
 Daniel Feldman

Reading Time in Youth Novels about the Warsaw Ghetto

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DOI: 10.18318/td.2024.en.1.16 | ORCID: 0000-0002-8819-6196

A Bridge over Time

Children's books about the Holocaust use language to create a narrative bridge over time. The Holocaust was a temporal event delimited by traumatic history and bound by a grim geography of contested borders, surveilled walls, and electrified fences. Time and space were tightly controlled during the genocide. Accordingly, literary attempts to portray the Holocaust from within the event face formidable barriers to conceptual entry. Moreover, juvenile texts about this dire history are ineluctably challenged by the relatively narrow temporal scope of their young intended readers. History over eight decades in the past seems all the more remote to youth born in an entirely different century who are unlikely ever to meet a living witness to the genocide. How literature affords young readers access to the horrifying history of the Holocaust in an engaging yet responsible manner poses a continuing dilemma. Authors of children's fiction about the Holocaust are therefore obliged to develop innovative narrative approaches to representing time and space in order to forge an accurate reconstruction of this atrocity.

Daniel Feldman – Senior Lecturer of English Literature at Bar-Ilan University, Israel, where he focuses on Holocaust literature and children's literature. His book *Poesis in Extremis*, co-written with Efraim Sicher (Bloomsbury Academic, 2024), addresses poetry written by Jews under Nazi persecution during the Holocaust. His recent scholarship has appeared in *Children's Literature in Education*, *Libri liberorum*, and *Bookbird*. Email: Daniel.Feldman@biu.ac.il.

Creating such chronological connection is the task taken up in two recent works of European children's literature about the Warsaw Ghetto. Both *Arka czasu* [The ark of time],¹ a 2013 children's novel in Polish by Marcin Szczygielski, and *28 Tage lang* [28 days],² a 2014 young adult novel in German by David Safier, stage a literary descent into the traumatic history of the Holocaust by transforming time into text. The texts exemplify how contemporary Polish and German youth literature provide a rhetoric and poetics of time that bridges the chronological gap between the wartime past and cultural coordinates of young Europeans today. The vocabulary of time is already foregrounded in the titles of both novels. Moreover, the works depict children's stories, book collections, and literary reading as constitutive elements of a transhistorical temporal structure. By conceiving of narrative as an independent chronological order that withstands brutal violence and appalling loss, *The Ark of Time* and *28 Days* give contemporary readers a point of access to the grave history of the Holocaust while also uncannily reproducing the historic conditions in which Jewish children read during the genocide – throughout the ghettos of Nazi-occupied Poland, books promised imprisoned Jewish children cognitive escape from unbearable current events. The two novels thus recapitulate the seminal role of reading in helping Holocaust victims overcome the stultifying morass of time during the genocide while also granting postwar students entry into a horrifying period of history.

In suggesting a deeper significance for the role of story in evoking survival, Szczygielski and Safier's novels revise the relationship between time and text. Temporal sequence is typically an essential component in producing narrative, but in these works, the situation is reversed. Time does not create story; instead, story creates time. Reading, narrative, and history converge in *The Ark of Time* and *28 Days*. The following examination of how time is rendered in these texts draws on theoretical concepts of narrative temporality, such as the *katabasis* and chronotope, and influential texts of temporally focused narrative, such as Herbert G. Wells's *The Time Machine*, to illustrate how the Holocaust has come to function as a topos of difficult memory in contemporary children's literature. This analysis underscores the central significance of reading time – both as practice and critique – in making the Holocaust legible to youth living long after the war.

1 Marcin Szczygielski, *Arka czasu, czyli, wielka ucieczka Rafała od kiedyś przez wtedy do teraz i wstecz* (Warszawa: Stentor, 2013).

