come into direct contact with the Nazi murder machine."¹ This common term assumes that the survivors must have been alive during Second World War and the Holocaust period, hence they could not be born in Israel afterwards. However, in various contemporary Israeli novels about the Holocaust we come across a series of post-war Israeli-born protagonists who represent a kind of "new" survivor. While some of them are depicted as persons that display bizarre behavior or even suffer from mental illness – which makes them into a suitable object for psychological analysis – my aim here

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1 The common terminology for a Holocaust survivor is based on the 2007 Holocaust survivors law, accessed April 26, 2023, <https://main.knesset.gov.il/activity/legislation/laws/pages/lawprimary.aspx?t=lawlaws&st=lawlaws&lawitemid=2000308> (in Hebrew). See also: "Survivors," *Shoah Resource Center – Yad Vashem*, accessed April 26, 2023, https://www.yadvashem.org/odot_pdf/Microsoft%20Word%20-%206057.pdf.

is to show how the process of acquiring of a new identity is connected to the posttraumatic life story of these characters and their relatives. The first novel to be discussed is *Tmunot Hatuna* [Wedding pictures] by Gil Ilutowich (2006),² while the second book is *Anshei Pinot* [Corner people] by Esty G. Hayim (2013).³ Some additional contemporary Israeli novels will be included in the discussion as well, in order to broaden the comparative scope of this article.

The contemporary Hebrew novels under discussion here concentrate on female protagonists who learn to accept themselves as Holocaust survivors. While the protagonist of *Wedding Pictures*, the old Polish-born Elka Stollar,⁴ is a “true” survivor who tries to deny her horrible memories of Holocaust atrocities and her subsequent – very distressing – immigration to Israel, the protagonist of *Corner People*, the young Dvory Stern, is an Israeli-born woman who cannot escape “her” fate, hence lives the life of a Holocaust survivor. Even though both characters have quite different personalities, their process of acquiring the identity of a Holocaust survivor is quite similar.

Significantly, in most contemporary Hebrew Holocaust fiction, the process of creating female characters who identify as Holocaust survivors is different from that of male characters, basically because the female protagonists are traditionally associated with the Jewish concept of a “woman of valour” [*Eshet chayil*] (Proverbs 31:10–30) – a gendered concept that revolves around marital life, motherhood and livelihood. Hence, focusing on two novels about female Holocaust “survivors” will bring us to a larger discussion about the identity of Holocaust survivors in contemporary Israeli-Hebrew fiction – second- and third-generation protagonists – through the prism of gender, self-identification and post-memory.

Elka Stollar in *Wedding Pictures*

Wedding Pictures, to begin with, is the third novel by Gil Ilutowich, a second-generation author who was born and raised in Israel. The book offers

2 Gil Ilutowich, *Tmunot Hatuna* [Wedding pictures] (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 2006) (in Hebrew). This novel has no English translation, therefore the English quotes through this article are my translations.

3 Esty G. Hayim, *Anshei Pinot* [Corner people] (Or Yehuda: Zmora, Bitan-Modan, 2013). I would like to thank the author, and the Deborah Harris Agency, for letting me use the unpublished English translation of *Corner People*, translated by Sara Freidman, 2014, for my study. All quotations in English are Freidman’s version.

4 Elka Stollar is an East European Jew from Wiszniewo; nowadays it is a part of Minsk in Belarus; from 1921 till the end of Second World War Wiszniewo was part of Poland. See *Tmunot Hatuna*, chapter 5.

a realistic story about an old lady's search for her husband whom she believed to be dead for almost forty years. The temporal setting of the story is the end of the summer of 1983 – about one year after the First Lebanon War broke out and just after Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin announced his upcoming resignation.⁵ Elka Stollar is an old widow and a retired dressmaker who lost her baby and her husband, Israel, during the Holocaust in Poland. With a forged certificate under the name of "Sabina Gorek" she managed to immigrate with her other, surviving, son to Israel before she turned thirty-two years old.⁶ Now she lives in the city of Ramat-Gan,⁷ alone, after her only living son immigrated to the USA with his family. In her purse, she keeps her single souvenir from – or testimony of – her marital life, an old, small, fading wedding picture.

Although Elka has been living in Israel for many years, she cannot read or write in Hebrew, the local language. Even though she can cope with basic Yiddish and some East European languages, her lack of proficiency in Hebrew turns her into a kind of illiterate person. One day, without any previous warning, an unfamiliar young man knocks at her door, telling her that he is Israel Stollar's son with his second wife, whom he married after the Holocaust. His father, it turns out, lives in Kfar Saba⁸ and is dying, so the young man advises Elka to visit him. All at once, Elka's faked stable life, inside her small city apartment, secured from the outer world by a door with too many locks, comes to an end, as a result of the the young man's visit. Elka decides to go to Kfar Saba and to find out whether this old dying man is Israel Stollar, her

5 Within Israeli collective memory, the resignation of Prime Minister Begin's on August 28, 1983, and the First Lebanon War (known also as "1982 Lebanon War" and "Operation Peace for Galilee") are considered as connected events, and Ilutowich presents them as such in the opening of his novel. The First Lebanon War launched by Israel against Palestinian terrorists based in southern Lebanon, following their attempt to assassinate the Israeli Ambassador to the UK. The consequence of the First Lebanon War led to a large-scale political debate within Israel, which affected the 1984 elections, resulting in the formation of a government of national unity instead of a right-wing government like Begin's government.

