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**A Jewish Child in a Polish Hiding Place.  
Children, Adults and Animals  
in Nava Semel's *And the Rat Laughed*  
and Wilhelm Dichter's *God's Horse***

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In comparative studies in literature one often encounters claims that Polish and Hebrew literatures on the Holocaust belong to two different orders of culture.<sup>1</sup> The former is written by both Jews and non-Jews from the positions of the victims and bystanders (less frequently of the perpetrators). Hebrew Holocaust literature is written by Jews, nearly always from the position of the victims and from an outside perspective, far from the site of the Shoah: Poland.

In this article two novels will be analyzed: *And the Rat Laughed* by Nava Semel and *God's Horse* by Wilhelm Dichter. The former was originally written in Hebrew, while the latter in Polish. They come from different linguistic backgrounds, yet they belong to the same order of culture: both were written by Jewish authors affected by the trauma of the Shoah, even though they belong to different generations – Wilhelm Dichter is a child of

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. *Polish and Hebrew Literature and National Identity*, ed. Alina Molisak and Shoshana Ronen (Warszawa: Dom Wydawniczy Elipsa, 2010); *Jews and Non-Jews: Memories and Interactions from the Perspective of Cultural Studies*, ed. Lucyna Aleksandrowicz-Pędoch and Jacek Partyka (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2015).

the Holocaust,<sup>2</sup> while Nava Semel is a representative of the post-Holocaust second generation.<sup>3</sup> Both of them speak from the position of victims, and in both cases, the main protagonist is a Jewish child.

In 1996, at the age of sixty-one, Dichter published his first novel on the Holocaust, *Koń Pana Boga* [*God's Horse*], amidst a series of late literary debuts of children of the Holocaust. When in 1986 Semel published her *כובע זכוכית* [*Kova Zekhukhit*] [*Hat of Glass*], a short story collection and the first work of fiction in Israel to address the topic of the second generation, she was thirty-one years old. The novel *צחוק של עכברוש* [*Cahok shel akbarosh*] [*And the Rat Laughed*] was published in 2001. Both novels discussed here thus opened new chapters in the history of Holocaust literature, although in different ways.<sup>4</sup>

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- 2 Wilhelm Dichter was born in 1935 in Boryslaw (then in Poland, today in West Ukraine) to a family of assimilated Polish Jews. His father died during the Shoah, while he and his mother survived in his hometown. After the war they moved to Warsaw, where he grew up in a communist social environment. He graduated from the Warsaw Polytechnic (receiving a doctorate in mechanical engineering) and worked in Poland until March 1968. He was forced by the antisemitic campaign of Władysław Gomułka to immigrate with his family to the United States. He settled in the Boston area and worked as an expert in ballistics and algorithm design. His literary debut was *Koń Pana Boga* [*God's Horse*, 1996], an autobiographical novel in Polish based on his personal experiences from early childhood and youth. His second book, *Szkoła Bezbożników* [*The Atheists' School*, 1996], deals with Polish postwar communist reality and the situation of young Holocaust survivors. Both novels were nominated for the Nike Award. All the quotations here come from their English translations: *God's Horse* and *The Atheists' School*. Trans. Madeline G. Levine (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2012) [hereinafter *God's Horse* by Wilhelm Dichter will be designated by the letter "D"].
- 3 Nava Semel was born in Tel Aviv (Israel) in 1954 and passed away in 2017. She was a poet, author of prose for children and adults, playwright and writer of television scripts and opera libretti, as well as a translator. She also worked as a journalist and a producer for television and radio. Her mother was an Auschwitz prisoner and survivor. Semel received several literary prizes, including the American National Jewish Book Award for children's literature (1990), the Women Writers of the Mediterranean Award (1994), the Austrian Best Radio Drama Award (1996), the Israeli Prime Minister's Award (1996), and Tel Aviv Woman of the Year in Literature Award (2007). All the quotations here come from the English translation of her book, originally written in Hebrew: *And the Rat Laughed*, trans. Miriam Shlesinger (Melbourne: Hybrid Publishers, 2008) [hereinafter *And the Rat Laughed* by Nava Semel will be designated by letter "S"].
- 4 Cf. Joanna Stöcker-Sobelman and Michał Sobelman, "Bypass pamięci: Myśli wokół książki Śmiech szczura Navy Semel," *Miasteczko Poznań* 2 (2019): 15–21; Marek Sawa, "Indywidualne doświadczenie przestrzeni kryjówek w prozie Michała Głowińskiego, Wilhelma Dichtera i Henryka Grynberga," in *„Rozliczanie” przeszłości. Relacje polsko-żydowskie w tekstach kultury XX i XXI wieku*, ed. Tadeusz Sucharski and Marta Murawska (Słupsk: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Akademii Pomorskiej, 2016), 145–168; Piotr Szewc, „Koń Pana