2 David Safier, *28 Tage lang* (Reinbek: Kindler, 2014).

Entering the Abyss

In the two texts under discussion, storytelling offers the young Jewish protagonists moments of evanescent release from the constant fear and hardship of the Warsaw Ghetto. The novels portray desperate children imprisoned behind walls who turn to fictional stories as a way of harnessing the virtual freedom found in books to mitigate the unremitting dread and privation found in the ghetto. While Safier's novel is written for a slightly more mature audience than Szczygielski's, both works portray protagonists who venerate stories as talismans of hope, autonomy, and even rescue from the misery they face under the Nazis. For Mira, the adolescent heroine of *28 Days*, books betoken promise of marvelous transport: "Why couldn't I disappear into a magic book and take everyone I loved with me?," she asks.³ Concocting fantastic tales of flight and adventure also allows Mira's younger sister Hannah to escape in her mind to an enchanted if perilous island of her own imaginative making: "They knew that this was probably a dangerous world – as I said, they weren't naïve – but they weren't trapped in the ghetto anymore," the text says of Hannah's confabulating.⁴ Rafał, the child protagonist of Szczygielski's *Ark of Time*, similarly cherishes books. His penchant for reading grants him safe passage through the ghetto, and at the book's climax his love of stories helps him elude death. Rafał memorizes the intricate route from his apartment to the ghetto library, which he describes as a refuge of open horizons within the otherwise claustrophobic space of the ghetto. "In the library. That's my favorite place in the whole district," he says.⁵ Nevertheless, reading also risks damnation: Rafał's embrace of an exotic tale forces him underground where he lives in subterranean fellowship with other hidden children to sustain his literary make-believe. In Hannah's story, a purloined book threatens to consign the literary, story-loving children to hell: "The bookseller threatened the children with death and damnation if they didn't give the book back at once. The book would swallow them and they'd end up in the Hell of No Return."⁶ Books are hardly innocuous, these texts suggest. On the contrary, to plunge into reading is to risk falling into a hell of no return.

The motif of entering hell via story first appears in the annals of Western literature as the *katabasis*, the mythic theme of a descent to Hades. This narrative template reinforces depiction of the ghetto as an apocalyptic and agonizing abyss and establishes Holocaust literature as a modern successor

3 David Safier, *28 Days*, trans. Helen MacCormac (New York: Feiwel and Friends, 2020), 83.

4 *Ibid.*, 81.

5 Szczygielski, *Arka*, 10.

6 Safier, *28 Days*, 81.

to the classical katabatic tradition. *Katabasis*, an ancient Greek term meaning “a going down,” refers specifically to the venerable genre of a hero’s descent to the underworld. Figures such as Orpheus, Heracles, Odysseus, and Aeneas undertake such journeys. Dante makes use of it as the theological and narrative scheme of his descent into Hell in the *Inferno*. Although the *katabasis* conveys the hero to a chthonic netherworld beyond the reaches of terrestrial geography, it also takes the traveler on a journey to a more capacious temporal continuum; the infernal space of the underworld allows the hero to visit figures from the past, speak with the dead, and gain prophetic insight about the future. Hell is thus a closed space that opens up new vistas in time. This helps to explain how the *katabasis* genre functions today. In contemporary culture, Rachel Falconer argues, Hell is not a place but a time: the Holocaust.⁷ Expanding on George Steiner’s proposition that “the Holocaust is Hell made immanent in history,” Falconer finds that Holocaust literature satisfies the contemporary predilection to plumb the “katabatic imagination” through ethical refashioning of the genre.⁸ Holocaust literature creates a narrative portal that allows the postwar reader to descend into the moral abyss and then emerge, transformed, like the katabatic heroes of yore. “More than Hell itself, then, it is this narrative of a descent and return in which we apparently continue to ‘believe,’” Falconer writes.⁹ Like Auschwitz, the Warsaw Ghetto represents a cursed time and wretched place of bygone purgatory that still looms large in cultural memory. It serves as a durable signifier of utter depravity, a cultural *mise-en-scène* of modern moral collapse akin to the role of Hell in Dante’s medieval religious cosmology. Given authors’ longstanding and reasonable reluctance to portray the concentration and death camps in children’s literature about the Holocaust, accounts of the ghetto express a juvenile version of this katabatic paradigm by inviting readers to enter vicariously into a time and place that the Nazis sought to obliterate.

Safier and Szczygielski’s novels depict the inherent peril as well as redemptive possibility of storytelling amid the historic depths of suffering in the Warsaw Ghetto. The katabatic nature of these texts exemplifies how children’s literature of the Holocaust represents both descent into and ascent from what Barbara Engelking calls the “abyssal consciousness” of time in the ghetto.¹⁰ “The ghetto was an island in time, isolated in the dense present,

7 Rachel Falconer, *Hell in Contemporary Literature: Western Descent Narratives since 1945* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004).

8 *Ibid.*, 6.

9 *Ibid.*, 1.