6 Elka's immigration documents suggest that she moved to Israel with her son in 1951, about three years after the establishment of the new state of Israel and about six years after Second World War.

7 Ramat Gan is close to Tel Aviv and is considered to be one of the largest 15 cities of Israel. Ilutowich is familiar with the Ramat-Gan area since his childhood and often writes about this city and other cities in its vicinity, such as Givatayim.

8 Kfar Saba is a city in the HaSharon area in the center of Israel, about 20 km from Ramat-Gan. Kfar means "village" and Saba means "grandfather." The name is probably not a coincidental choice.

supposedly dead husband. She wants to tell him about her life, their son, her loneliness. She wants him to explain why she had to live as a poor widow, as a single mother for so many years while he was having a new family.

Elka travels by public transportation. During her trip from Ramat Gan to Tel Aviv, where she gets a bus to Kfar Saba, she meets Maya, a young Israeli history student and a fresh widow. Maya voluntarily joins Elka on her way to Kfar Saba, after hearing the first parts of her life story. When Elka arrives at last to the house of the old dying man – Maya waits for her in a coffee shop – Elka decides to return home without talking to him about their marriage(s). Once again Maya joins her. On the way home Elka decides to teach Maya how to cook a decent Jewish–Polish dish, as she would have taught her own flesh-and-blood daughter. Significantly, the novel avoids a happy or neat ending. Elka seems to accept her tragic fate when she meets Maya, who is a better version of herself. Maya is a young Israeli war widow, pretty, full of life, empathic, free, and childless. The open ending sees Elka daydreaming about teaching Maya how to cook Polish food, like the daughter she had never had.

Dvory Stern in *Corner People*

Corner People is the fifth novel by Esty G. Hayim, a second-generation author who – not unlike Ilutowich – often writes about the Holocaust. The story is told by a first-person narrator, Dvory Stern, who is also the protagonist. She is a fifty-one-year-old Israeli woman who lives alone in her childhood apartment in the Mediterranean port city of Haifa. Unmarried and childless, Dvory is an unsuccessful writer who still uses an Olivetti typewriter instead of a personal computer. In general, she is obsessed with the past. In addition to Second World War, her main obsession are the past Israeli wars, and she often recalls her childhood memories from the Six-Day War and the Yom Kippur War.⁹

Apart from working as a substitute teacher, Dvory is also an eternal student (of literature). What is more, she is the only living member of her family in Israel; her only brother moved abroad, escaping – as she presents it to the

9 The Six-Day War is also known by the name “1967 War.” It was a brief war (for six days) in June 1967. Syria, Egypt, and Jordan signed a mutual defense agreement to invade Israel, but the Israeli Air Force attacked their airfield before the invasion. Nowadays both Jordan and Egypt have peace agreements with Israel. Yom Kippur War is also known by the name “1973 War.” On the holiest day in the Jewish calendar, Yom Kippur, on October 1973, a coalition of Arab armies surprised IDF. Although the war ended within 18 days, due to its timing and extremely high number of casualties, it is still considered to be the most traumatic war by Israelis. Many families learned about their sons and husbands’ deaths weeks and months after this war had ended.

reader – from their traumatic and Sisyphus-like second-generation existence in Israel. Like in the case of *Wedding Pictures*, the story is set during the First Lebanon War. Dvory feels lonely and insecure at home during the war, while Haifa and the north of Israel are under heavy missile attacks. War casualties, civilian casualties and the memory of her beloved dead relatives, all this combined drives Dvory to tell her story and to make her wish “to wake the dead from their rest, summon the dead family to tell its story.”¹⁰ Yet Dvory’s narration, as well as her mental health, is not coherent at first. Through her child-like eyes, the reader learns that she is an Israeli-born daughter to a family of Holocaust survivors of Hungarian origin. Her wish is to become a famous writer; therefore, she receives for her Bat-Mitzva the Olivetti typewriter from her beloved aunt Esther.¹¹ But her greatest fears come at night, as she strongly believes – ever since her early childhood years – that the Nazis are going to catch her. Throughout *Corner People*, Dvory’s life story from early childhood up to the present is slowly revealed in its full terrifying meaning to the reader – Dvory believes that she herself is living during the Holocaust and that she is unable to escape from that fate. Her wish to save a displaced and haunted creature is given a tragical twist when she decides to shelter a dying jackal in her apartment (believing this gesture to be equal to giving shelter to a haunted Jew). The story ends in an open fashion, with Dvory’s decision to buy herself a computer instead of her old typewriter. However, not unlike Elka Stollar’s fantasizing – at the very end of *Wedding Pictures* – about teaching her substitute daughter Maya how to cook, the protagonist’s aspiration is left incomplete.