### Memories/Post-memories/Sub-memories/Non-memories

Several kinds of memory are activated in these novels: the memory and non-memory of a survivor (Dichter), the post-memory of the child of a survivor, the unnatural sub-memory of future reality (Semel), and once again, the non-memories of new generations of readers (in both). After an initial read of the novels, one may hypothesize that the Holocaust is still traumatizing to all who carry these kinds of memories.<sup>5</sup> But which memory is now the most universal among the contemporary public?

One can find an answer to this question in Semel's novel, in the attitude of one of the last eye-witnesses of the Shoah: "Non-memory – that's what she ought to have talked about" (S, 22). The witnesses have passed away, their memories must be preserved, although people who have lost their memory are envied. Holocaust survivors do not usually lose their memory, though children of the Holocaust sometimes do.<sup>6</sup> Representatives of the second generation are deeply traumatized by these memories, so, surprisingly perhaps, it is those from the no-memory population who can really absorb the experience of the Shoah and feel real compassion for its victims.<sup>7</sup> The protagonist of *And the Rat Laughed* (a teenager, granddaughter of a Holocaust victim) wonders: "Why [does her grandmother talk about her Shoah experiences with – author's note] her granddaughter? Why not her daughter? The old woman's daughter, no longer young and not yet old, had been ruled out as possible listener to the story" (S, 18). The old woman ("the little-girl-who-once-was") from Semel's

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Boga (review)," *Nowe Książki* 1 (1997): 12; Magdalena Rabizo-Birek, „Koń Pana Boga (review)," *Twórczość* 8 (1997): 128–131; Mieczysław Orski, *Koń Pana Boga* (review), *Przegląd Powszechny* 3 (1997): 362–364; Ranen Omer-Sherman, "To Extract from It Some Sort of Beautiful Thing": The Holocaust in the Families and Fiction of Nava Semel and Etgar Keret," *Humanities* (Basel) 9 (4) (2020):137.

5 Cf. Marianne Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture after the Holocaust* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012); Maria Rice Bellamy, *Bridges to Memory Postmemory in Contemporary Ethnic American Women's Fiction* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2016); Marta Cobel-Tokarska, "Memory and Postmemory of War in the Realities of Contemporary Ukraine in *Everything Is Illuminated*, a Novel by Jonathan Safran Foer," in *Niepamięć wojny. Europa Środkowo-Wschodnia w XX/XXI wieku*, ed. Justyna Budzińska, Edyta Głowacka-Sobiech and Bernadette Jonda (Poznań: Instytut Historii UAM, 2017), 117–134; *Entangled Memories: Remembering the Holocaust in a Global Age*, ed. Marius Henderson and Julia Lange (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2017); Griselda Pollock, "The Lessons of Janina Bauman: Cultural Memory From the Holocaust," *Thesis Eleven* 107 (1) (2011): 81–93.

6 See Paul Valent, *Child Survivors of the Holocaust* (New York: Brunner-Routledge, 2002).

7 See Erin Heather McGlothlin, *Second-generation Holocaust Literature: Legacies of Survival and Perpetration* (Suffolk: Boydell & Brewer, 2006).

novel remains a child forever, “inside her [...] time has become fossilized” and only “on the outside it has taken its toll” (S, 29). A child of the Holocaust is able to share his or her tragic experience only with a no-memory child. A witness commits that experience “to the Holocaust, a huge submemory folder” (S, 72), a vision of the future memory of the Shoah. On the other hand, all generations after the Holocaust “would be trapped in a never-ending loop of murder, hatred and fear,” with “each generation starting the terrible cycle anew, having learned no lesson whatsoever” (S, 72). “The little-girl-who-once-was” decided to give testimony to her grandchild. She approached “the danger zone, the limits of control, the place where she would no longer be able to hold on to the story line” (S, 19):

For a moment, the old woman feels as if she has not told the story at all, but has merely imagined doing so. And even before her granddaughter gets up to leave, she is overcome with a burning desire to go back and try again to tell it more smoothly, in a way that would include whatever the little girl hunkering in the pit knows. (S, 28)

The memory of the Shoah is shown in Semel’s novel as a transgenerational process, in which representatives of three generations take part, but the matter also affects the next generation as a so-called memory-implant.