10 Barbara Engelking, *Czas przestał dla mnie istnieć...* (Warszawa: IFIS PAN, 1996), 59.

where the past was suspended and the future receded into eternity," Engelking says.¹¹ Using the spatial metaphor of an island to refer to the foreshortening of time in the Warsaw Ghetto, Engelking describes how past, present, and future were reduced in the ghetto to the immediate nullity of urgent needs, especially hunger. This is the warped temporal structure that Lejb Goldin attempts to measure in *Khronik fun eyn... mey'eys l'eyn* [Chronicle of a... from time to time], his 1941 autobiographical story about how famine ravages time: "How terrifyingly long were each of those days and nights," Goldin writes.¹² The extreme constriction of time, space, freedom, nourishment, and hope in the ghetto created a gaping temporal rift that distorted conventional modes of chronology, Engelking argues.¹³ Ghetto time and conventional time entirely diverged. Within the ghetto walls, "daily encounters with death, so omnipresent in the ghetto, brought its inhabitants closer to the eternal boundary of time," she writes.¹⁴ Ghetto time also unfolded at its own irregular, harrowing pace. Samuel Kassow observes that time in the ghetto could stand still for weeks with stultifying torpor and then leap forward with "lightning speed" and capricious tempo as "months turned into days and years into months."¹⁵ To reflect such painful and arbitrary temporal dilation, Holocaust literature requires calibration of "different measures of time," Ida Fink writes in her aptly titled *Scrap of Time*.¹⁶ If the Warsaw Ghetto was an "island in time," as Engelking claims, then it was a temporal abyss governed by its own laws of time and detached from any contiguity with conventional chronology and geography. The young protagonist of Uri Orlev's *The Island on Bird Street*, a pioneering book of children's literature about the Holocaust, says that he clung to life in the

11 Barbara Engelking and Beata Chomątowska, "W czasie zawieszonym," *Tygodnik Powszechny* (April 16, 2018), accessed April 29, 2023, <https://www.tygodnikpowszechny.pl/w-czasie-zawieszonym-152758>.

12 Lejb Goldin, "Kronik fun [mes-les]" [Kronika jednej doby], *Ringelblum Archive*, ARG I 1219, vol. 26, 450-461; accessed May 3, 2023, <https://cbj.jhi.pl/documents/966113/11/>. For astute analysis of Goldin's story see Sven-Erik Rose, "Writing Hunger in a Modernist Key in the Warsaw Ghetto: Leyb Goldin's *Chronicle of a Single Day*," *Jewish Social Studies* 23 (1) (2017): 29-63.

13 Engelking, *Czas*, 17-19.

14 Barbara Engelking and Gunnar Paulsson, *Holocaust and Memory* (London: Leicester University Press, 2001), 99.

15 Samuel Kassow, *Who Will Write Our History?: Emanuel Ringelblum, the Warsaw Ghetto, and the Oyneq Shabes Archive* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007), 13.

16 Ida Fink, *A Scrap of Time and Other Stories*, trans. Madeline Levine and Francine Prose (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1998), 3.

Warsaw Ghetto “as though I were living on a desert island.”¹⁷ The ghetto was an island in time and space detached from the rest of existence.

Representing such catastrophic circumstances challenges authors to innovate new techniques for addressing temporality and geography. The predicament is even more acute in children’s literature. In criticism on the role of chronology in children’s literature, scholars such as Maria Nikolajeva claim that, given child readers’ relatively limited temporal experience and historical range, time is always a fraught subject in any work of youth fiction.¹⁸ However, such temporal difficulties multiply exponentially when representing the history of the Holocaust and its complex dimensions of terrifying time and suffocating space. Authors of children’s literature must therefore seek out alternate ways to recreate this traumatic history.

28 Days and *Ark of Time* attempt to resolve this difficulty by converting time into text. Reading time runs parallel to historical time but is also a way out of the chronological chasm of the ghetto. Safier and Szczygielski’s novels illustrate how literature creates its own chronology apposite to the temporal isolation of the Warsaw Ghetto by presenting reading as an alternate measure of time. This was especially true in the ghetto, where reading was pervasive and indispensable:

Reading books was a widespread form of participation in cultural life in the ghetto, a habit difficult to give up. Even people on the peripheries read passionately. Everything was read, depending on preferences, possibilities, and needs. To get away from the outside world, to forget about reality while experiencing the adventures of fictional heroes.¹⁹

Stories offered a readily available if ephemeral exit from history to prisoners in the ghetto. Orlev’s character, whose analogy of the ghetto to a desert isle derives from a book, namely *Robinson Crusoe*, claims that literary sustenance was as essential to him as physical nourishment. “I knew exactly what to look for: candles and food. That was all I needed. Except for a good book, if I found one,” he says.²⁰ Mira in *28 Days* likewise exchanges bread for books: “I showed

17 Uri Orlev, *The Island on Bird Street*, trans. Hillel Halkin (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1984), 87.

18 Maria Nikolajeva, *From Mythic to Linear: Time in Children’s Literature* (Lanham, Md.: Children’s Literature Association and Scarecrow Press, 2000).