Within a historical frame of mind, the term “Holocaust Survivor” is typically used to designate a person who survived the Nazi atrocities during Second World War. Yet, modern historians are aware of the impact of artistic forms upon historical representation.¹² Instead of one canonical “history” fiction the reader is given multiple “histories” that bring the Holocaust “to life [...] in a way that ideology and philosophical abstractions cannot.”¹³ To this state of affairs,

10 Esty G. Hayim, *Anshei Pinot* [Corner people], trans. Sara Freidman, 2014, “Forward.” This is an official unpublished translation of the Israeli Institute for Hebrew Literature and the Deborah Harris Agency. See note 3.

11 Bat-Mitzva is a Jewish ceremony for twelve-year-old girls.

12 Geoffrey Hartman, “The Holocaust, History Writing, and the Role of Fiction,” in *After Representation?*, ed. R. Clifton Spargo and Robert M. Ehrenreich (Piscataway: Rutgers University Press, 2009), 26.

13 Dvir Abramovich, *Fragments of Hell: Israeli Holocaust Literature* (Boston: Academic Press, 2019), 98.

one may add the fact that in contemporary works of Holocaust fiction, manipulated, embellished, and invented memories are no longer regarded as taboo.¹⁴ The emotional aspect leads to a kind of life narrative that is not a testimonial nor accompanied by documentary pieces; in other words, we are not dealing with a literary catalogue of unbearable atrocities that happened to the protagonist, or his or her way to freedom, but we are given an emotional story about the past that offers a personal and psychological glance into a tormented soul. This shift transfers the uncanny conceptualization of the Holocaust into daily, simple, acceptable, and unthreatening concepts, transmitting the “survival mode” of the protagonist from the past war to the present, for instance by moving away from a basic stage of “staying alive” to a higher stage of “enjoying life.” The fundamental motivation for creating an analogy between the past and the present, for the protagonist’s potential shift from mere survival to enjoyment of life, is connected to the “traumatic memory” of the Holocaust and the character’s obsession with the past.¹⁵ Hence the most powerful vehicle in such stories are the protagonist’s memory and traumas. It does not matter whether it is a true, false or “embellished” life story; the value of the texts is their literary function,¹⁶ their ability to generate an emotional response among the readers, and their power to leave their mark on the collection of “canonical” Holocaust novels or – to put it differently – to become a legitimate part of “Hebrew Holocaust literature.” What is more, looking at the institutional context and the position of the two books under scrutiny within the field of “Hebrew Holocaust literature,” it should be noted that both novels were published by leading Israeli publishing houses: *Wedding Pictures* was published as title number 558 in the series of *Sifriya La’am* [People’s library] by Am Oved, whereas *Corner People* came out in the Hebrew literature series of the Kinneret Zmora-Bitan publishing house.

Authentic Memories vs. Adopted Memories: Elka vs. Dvory

The plots of *Wedding Pictures* and *Corner People* are based, respectively, on the memories of Elka Stollar and Dvory Stern; their memories create the main conflicts and drive the plot. In various ways, however, these two female lead characters represent two opposites. Elka from *Wedding Pictures* is a Hebrew

¹⁴ Matthew Boswell, “Holocaust Literature and the Taboo,” in *The Bloomsbury Companion to Holocaust Literature*, ed. Jenni Adams (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014), 196.

¹⁵ Dominick LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), 90.

¹⁶ Sue Vice, “Questions of Truth in Holocaust Memory and Testimony,” in *The Bloomsbury Companion to the Holocaust Literature*, ed. Jenni Adams (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014), 59–60.

ignorant in contrast to the verbally skillful Dvory, the protagonist of *Corner People*; Elka tries to overcome her harsh memories of the past and builds a secure home for herself while Dvory, for her part, adopts others' memories of the past as her own and builds herself a shelter from the "Nazis" around her. Elka tries to liberate herself from painful memories, whereas Dvory feels she carries them inside her body, as a sort of DNA or a curse:

A child of survivor parents. Second generation. You get the feeling there's no patience anymore for us. For the second generation. People are tired of Holocaust-Holocaust-Holocaust. I understand. I'm tired of it too. But there's no escape. The Holocaust is inside me.¹⁷

Dvory never stops to embrace and collect more and more stories about "the War"¹⁸ and other wars, seasoning them with Mediterranean tastes and flavors; for example, after buying cigarettes and a bottle of Arak, Dvory remembers her late Jewish-Hungarian grandfather in the following way:

In his rare moments of waking, Grandfather would smear arak on his body, claiming it was healthy. The smell of anise would fill the house. I inhaled it deeply. It's good for your memory, he retorted when Grandmother ordered him out of the kitchen. You stink, get out of here! It appears that arak actually did him good, especially his long-term memory: He kept repeating his stories of that other war, the first one, never forgot a single detail.¹⁹

The memories of others that Dvory collects are a kind of "phantom pains" for her, a cross-generation post-trauma that characterizes the second-generation.²⁰ By embracing the pain she becomes a secondary victim, a personification of suffering humanity who must survive to tell the story of her family.²¹

17 Esty G. Hayim, *Anshei Pinot*, "Forward."

18 Second World War is mostly referred as "the War" [Ha-Milxhamah] in Israeli literary, popular and/or quotidian context, see for example: Erga Heller, "הארץ כי אל ארצי ואל מולדתי תלך"; "קולו של הבן וקולו של בן הא'רעץ" [But thou shalt go unto my country and to my kindred: Ambivalence about family and homeland in Israeli songs about the Holocaust], *MORESHER ISRAEL* 19 (1) (2021): 191.