The problem of memory looks different in *God’s Horse*. In Dichter’s book, the child of the Holocaust is also the main protagonist-narrator (in this novel there are no protagonists who belong to the future generations). His name is Wilhelm. He is shown by the narrator (meaning himself) in the process of growing-up – at the moment the war breaks out (1939) he is four years old, while in 1947, when the plot ends, he is a twelve-year-old boy and moves (with his mother and stepfather) to Warsaw. His experience of a traumatized childhood opens another dimension. His memory is protected by adults who allow him to remain a child – he therefore feels chosen.

The events which form the basis for the plot of the novel are related by the narrator-protagonist on the basis of his own personal memory, which along with the relations of his parents and grandparents, are a very important source for the plot’s construction. In the novel one can see the child’s knowledge of his family history, events which took place before his birth (he knew for instance the love story of his grandparents, and even the details of their meeting as young people). Semel’s heroine knows nothing about her parents and grandparents and does not know their names or even her own. She knows nothing about herself and only assumes she is a Jewish child.

In the beginning of the novel *God’s Horse* we meet the grandmother from the mother’s side – Antonina – “short and somewhat prickly,” who “was always carefully attired in a black dress” and had “black hair and black eyes, like

Mother and me” (D, 7). One detail is particularly important about her – “everyone except [...] [her – S. J. Ż.] spoke in German [at home – S. J. Ż.]” (D, 7). Her husband, a key-figure in the boy’s miraculous escape from the Shoah, is described by him. The grandpa organized hiding places on the Aryan side for the whole family as well as money to live on. He himself stayed in the ghetto. In the memory of the child, the photograph of the man in an “Austrian uniform, with a medal and a saber” (D, 7) was the only recollected image of his ancestor from his mother’s side.

Other episodes clearly remembered by Wilhelm are the entry of Soviet troops into Borysław in September 1939 and the anti-Jewish pogrom carried out by the Ukrainians after the Germans entered the city in July 1941. The protagonist of Dichter’s book thus has a conscious knowledge of reality and history.

When the Jews were being locked up in a closed district designated as a ghetto by the Germans, the boy and his mother remained on the Aryan side. They wander from one hiding place to the next in the apartments of friends and strangers, and the boy, not having a normal life, begins to exist in his own world of his imagination. He learns about the outside world only from the accounts of his loved ones, who sometimes come out of confinement (in the hiding place on the Aryan side). Above all, he hears about the slow disappearance of the Jewish world and its people, among them people known and close to him. However, he prefers to forget immediately the things that hurt him. In addition, for security reasons, his memory also deletes details about subsequent hideouts and those who organized them. Astonishingly, this process accelerates after the war:

During the Hitler times I lived on Pańska Street, at Janka’s, at Pani Sprysyowa’s, at Pani Hirnikowa’s, and in the well. I was always losing someone and I had to remember more and more dead people. At Andzia Katz’s I started to forget. What did Grandma Antionina look like? I didn’t know. (D, 94)

In the end the boy becomes afraid that he is beginning to lose his memory, not only of the deceased but also of living persons who survived the Shoah: “If they seal the border, Nusia and Kopcio will remain in Borysław forever. Will I forget them, too?” (D, 94).

Even during the Holocaust, he realized that memory was really his enemy, because remembering meant danger and could even threaten him with death. So, he was afraid not only of his own memory, but also of those who might have remembered him as a Jewish child from before the war. Therefore, he wanted to change his own memory and that of others into non-memory. This can be clearly seen in the scene when the mother goes outside during her stay

in the hiding place. When the woman does not return for a long time, the boy thinks about his father appearing as an omnipotent figure who could reverse a bad fate:

I was terrified that something bad had happened to her. Only father could fix it. Who else was capable of turning things around and erasing everything from the memory of witnesses? (D, 83–84)

After the war, when he leaves these hiding places and is repatriated to Poland, his mother many times verifies the memory of her son as a child:

“Do you remember how we went to the orphanage from the hospital?”  
 “No.”  
 “And do you remember Uncle Unter?”  
 “No.” (D, 116–117)

With the passing of time the boy notices something worrying at himself. First, a few days after leaving his hiding place and finding his mother's colleague's (Andzia Katz) home, at first, he could not recall the voice of his Grandmother Antonina, or even her appearance. Then, living in the so-called Recovered Territories, he could also not recall his other Jewish relatives. He tries at any cost to recall his beloved uncle Milo (the older brother of his mother), who signed up in the Red Army in 1940 and was evacuated to Russia as a medical officer. He wants to find him very much: “I follow every Russian officer with creaking straps. If he's not a Kalmuk, I wonder if he's my uncle” (D, 117) – the boy associates his relative only with the sound of the leather belt and harness from his uncle's uniform. And what about his beloved grandfather? There was only a one trace in the boy's smell. He remembered the scent of a poison in a little bag that his grandpa wore around his neck. He was to use it if the Nazis caught him: “Mother sends me out unnecessarily to follow people in wooden shoes or striped camp clothes. I wouldn't recognize Grandfather! I've even stopped dreaming about him. I can only smell the odor from the ampule” (D, 117).

Memory loss progresses to manifest itself most terribly several months after the war: “Suddenly, I realized that I no longer remembered Father's voice. I tried to picture his mouth, in vain. His cheeks. His forehead. Hair. Nothing! ... Only his eyes.” (D, 118). Maybe this happened because after his father death his traumatized and suffering mother never mentioned him and “only once, she took his photograph out of her bag,” asking her son: “do you remember?” (D, 146), but then the boy answered only with silence.

The problem of memory is shown in completely different ways in these two novels. In Dichter's work, the reader can observe the personal memory

of a child of the Holocaust, which shapes the fabular construction of the literary text. In Semel's book, memory seems to be only a cultural construct, serving to make possible the trans-generation process of Holocaust memory transmission.

### A Polish Hiding Place

"Hiding places" is a very important motif for Holocaust history and literature.<sup>8</sup> The protagonist of Semel's *And the Rat Laughed* is a five-to-six-year-old Jewish girl, who, upon the liquidation of the local ghetto, was entrusted by her parents to the care of a Polish family – without any alternative. She was forced to spend many months alone in hiding places in extreme conditions or in the company of complete strangers. The protagonist of *God's Horse* is a little older, an eight-to-nine-year-old boy, who also spent time in different hiding places (in both the city and the countryside) but always in the company of family and friends. He feels loved and cared for. The unnamed girl from Semel's book was hidden in a village in a potato pit: "They lowered her into a pit under the ground. The stranger, the one whom she would come to call the 'farmer's wife,' dragged her down the ladder and said, this is where you stay" (S, 16). Through this horrible experience, the girl, who was too little to remember her own name, remains forever "the little-girl-who-once-was" in "the pit-that-once-was." She remembers only "darkness" and "nothing more" (S, 63); many years after the Holocaust she is still "forever in a pit" (S, 67) and feels as if she "never ever left" it (S, 35).

The next hiding place for the girl was a niche in the apartment of a priest who agreed to take care of her after she had spent many months in the pit. When she was handed over to a priest, she looks and acts as if she were dead. The priest narrates:

I try everything. Water, bread, a blanket, but she will not let me near her. All night long I watch her, contorted in her strange position – half lying, half sitting. Protecting every part of her body, trying to keep from being noticed. Whenever I approach her, she shrinks into the little niche in the wall adjoining my quarters. I yearn to tell the huddled soul: There is a place for you in this world. If only I could promise her a place in the next world. (S, 78)

She spends long periods of time with her eyelids shut tight, hunkered down "in her niche like a clump of mud" (S, 79). At last, she ventures out of the niche

8 Cf. Marta Cobel-Tokarska, *Desert Island, Burrow, Grave: Wartime Hiding Places of Jews in Occupied Poland* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2018); Natalia Aleksiuń, "Gender and the Daily Lives of Jews in Hiding in Eastern Galicia," *Nashim* 27 (2014): 38–61.

and starts “walking gingerly through [...] quarters” (S, 83) but she still “cringed in the niche that she dug in [...] [the priest’s – S. J. Ż.] quarters, and covered her hair with dirt” (S, 85), lying “quietly in her niche” (S, 86). As the war closes in, the niche becomes the girl’s and the priest’s common place of hiding: “the bombs felled so close that the blast caused the ground and the walls of the church to shake. [...] [They – S. J. Ż.] huddled in the niche; the little girl shut herself in there at once. The smell of fires and smoke filtered through” (S, 97).