19 Barbara Engelking and Jacek Leociak, *Getto warszawskie: przewodnik po nieistniejącym mieście* (Warszawa: IFIS PAN, 2001), 533.

20 Orlev, *Island*, 48.

him the book. 'I'll give you a piece of bread for it,'" she says to a bookseller.²¹ Such zealous hunger for books was not restricted to Jews in the Warsaw Ghetto. Herman Kruk, the chief librarian of the Vilna Ghetto, reported that Jewish prisoners in Vilna also frequently sought refuge in reading. While some ghetto inmates preferred texts that in some way reflected their tribulations and ordeals, most ghetto inmates looked to literature as "a means of escape... Books carried them away, over the ghetto walls and into the world. A reader could thus tear himself away from his oppressive isolation and in his mind be reunited with life, with his stolen freedom," Kruk wrote in 1942.²² Literature's capacity to enchant readers by transporting them to another time and place is also manifest in *28 Days* and *Ark of Time*. Mira delights in perusing books as a means of assimilating the languages and perspectives she will need in a future she envisions for herself on foreign shores. Books are virtual passports that grant her imaginary passage to a better life, even as the war still rages:

Whenever I had the chance, I took a detour through the book market. I enjoyed losing myself in the boxes and suitcases of books for sale: works by the likes of Thomas Mann, Sigmund Freud, Karl Marx, or Erich Kästner, all authors forbidden by the Nazis. And better yet, there were even books in English. I'd been able to teach myself some English using books, in case I ever got to America. I'd started with picture books like *Snow White*, *Little Red Riding Hood*, and *Winnie-the-Pooh*. But by now, I could read whole detective novels. My favorites were the Lord Peter Wimsey detective novels by Dorothy L. Sayers, even if she could only transport me as far as England in my mind and not all the way to New York.²³

Losing herself in books allows Mira to find herself in ambitions inspired by her reading.

Libraries facilitated such dreams by serving as portals to heterotopic space within the ghetto.²⁴ Among the two dozen libraries that historically

21 Safier, *28 Days*, 62.

22 Herman Kruk, "Library and Reading Room in the Vilna Ghetto, Strashun Street 6," trans. Zachary M. Baker, in *The Holocaust and the Book: Destruction and Preservation*, ed. Jonathan Rose (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2001): 171–200; 192.

23 Safier, *28 Days*, 61.

24 On the Warsaw Ghetto as heterotopia in children's literature, see Ada Bieber, "Mentoring in a Heterotopic Space – Janusz Korczak's Orphanage in Contemporary Picture Books," *Filoteknoś* 5 (2015): 181–189; and Mateusz Świetlicki and Dorota Michułka, "Unburied Practices of Memory: The Holocaust and the Polish-Jewish Relations in Joanna Rudniańska's *Kotka Brygidy* (2007) and *XY* (2012)," *Children's Literature in Education* (2022).

functioned in the Warsaw Ghetto was one at Leszno 67, where Basia Temkin-Berman operated a children's library.²⁵ This is the real address that the fictional Rafał in *Ark of Time* locates as his personal epicenter of the ghetto: "A special place on his personal map of the ghetto is taken by the library, a location to which he could find his way even if blindfolded. Rafał superimposes his personal map organized around this central point of the library," writes Małgorzata Wójcik-Dudek in her reading of Szczygielski's novel.²⁶ Literature and books reorganize the space of the ghetto just as they generate a substitute temporal order defying persecution. Krzysztof Rybak observes that Szczygielski visually illustrates the central role of books in *Ark of Time* by including in his novel a map of Rafał's conception of wartime Warsaw centering on the historic location of the ghetto children's library. Books help Rafał map his city; the map, in turn, becomes part of Szczygielski's book. Similarly, for Mira in *28 Days*, escape from the ghetto and reunion with her sister proceeds through a book: "Before I knew what was happening, I was sucked into the book, transported away from our world," she says.²⁷ Books offer spatial and temporal alterity.