19 Hayim, *Anshei Pinot*, chapter II.

20 Erin Heather McGlothlin, "Introduction," in Erin Heather McGlothlin, *Second-generation Holocaust Literature: Legacies of Survival and Perpetration* (Suffolk: Camden House, 2006), 5–6.

21 Alvin H. Rosenfeld, *The End of the Holocaust* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011), 93.

Telling a life story – and especially a life story regarding the Holocaust – is an impulsive drive that both Elka and Dvory share. While Elka addresses a stranger (Maya) during a bus ride and talks to her, Dvory writes for nameless strange readers. Hence their life stories carry different degrees of intimacy and pain. Elka feels she could like Maya as her own daughter, and she shows Maya her tender and loving feelings through bodily gestures and by showing Maya her most secret item, her well-hidden old wedding photo. Maya, in turn, acts in the same way, as she uses friendly body language as well, and equally shows Elka her wedding photos. They use direct physical contact and vocal speech. Since they spend most of the story on buses – hence in public spaces – Elka does not tell Maya about everything. A large part of the represented “ghetto,” in her Holocaust and post-Holocaust stories, remains in the form of hidden memories, known only to the narrator (and to the reader). Elka’s old wedding photograph is used instead of the lost documents of her civil status, not only as the official proof of her old marriage but also as an imaging tool of her current emotions.²²

Meanwhile, Dvory uses written words and addresses her message – her “complete book” – directly to the reader. Since she is a first-person narrator, she controls the telling act, and hence also controls the degrees of intimacy and pain. Dvory invites the reader into her chaotic painful life, occupied mostly with food and fear. Although she is alone and apart from the rest of the world, her stories are full of characters, subplots and side plots, hence they manipulate the reader to believe in a false intimacy. There is, however, no real intimacy between Dvory and the reader, although she encourages her readership to believe she writes about authentic protagonists:

But if somebody reads it and gets the feeling that now he knows these strangers, even for a moment, people he’s never looked at directly, then perhaps a temporary spotlight will be trained on the gray people, and for a short time they will be “heroes.”²³

Elka, for her part, is presented as an elegant person like Dvory’s aunt, but unlike Dvory herself. She knows she is not a verbal person – unlike Dvory – but similarly to Dvory, Elka likes to tell stories. Her favorite stories are about strangers:

22 James E. Young, “Holocaust Documentary Fiction: Novelist as Eyewitness,” in *Literature of the Holocaust*, ed. Harold Bloom (Broomall: Chelsea House Publishers, 2004), 83.

23 Hayim, *Anshei Pinot*, “Forward.”

Elka doesn't know how to read Hebrew. She recognizes numbers and even some words in Yiddish, but even though she never admitted – not even to herself – words could not work into sentences for her.

She likes to hold magazines in her hand and she looks at the pictures, looks at the photos and wonders who these people are and what they are doing.²⁴

While Elka understands her affection for storytelling only after her retirement, the five-year-old Dvory is a natural storyteller, and her ambition to tell stories grows with time. As a grownup she keeps writing her few stories – which are always similar variations on her basic life story – on her Olivetti and publishes them in an exclusive literary journal without many readers.

As a consequence, both Elka and Dvory do not have many specific addressees, which reflects the intimacy of their telling act. Elka addresses Maya, a lonely war widow like herself, while Dvory addresses unknown recipients. The natural degree of unfamiliarity between Dvory and her addressees – meaning an author who directs her words to her readers – echoes her transparent literary aspirations, which none of her family members acknowledges except for her aunt Esther.²⁵ It seems that since her early childhood Dvory becomes transparent in the eyes of her family members, but more important is her belief that she becomes invisible to the Nazis:

Two knocks at the door.

I wasn't dreaming; this was for real. Maybe it was the Nazis. I knew that had been a long time ago and that the good guys had killed them and rescued my father and mother and grandmother, but maybe there were one or two left who had come looking for my father and mother and grandmother and my brother and me. My thoughts came fast. There were two possibilities for survival. First, I didn't have a Jewish nose. Completely Aryan. Fine blonde hair and a turned-up nose. I didn't look like I even belonged to Mother, with her dark hair. No resemblance whatsoever. The second possibility, which I adopted after some hesitation, was to disappear. [...] You don't see me because I don't exist. Disappearing. Disappeared. [...]