The intersection between the history of juvenile reading in the Warsaw Ghetto and recent fiction about the ghetto for juvenile readers – which, we have seen, often depicts children reading in the ghetto – brings into focus a point of starting commonality: books present a way *i n* and *o u t* of the ghetto. Imperiled Jewish children reading *d u r i n g* the Holocaust and inquisitive young people today reading *a b o u t* the Holocaust engage in parallel acts of time travel and spatial transport. While reading *i n* the ghetto served as a means of escaping a hellish world of tortuous time and little space, reading *a b o u t* the ghetto follows an opposite course by affording access to the lost world of the ghetto. Reading *i n* the ghetto was a way of escaping history; reading *a b o u t* the ghetto offers a way of entering it. Both situate in literature

25 Engelking and Leociak, *Getto*, 323; 536. See also Rokhl Oyerbakh, *Varshover tsavoies* (Tel Aviv: Yisroel Bukh, 1974), 268; and Krzysztof Rybak, "Zupełnie inne miasto. Obrazy warszawskiego getta w polskiej literaturze dziecięcej XXI wieku," *Dzieciństwo. Literatura i Kultura* 3 (1) (2021): 67–84; 74–75. On the children's library of the Warsaw Ghetto see also Basia Temkin-Berman, *City Within a City*, trans. Jerzy Michałowicz (New York: International Psychoanalytic Books, 2012), and David Shavit, *Hunger for the Printed Word: Books and Libraries in the Jewish Ghettos of Nazi-Occupied Europe* (Jefferson, NC and London: McFarland & Co., 1997).

26 Małgorzata Wójcik-Dudek, *Reading (in) the Holocaust*, trans. Lucyna Aleksandrowicz-Pędich (Berlin: Peter Lang, 2020), 187.

27 Safier, *28 Days*, 185.

a transhistorical means of representing time and space that is measured not by the clock, but by the word.

The Holocaust as Chronotope: Time in Text

Holocaust memory geographically locates the history of the genocide in specific sites of atrocity and chronologically organizes the conflict's vast topography of horror into a sequence of historical events. This compression of historic time and place into language lends credence to Sue Vice's argument that the Holocaust is a narrative topos in time, a new and extreme version of the chronotope,²⁸ a term coined and defined by Mikhail Bakhtin as follows:

In the literary artistic chronotope, spatial and temporal indicators are fused into one carefully thought-out, concrete whole. Time, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history. This intersection of axes and fusion of indicators characterizes the artistic chronotope.²⁹

The interrelationship of temporal and spatial coordinates in Holocaust memory makes literary representation of this atrocity a distinctive chronotope. As a chronotope of difficult memory epitomizing trauma, Vice says, the Holocaust evokes a set of abject historic experiences at the extreme limit of the human condition, such as the charged circumstances of "extermination (in the camps), imprisonment (in ghettos), hiding (in confined spaces), or attempted escape (over the thresholds of borders, walls, barbed wire)."³⁰ Framing Holocaust literature in terms of the Bakhtinian concept of the chronotope helps to elucidate how such texts reify the genocide's history of racial violence in "memory-time and the past," Vice says.³¹

Safier and Szczygielski's portrayals of the Warsaw Ghetto fit this theoretical model. The Warsaw Ghetto was a closed city within a city bearing its own tragic history within the broader history of the Holocaust. Destroyed in May 1943 following the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising and eradicated from the city's streetscape, the ghetto no longer exists except in memory. Its urban

28 Sue Vice, "Trauma, Postmodernism and Descent: Contemporary Holocaust Criticism in Britain," *Holocaust Studies* 11 (1) (2005): 99–118; 110–113.

29 Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 84.

30 Vice, "Trauma," 112.

31 *Ibid.*

geography was erased from the map of Warsaw. The passage of time and re-configuration of space since the war obscure memory of the ghetto. Artists and authors who choose to portray it must depict a time and place without contemporary referent; it is a “pure” chronotope that exists only in language and artifact. Engelking and Leociak write that the ghetto “is hidden from us by earth, asphalt, the foundations of new houses, and oblivion.”³² The ghetto can be recalled but not inhabited; its terrain can only be glimpsed in memory or visited in words.

Excavating such condensed history and buried space is difficult work for any writer, let alone for authors of children’s books whose narrative styles generally hew to the more innocent perspectives of children.³³ Yet conceiving of children’s literature of the Warsaw Ghetto as a chronotope of difficult memory underscores the various ways in which authors experiment with narrative form to make reading time a central concern in historical fiction about the Holocaust. Reading time is a favorite activity among the characters in these texts; it is also an essential act of critical engagement. Time for reading and the reading of time coalesce to highlight the role of narrative in recreating this event as a key chronotope of traumatic memory. Language generates its own temporal order separate from ordinary chronology, but it is precisely in reading time in the Holocaust that literary children of the past and the present meet. And thus the chronotope of youth fiction about the ghetto invites readers to apprehend a multiplicity of temporal frames. “There is not just one chronotope, or spatio-temporal form of experience, but a plurality of them: there are different chronotopes for different views of the world and different social situations,” Bakhtin scholar Liisa Steinby says.³⁴ As a topos of traumatic experience, the ghetto allows for a diversity of temporal dimensions.³⁵ Time could be experienced in different ways, depending on circumstances or literary depiction. For instance, the chronotope of the ghetto could express the unremitting bleakness of unendurable hunger, as in Goldin’s autobiographical story of slow starvation. Or it could also open up possibilities for imagining alternate futures, as in Safier’s *28 Days*. This temporal diversity

32 Barbara Engelking and Jacek Leociak, *The Warsaw Ghetto: A Guide to the Perished City*, trans. Emma Harris (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), ix.

33 Sue Vice, *Children Writing the Holocaust* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, U.K.: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 143.

34 Liisa Steinby, “Bakhtin’s Concept of the Chronotope: The Viewpoint of an Acting Subject,” in *Bakhtin and His Others: (Inter)subjectivity, Chronotope, Dialogism*, ed. Liisa Steinby and Tintti Klapuri (London: Anthem, 2013), 105–126, 107.

35 Vice, “Trauma,” 110–113.

reflects what Gary Saul Morson and Caryl Emerson claim is Bakhtin's "crucial point," namely that "time and space vary in qualities; different social activities and representations of those activities presume different kinds of time and space."³⁶ The history and depiction of reading in the Warsaw Ghetto engender precisely this shift.

Safier and Szczygielski's depictions of the "timescape"³⁷ of the ghetto as a chronotope of traumatic memory provide for temporal multiplicity by taking into account the role of reading in structuring time in this abnormal environment. The chronotope of the Warsaw Ghetto encompasses the historic role of literature in that place, including the desperate conditions under which people trapped in the anteroom of death voraciously read books to hold on to life. This broadens the significance of the ghetto as literary chronotope and makes it pertinent not only to the past but to the present. "28 *Days* is not just about the past. It's about all of us," Safier writes in the afterword to his novel.³⁸ He strategically invests his characters with an idiomatic, vernacular mode of modern speech as a means of connecting contemporary youth with the history of the ghetto. He says that he asked himself, "How can I bring this history back to life for today's generation? That is why I chose a direct and modern voice for this novel."³⁹ The multiplicity of timeframes indicated by the chronotope of the ghetto projects the relevance of Holocaust memory in various directions.⁴⁰ Although the Warsaw Ghetto was situated in fixed coordinates of past time and destroyed space, its literary depictions expand its frame of reference to include points of contact between the present and the past. The ghetto may exist only in language, but it is in language that victims from the past and readers from the present encounter each other in a literary space beyond the bounds of the ghetto's temporal constriction. The chronotope of the ghetto and the chronicle of its literary history complement each other in accentuating this dynamic quality of reading time in juvenile narrative accounts of the

36 Gary Saul Morson and Caryl Emerson, *Mikhail Bakhtin: Creation of a Prosaics* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), 367.

37 Falconer, *Hell*, 42

38 Safier, *28 Days*, 331.

39 Quoted in Micha Brumlik, "Postmemory und transgenerationales Trauma," in *Die Shoah in Bildung und Erziehung heute*, ed. Marina Chernivsky and Friederike Lorenz-Sinai (Berlin: Barbara Budrich, 2022), 15–30; 22.

40 On the coexistence of contradictory timeframes in children's literature of the Warsaw Ghetto, see Krzysztof Rybak, "Hide and Seek with Nazis: Playing with Child Identity in Polish Children's Literature about the Shoah," *Libri & Liberi* 6 (1) (2017): 11–24.

ghetto. This is literature that creates time both as traumatic memory and as transcendent time. Reading about the Holocaust serves to transport contemporary children to the historic past, and reading during the Holocaust helped imprisoned children to imagine a redemptive future. In both cases, literature functions as a kind of time machine, a narrative means of overcoming temporal limits and bending time to one's needs.

A Well-read Time Machine

As criticism on science fiction proliferates and gains increasing purchase in academic discourse, scholars such as David Wittenberg have begun to argue for the validity of conceiving of literature as a sort of time machine. Wittenberg writes:

Since even the most elementary narratives, whether fictional or nonfictional, set out to modify or manipulate the order, duration, and significance of events in time – that is, since all narratives do something like “travel” through time or construct “alternate” worlds – one could arguably call narrative itself a “time machine,” which is to say, a mechanism for revising the arrangements of stories and histories. In this more expansive view, literature itself might be viewed as a subtype of time travel, rather than the other way around, and time traveling might be considered a fundamental condition of storytelling itself, even its very essence.⁴¹