24 Ilutowich, *Tmunot Hatuna*, 12–13. Unless otherwise noted, all quotes are translated by the author of this article.

25 In Esty G. Hayim's novella *SID* [Plastered walls] the intense love story is fully revealed since the heroes are Dvory Stern's Father and his lover, Dvory's aunt Esther, an erotic author who is known by the alias "Frauline Böll" and whose purple book copies are hidden in her apartment (*Corner People*, "XVIII"). See Esty G. Hayim, *SID* (Tel Aviv: Achuzat Bayit, 2020).

Murky words with a pungent smell. Grandmother once said that anything sour, sweet, salty or bitter, with color and texture – exists. Words for me always had color, taste, and smell. I could sense them, so they were real.²⁶

Dvory lives through words. She suffers from synesthesia, she catches words (not items, not denotations) through seeing, tasting, and smelling. According to the five-year-old Dvory sensing the words that construct a story shifts its ontological status from “fiction” to “fact”, from “tale” to “testimony”, hence enabling her self-creation as a Holocaust survivor.

Literacy and Survival

It is interesting that Elka’s visual literacy and Dvory’s synesthetic verbal literacy are their unique characteristics, and in both cases, they are the generators of the self-creation process of a Holocaust survivor. In spite of the fact that Elka is an “authentic” survivor and Dvory is not, their “survivor” identity is developed thanks to their capacity of storytelling. After delivering their life story to the world, they both want to change their former way of living. Elka wants a new family through Maya, suggesting that she would like to have new Israeli “grandchildren,” and Dvory considers a fresh writing start on a computer, after hiding in a burial-like act her old Olivetti, suggesting the possibility of writing about new subjects which are not the Holocaust. Due to the open ending these possible futures remain vague. Yet these possible futures clearly point at the theme of motherhood or at least at a changing feminine life circle. The open ending conceives a wish for creating a new self, much more social, active, and vivid.

Significantly, when studying the tension between the protagonist’s high literacy – either visual or verbal – and her self-identification as a Holocaust survivor, either true or faked, one realizes that this tension is found also in other contemporary Israeli novels. Take, for example, *Heshbon Radum* [Dormant account] by Nathan Shaham.²⁷ This first-person novel is not presented to the reader as a Holocaust novel since it is a sort of detective story that happens in the beginning of the twenty-first century and marketing this novel under the title of Holocaust fiction could ruin its surprising closure. The protagonist and narrator of *Dormant Account* is a literary editor and publisher by the name of Menashe Shahar; hence he has a high degree of verbal literacy. He is a grandson of a Polish-Hassidic Jew, Aharon Tzvi Morgenstern,

²⁶ Hayim, *Anshei Pinot*, chapter “I.”

²⁷ Nathan Shaham, *HESHBON RADUM* [Dormant account] (Or Yehuda: Zmora-Bitan, 2013).

a successful businessman and unfaithful husband, the owner of a large Yiddish publishing house in Eastern Europe before Second World War, but also a Holocaust victim. Menashe Shahar inherited the publishing house, and now he tries to manage it – unsuccessfully – from his Tel Aviv apartment. Shahar asks a befriended author to voluntarily write his grandfather's biography, and from that moment onwards scandalous old family secrets that were concealed during the Holocaust are revealed one by one in Tel Aviv, New York, Warsaw, and Frankfurt by his friends, family members, his business rivals, and even by a Neo-Nazi millionaire. At the end of the story, Menashe Shahar understands the impact of the Holocaust on his family and business, therefore he cannot continue with his former life – keeping the publishing house to himself – so he decides to sell it to Morgenstern's secret daughter, a Holocaust survivor, and moves to New York to live a rich man's life with his cousin's widow.

Another example of a very high literate protagonist can be found in Yishai Sarid's novella *Mifletzet Ha-Zikaron* [The memory monster].²⁸ Its protagonist (and first-person narrator) is a young Israeli father who holds a PhD in Holocaust history. Working as a tour guide in Poland, mainly with Israeli high school students, he suddenly finds himself in the middle of an identity crisis. He does not believe anymore that the Holocaust and its atrocities are locked in the past and he assumes that with the "right" form of thinking everyone can be a Nazi. At a certain moment, he is arrested and accused on the ground of plotting a violent crime against a German producer and an old woman, after which he writes a letter to his employer, the Yad Vashem chairman, to explain his behavior "for memory." The main trigger for his instable condition – and of his transformation into a monstrous predator – is activated when he accompanies a group of German filmmakers to Auschwitz-Birkenau and suddenly gets fired because they do not need to see more horror to understand. The narrator identifies himself as a soldier, but he is not aware of his post-traumatic state, which raises his hidden and dark drives, and creates a monstrous new ethical and behavioral mirror image of his former self.

Another post-traumatic memory that unveils the dark Holocaust secrets of a man with high literacy capacities is found in Gil Ilutowich's fourth novel, *Ochlay Ha-Gehalim* [The coal eaters].²⁹ Mordechai-Marek Greenstein is a non-talkative Holocaust survivor from a neighborhood close to Ramat-Gan. He used to work as an archive librarian, but is also an exceptional writer of

28 Yishai Sarid, *The Memory Monster*, trans. Yardenne Greenspan (New York: Restless Books, 2020). It was first published in Hebrew in 2017 as title number 752 of SIFRIYA LA'AM in Am Oved publishing house under the Hebrew name *בפליצת הזיכרון*, MIFLETZET HA-ZIKARON.