That literary narrative affords a means of elastically traversing time is itself a proposition that stems from a work of literature, H. G. Wells's *The Time Machine* of 1895. It comes as no surprise, then, that Wells's landmark novel is one of only two texts named in both *Ark of Time* and *28 Days*.⁴² In *28 Days*, Mira fantasizes, “If I'd had a time machine like the hero in the book by H.G. Wells, then I'd have gone back in time.”⁴³ In *Ark of Time*, Rafał reads Wells's novel alongside other classics of science fiction, such as Jules Verne's *Journey to the Centre of the Earth*. When a rescuer smuggles Rafał out of the ghetto, the boy describes his escape as a journey to a different epoch akin to that of the protagonist in Wells's novel:

⁴¹ David Wittenberg, *Time Travel: The Popular Philosophy of Narrative* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012), 1.

⁴² The other is Janusz Korczak's *Król Maciuś Pierwszy*.

⁴³ Safier, *28 Days*, 202.

I imagined I was a Traveller in the Land of Time. I just arrived by a time machine in a mysterious, extraordinary future. Nobody must identify me as someone who came from here and now, so I had to pretend to be one of the natives.⁴⁴

Like the world outside the ghetto, time is a domain with its own natives and newcomers. Wójcik-Dudek writes that Rafał adapts by composing his own narrative: “For the occasion of his escape from the ghetto, the boy invents his own ‘fable.’”⁴⁵ But this is imprecise. Rafał does not craft his own story but applies one he already knows. He sees his life as the embodiment of a book he has read. Once outside the ghetto, Rafał continues to perceive his situation in literary terms. He believes he is performing the role of a character in “a story for the Morlocks,” the underclass in *Time Machine*.⁴⁶ Eventually, Rafał’s favorite books merge: the spatial emphasis of *Journey to the Centre of the Earth* fuses with the temporal thrust of *Time Machine* in the climactic scene in which Rafał evades discovery by the Nazis by burrowing underground beneath the Warsaw Zoo where he discovers a time machine that dispatches him to the future. Wójcik-Dudek writes that this temporal *deus ex machina* not only brings a Victorian literary classic into the Warsaw Ghetto, but also delivers memory of the Holocaust into the present, where generations meet:

Rafał is still a young boy who jumps into the present by means of a magical time machine. This temporal arrangement may be more than just a simple device which is popularly used in fantasy literature to connect two parallel worlds through a tunnel of sorts [...]. Another, equally important condition is met by telling the story which enables the “visitors from the past” – the survivors – to recall the world which is no more but which, as time boundaries are obliterated, constructs an entirely different space – a space of dialogue between generations.⁴⁷

Story enables Rafał’s “conquering of time.”⁴⁸ Insofar as Rafał can claim victory over time, however, his triumph comes through the time machine technology of books.

44 Szczygielski, *Arka*, 95–96.

45 Wójcik-Dudek, *Reading*, 189.

46 Szczygielski, *Arka*, 87.

47 Wójcik-Dudek, *Reading*, 193.

48 *Ibid.*, 192.

Other works of children's literature about the Holocaust make comparable use of a time travel motif. For instance, Jane Yolen's *The Devil's Arithmetic*⁴⁹ places a contemporary Jewish-American girl into the crucible of the Holocaust through a magical time travel portal. But in Yolen's novel, the narrative present precedes the historical past, and the adolescent time-traveling character moves backward in time, in defiance of the future-oriented trajectory in Wells's text. Susan Stewart reads Yolen's novel through a time-shift narrative paradigm that calls attention to "how time and plot, both of which are connected, are constructed."⁵⁰ Nevertheless, Yolen's lack of a time machine or reference to such a device's literary provenance is significant. For a Wells-like time machine is not merely the instrument by which the well-read Rafał arrives in the present, but a metaphor for children's literature about the Holocaust in general. By foregrounding the role of reading time in narrating this history, works such as Safier's and Szczygielski's epitomize how literature both imagines the possibility of time travel and functions as a time machine in its own right.

If *The Time Machine* offers a fictional paradigm for using text to mix time, Holocaust fiction suggests the potential for using text to make time by opening a narrative window into the temporal worlds that can be fathomed only in literature. Safier and Szczygielski's youth novels of the Warsaw Ghetto in part ensue from the *The Time Machine* but introduce texts as time machine: a mechanism for generating narrative time as a chronotope of trauma confronted, recollected, and, sometimes, survived. "Stories are like that. They work differently for different people,"⁵¹ says a character in *28 Days*. The same can be said of Holocaust narratives: they work differently for different people. Depending on the circumstances of when, why, and what one reads, literature can emerge as an essential component not only in representing the past, but in creating a new relationship between space and story, time and text.

Reading Time in the Ghetto

Mira of *28 Days* says that she found a rare instance of serenity in the Warsaw Ghetto when she succeeded in "losing myself in the boxes and suitcases of

49 Jane Yolen, *The Devil's Arithmetic* (New York: Viking, 1988).

50 Susan Stewart, "Shifting Worlds: Constructing the Subject, Narrative, and History in Historical Time Shifts," in *Telling Children's Stories: Narrative Theory and Children's Literature*, ed. Michael Cadden (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2010), 231–250; 232.

51 Safier, *28 Days*, 320.

books.”⁵² She later says that her sister “Hannah was lost in her story.”⁵³ What does it mean for a child to be lost in books or in reading? Furthermore, how might that sense of textual abandon contrast with the phenomenon of finding a child in a book, especially of recovering one of the countless forgotten child victims of the Holocaust who have been lost in time? A poignant anecdote in Rokhl Oyerbakh’s memoir of the Warsaw Ghetto sheds some light on such irreconcilable questions.

At the end of a chapter profiling several Warsaw Ghetto librarians, Oyerbakh describes the activities of the ghetto libraries, including the children’s library run by Basia Temkin-Berman, during the horrific period of the *Große Aktion* (Great Deportation) of summer 1942, when the ghetto was decimated in one of the worst massacres of the Holocaust. Nearly 300,000 Jews from the ghetto were sent to their deaths in less than two months. Books played an important role even during this apocalyptic time. Temkin-Berman continued loaning books to children whom she knew could not possibly return them. Oyerbakh writes:

Books from the children’s library played a crucial role even in the period of the deportations. In the first days of the *Aktion*, Basia told me after the war, there were children who did not surrender what was theirs. They would come to Leszno 67 to exchange books during borrowing hours, and even at that time – for the final time – the books served their readers [...]. The books borrowed on that day were never returned. Some of them were packed in the small bundles that each child was permitted for the trip “east”! Some of them ended – together with prayer books placed in rucksacks – strewed on the ground at Treblinka.

Even now I can still see before my eyes a boy during one of the roundups on Leszno. His father had been imprisoned for weeks. His mother, who had resolved of her own “volition” to give herself and her children up for deportation at the *Umschlagplatz* in order to find her relatives in Brisk, is busy collecting food for the road from us neighbors in the courtyard of Leszno 66. From every side sounds the strange cacophony of the roundup. But throughout it all, the twelve-year-old boy stands in a corner of the courtyard, completely immersed in the newly revealed worlds he has entered, not hearing and not seeing what is occurring before him. With all his senses, he reads a tattered little book with a red binding...⁵⁴

52 *Ibid.*, 61.

53 *Ibid.*, 142.

54 Oyerbakh, *Varshover*, 270–71.

Where is this boy whom Oyerbakh observes intently reading during the chaotic madness of a roundup? He is lost in a book, perhaps even lost in time. But Oyerbakh intimates that perhaps it would be more accurate to say that the boy entered a new world and another time. Not hearing and not seeing what was occurring at that moment in the ghetto, this historic and murdered child reader imaginatively traveled with his literary instincts to another, presumably less barbaric world. Even during his terrifying last hours in the ghetto, the boy delves into reading not to waste some of the last precious moments he had left on earth, but to gain access to another temporal realm, one that Oyerbakh glimpses in her vignette. Time for reading is time outside history. The book, perhaps borrowed from the library across Leszno Street, rather than the roundup engrosses all the child's senses, temporal and spatial. In this respect, he is like all devoted child readers. It is by losing themselves in reading that children find themselves. This is as true of child readers today as it was of child victims of the Holocaust who were lost to the abominations of that violent time. At all times, however, the child reader lives on – bound not in history, but in the pages of book.

Abstract

Daniel Feldman

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH LITERATURE AND LINGUISTICS, BAR-ILAN UNIVERSITY

Reading Time in Youth Novels about the Warsaw Ghetto

Children's literature about the Holocaust stages a descent into traumatic history that transforms time into text. This article reads two youth novels about the Warsaw Ghetto to illustrate how the Holocaust functions as a chronotope of difficult memory in contemporary children's books. *Arka czasu* [The ark of time], a 2013 children's novel in Polish by Marcin Szczygielski, and *28 Tage lang* [28 days], a 2014 young adult novel in German by David Safier, depict storytelling and books as markers of temporality in juvenile narratives of the Holocaust. The article argues that reading time is a persistent topos in making the Holocaust relevant to young readers.

Keywords

Holocaust, children's literature, Warsaw Ghetto, libraries, narrative, chronotope