29 Gil Ilutowich, *אוכלי הגזלים* [OCHLAY HA-GEHALIM, The Coal Eaters] (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 2009).

letters. In order to celebrate his “freedom,” the freshly retired Greenstein decides to join an Israeli organized tour to the Island of Bali. During this exotic tour, Mordechai turns back to his Polish name Marek and falls in love with Dora Blum, an Israeli Holocaust survivor from Budapest. Overwhelmed by his renewed emotions, the colors, the smells and the views, including that of people eating coal, the lead character is increasingly confronted with resurfacing traumatic memories. The dark and ambivalent role he played during the Holocaust starts haunting him, yet he keeps this shameful secret to himself, for no one knows he was a Kapo. Afterwards, in Israel, he continues his relationship with Dora, who is preparing herself to the upcoming marriage of her son. Marek feels uncomfortable with Dora because of his dishonorable past and his sudden understanding that as a Kapo he had ill-treated Dora’s late husband. In the final scene, Moishe Ziecher, the future bride’s father, recognizes Marek from Warsaw and addresses him by his Yiddish name – Mottel. Moishe wants to hit Marek twice, not only because Marek bullied him in Warsaw before the war, but also because on the train from Majdanek to Auschwitz the Kapo Mottel selected him to work and saved him from the “Gaz.” The novel ends with Moishe saying: “Come on, Mottel, [...] There is no time. We have kids to marry.”³⁰ At the very end of the novel, maybe due to his new romantic engagement with Dora, Marek’s tormented self-identity as a Kapo is settled, as he understands that he is a Holocaust survivor as Dora, Moishe and many other Jewish victims.

Another (final) example of a literate protagonist and the impact of post-memory on the lead character’s survival can be found in Zehava Kor’s young adult novel *Mispar* [Number].³¹ The book is an important example for this discussion, because the protagonist is a woman, Rivtzuk, a Holocaust survivor and an autobiographer who joins Yad Vashem’s Israeli high school delegations to Auschwitz. This time, according to Yad Vashem’s administration, she is expected to go to Auschwitz with her granddaughter’s class. Rivtzuk’s son – the father of her granddaughter – is against the whole idea, and for the first time in his life, he tells Rivtzuk, his beloved mother, that her obsession with Holocaust testimony, writing and delegations, literally kills him. As a result, at the end, it is Rivtzuk who gets a heart attack and nearly dies. She is hospitalized and only then the scope and the implications of her testimonial Holocaust works are finally revealed to her family members. *Number* too has an open ending, as it combines the prospect of the beloved grandmother Rivtzuk’s healing and coming back home with her family members’ understanding

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 286.

³¹ Zehava Kor, *MISPAR* [Number] (Tel Aviv: Yediot Books, 2015).

that her most important *raison d'être* has been – in a paradoxical way – her Holocaust testimonies and writings.

Looking at gender issues in these examples, an interesting pattern rises to the surface. The nexus between literacy and Holocaust survivor interactions wraps up differently in cases of female protagonists when compared with their male counterparts. In stories featuring female lead characters, the main conflict is typically resolved and so is the protagonist's obsession to testify or fabricate memories and stories. In *Wedding Pictures*, Elka not only wishes to build for herself a new home, but she also wants to make Maya a part of her new Israeli family (combined with old Polish cuisine). Dvory in *Corner People*, for her part, wants to buy a computer, which comes to serve as a symbol of modern life freed from the Holocaust. In Zehava Kor's *Number*, Rivtzuk wants to heal and move to an elderly village. The traditional role of 'home' is typically associated with motherhood and womanhood, but in the texts under discussion, this trope is used to incubate the protagonist's new identity. Hence, one may say that the female lead character's home is equal to an Israeli womb from which the protagonist is reborn with purified Israeli powers. In *Dormant Account*, *The Memory Monster*, and *The Coal Eaters*, on the other hand, the male protagonist leaves his allegedly safe and protective home to realize that he is actually possessed by demonic thoughts (Shahar pays a visit to Frankfurt, while the historian in *Memory Monster* relocates to Warsaw and Mordechai/Marek travels to see the coal eaters in Bali). Consequently, the male lead character experiences a significant degree of anxiety and fear. Shahar and Marek understand that they have to accept their dark shameful past, while the historian in Gil Ilutowich's novel loses his mind while becoming the monster himself. It seems that while the female characters become a better variation of themselves, the male characters – for a short time or permanently – become the evil ones.

From Death to Re-birth: Home as a Camp versus Home as an Incubator

Looking closer into the particular role of spatiality in *Wedding Pictures* and *Corner People*, it should be noted that both Elka and Dvory live alone in typical Israeli apartment buildings from the mid-twentieth century in two of the largest cities in Israel. However, the two women are presented as detached from their immediate neighbors. In *Wedding Pictures*, to begin with, Elka is safe with her door locks and her calculated visits to the hair stylist and the grocery. Her tiny apartment in Ramat Gan is the first place she refers to as "home" in her adult life. She is not afraid to go outside on foot, and sometimes she even likes getting around by bus, but she often feels herself a stranger, especially when she comes across young mothers with their babies. The sudden appearance of

the young man, Israel Stollar's allegedly other son, at her doorstep is the sole event that enables the almost subservient past to threaten her again, initiating her voyage toward the mysterious old man:

A decision flashes in her mind, she must go, for so many years she has imagined this meeting, and always postponed it because of sorrow, rage, and insult. But now it seems that there is no other time. She is going to go, yes, despite everything she is going to go – today.³²

Elka's decision to leave home at the end of the first chapter is a direct response to the strange young man's surprising visit, but it is also an indirect response to a random street view of a mother with her toddler playing in a sand box in the neighborhood's playground. The Israeli sand box reminds Elka of the burial of her baby in Poland, "in the other world" in her words. When Elka reaches the home of the dying Israel Stollar, she observes an unfamiliar look in his blue eyes. Therefore, the only thing she asks him is whether his place is for sale, and then she goes back home with Maya, while promising her a detailed explanation in her typical broken Hebrew: "I will tell you my home, now, no time, we must take bus back home."³³ The main conflict in *Wedding Pictures* is practically resolved at the very end, when Elka adopts the civilian status of "Elka Stollar, a widow, a single mother, a Holocaust survivor" that was given to her by the Jewish Agency upon her arrival to Israel.³⁴ Although this identity was offered to her more than three decades ago, only after her current eye-to-eye contact with her supposedly dead husband Israel Stollar, she realizes that he does not recognize her at all. Only then she accepts the widow-single-mother-Holocaust-survivor identity. Elka looks at the ideal past she could have had with Israel Stollar and their son: she was not a Kibbutz and did not have many children. Yet, by adopting the war widow Maya as her Israeli daughter, she wholeheartedly embraces her new Israeli being along with her Jewish-Polish legacy. Quite symbolically, Elka miscalls Maya by naming her Mia. In Hebrew Maya implies both the month of May and the Aramaic word for water. The name Mia, for its part, has also two meanings, which are opposed to each other. One literal translation of Mia in Hebrew is "Who is [MI] God [YAH]?" which is a very loaded question in the context of the Holocaust. The other translation works in the same way, but has a different meaning: "From [MI<MIN] God [YAH<YEHVAH]", in other words a divine

³² Gil Ilutowich, *Tmunot Hatuna*, 16.

³³ *Ibid.*, 212.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 10.

gift. Since Elka is not religious, we may assume that Maya is a sort of a gift for Elka, a savior for golden years.

In *Corner People*, Dvory engages herself voluntarily at her old family home in Haifa, running away from her substitute teaching duties, although she knows that her home is full of hurting memories and death. She had been forced to leave her family home only once, for two years, during her military service, after which she left it voluntarily only for short periods of time, while trying to make a living in the "Big City" of Tel Aviv.

Like in the case of Elka in *Wedding Pictures*, Dvory's daily writing routine is broken by a *force majeure*. A neighbor of her beloved aunt Esther is worried about her and calls her father, so her father goes to Esther's place but never returns home. It takes Dvory a day to decide that she has to go to her aunt's apartment in order to look for them. Like Elka, on the very next day, Dvory takes a bus to her destination, her aunt's apartment. However, the familiar trajectory from her parent's place to her aunt's house along the busy streets of Haifa seems sad, as in a funeral. There, at her aunt's place, the shocked Dvory discovers the body of her aunt and her dying father. Esther is all dressed up in her double bed in her fancy bedroom, and Dvory's father is barely alive in the bathroom, after his fall while trying to hide Esther/*Fraulein Böll's* erotic novels in the bathroom's "Boidem" (the Yiddish name for an attic).³⁵

I was the only mourner at Esther-nayni's funeral. The man from the burial society summoned his workers from other funerals to make up the quorum of ten men for reciting the *kaddish*. I opened drawers, rummaged in boxes; I climbed up to the overhead storage closet with the aid of the same ladder Father had used. I found typed pages in Hungarian. I found the paint-spattered book, with only its title still legible: *Fraulein Böll*. I sat on her bed, where I had found her. Now I would never know her secrets. Only questions remained. Had she been a spy? Was that her alias: *Fraulein Böll*? If she was a spy, who had she worked for? The Russians? The Americans? The British? Perhaps she had been the mistress of a high-ranking Nazi officer, just as a cover story? Or a partisan, a resistance fighter trying to save the doomed? Or a slut who had seen to her own needs, she was eighteen years old, so beautiful, perhaps she had taken on a false identity in order to survive? Or perhaps none of these? Did she have a baby with a Nazi officer? Or with a secret Jewish lover? Did she leave him behind? Maybe she never had a child?³⁶

35 As mentioned before, an extensive version of Dvory's father's love story and his life story is given in Hayim, *SID*.

36 Hayim, *Anshei Pinot*, chapter "XVIII."

Esther's apartment was always a mysterious place in Dvory's eyes, but her old family home is her only "home" in which she has been hiding from the Nazis since her early childhood, but from which she could never escape; therefore, she believes, she is becoming an alcoholic:

Everything comes to an end. Even a bottle of Arak.
My alcohol life offers an escape, but I don't know where or from whom I'm running. Perhaps I'm escaping *to* the writing of the story, not *from* it. [...]
The danger of escaping is getting to a place that's much more frightening.³⁷

In the end, after the death of her last relatives – except for Dvory's brother – Dvory takes care of the dying jackal at home. This is the first time she does not want to escape anymore. But it also is the first time that she is involved in a true violent event (being attacked either by the jackal or by her hostile neighbors). She serves her grandmother's best Hungarian dishes to the jackal, and believes it is waiting for her to feed him in the children's room; along with the cooking she switches to a silent mode:

Thus began the days of silence that marked my adulthood. Compared to the noise of my childhood, the silence was alternately soft and consoling or hard and indifferent.³⁸

At the closure of both novels, the lead characters Elka and Dvory use their diasporic cuisine and their relatives' death to overcome their foreign identity and come closer to the common notion of Israeliness. But there is a difference between the two women: while Elka builds for herself a new Israeli future based on the possibility of a new alternative family, Dvory stays alone; her decision to withdraw the Olivetti typewriter is equal to the decision to stop writing, which is a death sentence for such a verbal person as herself. The ending sentence of *Corner People* that cites Dvory's thoughts ("Maybe I'll buy a computer after all.")³⁹ is an open ending; Dvory's future depends on the interpretation by the reader: is it the creation of a new life (and life story) or just the last thought of a lost person?⁴⁰

37 Ibid., chapter "XIII."

38 Ibid., chapter "XVIII."

39 Ibid., chapter "XVIII."

40 One can find a small hint for an optimistic closure based on the chapter's number "XVIII" (18) is "יח" in Hebrew gematria, meaning "alive."

Conclusion

Wedding Pictures and *Corner People* illustrate a new Holocaust survivor type within Hebrew literature at large, and within Israeli fiction in particular. The lead character is a person who survived the Holocaust with or without a direct contact with Nazi atrocities and whose entire existence revolves around escaping from the Nazi Hell. While the common Israeli sociohistorical terminology of the Holocaust survivor regards the survivor as a person that was probably born in Europe before the War, the new Israeli fiction undermines these spatiotemporal features and foregrounds a variety of Holocaust survivor protagonists: some are born in Europe before "the War" and some are born in Israel years after Second World War had ended.

As was discussed on this article, there are various *ad-hoc* narrative reasons for adopting a false survivor identity or re-adopting an unwanted one in current Israeli fiction about the Holocaust. Most of the protagonists, as Elka and Dvory, need the 'survivor' identity as a justification for reopening personal/marital/national past secrets, in their autobiographic journey of achieving a peaceful closure for their life story.

In the end, Elka Stollar, the protagonist of *Wedding Pictures*, liberates herself from all the pains of the past (her unhappy marriage with Israel Stollar, her suffering during the Holocaust, her loneliness) while she gladly takes on the identity of a Holocaust widow. Quite the opposite happens at the end of *Corner People*, when Dvory Stern wonders for the first time in her life about the possibility of going outside her cagy home (to buy a computer) and doing something else rather than relive the "no escape" Holocaust labyrinthian memories. Similar are the other protagonists from the additional texts in this article: all recognize in themselves the identity of the survivor and find a considerate solution for the rest of their lives (all except for the protagonist and first-person narrator of *The Memory Monster* who loses his mind).

Yet we should not disregard the fact that Holocaust surviving in Israeli fictional works becomes more than a historic testimony; the Holocaust is no longer a matter of family memories but a pan-Israeli issue based on collective memories; hence the Mizrahi historian in *The Memory Monster* can transform himself first into a victim and then into a "victimizer," and then turn, as a result of his deep understanding of the Nazi plan, into an insane perpetrator.

This protagonists' new identity can happen only now, in the 2020s, when not only the second generation but also the third generation is growing old. The fictional works discussed here bring to the surface an authentic painful voice of Israeli-born authors who transfer "facts" into "fiction" and vice versa. Their ability to play with truths of surviving is their greatest narrative power to create a story out of history, hence, to create a Holocaust survivor in

order to emotionally deliver the “never forget” past to a twenty-first century readership.

Abstract

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The Creation of a “Survivor” in Contemporary Israeli Holocaust Novels

This article focuses on contemporary Hebrew fiction about the Holocaust and investigates how protagonists who belong to the second and the third generation identify themselves as “authentic” Holocaust survivors. As a result of this adopted identity and the misconception of reality that goes along with it, the relations between victims and perpetrators become fluid. While most of the protagonists embrace the faked fate of being a Holocaust victim, others fashion themselves as monstrous individuals or Nazis. While looking into the collective memory of the Shoah in twenty-first century Israel, this article seeks to provide an explanation for these literary developments.

Keywords

Holocaust fiction; contemporary Israeli fiction; Holocaust survivor (in fiction); woman protagonist; self-identity (in fiction)