The protagonist of the novel *God’s Horse* also spends time during the Holocaust in hiding places, as mentioned above. The first of those was under the bed in the apartment of their former Polish housekeeper. But he was not alone: “during the day Mother and Nusia sat in the corner and I lay under the bed,” while at night “we slept on the floor, and the husband and wife slept in the bed” (D, 28). In the second hideout, he begins to feel and to behave like an animal:

I saw her feet. I was like a mouse. Invisible myself, I observed everyone who entered the room. I would turn over slowly, from one side to the other, so the floor wouldn’t creak. Freshly scrubbed, it smelled like soup. That smell lingered for a long time, especially in the cracks between the boards. Hunger made me press my nose against the floor and inhale. (D, 29)

He deals with physiological matters like a pet. In order to relieve himself under the bed, he turned onto his stomach and slid a chamber pot under him. At night, the host “dumped out the bucket in the latrine, which was a communal one for several apartments” (D, 28). He felt like a mouse, any sound could betray him, “especially if there was a stranger in the kitchen” (D, 29). The boy relates:

I would grow sleepy from boredom, but I was afraid to fall asleep, because Mother told me that I groaned in my sleep. When my eyelids grew heavy I opened them with my fingers and, turning onto my back, I looked at the boards on top of which lay a straw-stuffed mattress. (D, 29)

During the day he “heard the sounds of birds outside the window. Their voices didn’t mean anything.” He liked them because “he was indifferent to them.” He was only afraid of “the voices of the people who would come to get [...] [him – S. J. Ż.]” (D, 30). In his opinion, the biggest danger were the children because “they would recognize [...] [him – S. J. Ż.] instantly in the street and hand [...] [him – S. J. Ż.] over to the Germans. Grownups might take pity on [...] [him – S. J. Ż.], but not children” (D, 30). Polish children persecuted him at night in his dreams:

I dreamed that I was running away from them. I was running blindly, farther and farther, until I stopped because I didn't know what to do next. I slowly lost the ability to walk. (D, 30)

But the most important matter was that at night he slept in his hideout together with his mother, who lay next to him "on the floor and talked with Janka, who leaned down from her bed" (D, 30). After many weeks under the bed he begins to think: "Are there any Jewish children alive besides me?" (D, 31). He would not want to be the only Jewish child in the world: "I don't want to be alone" (D, 31).

Finally, the mother and the child are thrown out from this hiding place by their Polish hosts. Their next hideout is a little space in a garret and then in an attic. Inside those places there was only "a mattress covered with a blanket and on it were red pillows with feathers sticking out of them. Next to it was a bucket covered with a board and a jug of drinking water with a dipper." Their new hostess, Pani Spryskowa, had been paid by the boy's grandfather to take care of them – she emptied their bucket, topped up the jug with water from the well, and brought them bread. In the next hideout, at the home of Pani Hirniakowa, they lived inside a little space in the attic, in which "besides a straw pallet there was an empty iron bucket with a round wooden lid." The boy had to lie bent over under "the rafter that supported the roof above the pallet" (D, 40). Pani Hirniakowa was a prostitute, and at night the boy heard the creaking of the bed ("elbows and knees banged against the wall"), laughing and groaning. Sometimes Pani Hirniakowa "howled wildly and the bed banged the floor, faster and faster. Terrified by the roars of the men." At those moments the boy looks in the direction of his mother, but he "couldn't make her out in the darkness." He only remembers soldiers puffing out cigarette smoke – "some of them stayed until morning" (D, 41).

The last hiding place was a well, where the boy and his mother were taken by their cousins. They reached the destination after footslogging for several hours. One of their relatives lowered them down and another grabbed their legs. Next, they found themselves in the arms of the boy's aunt Niusia, his mother's sister. They hugged and wept for a very long time. The mother and her son began the last stage of their hiding, an underground life, which was wet and smelt of moss:

During the day it was hot. Soaked with sweat, we sat or lay on clay through which water was always seeping. An intense odor of earth and roots permeated everything. [...] Only a few narrow rays of light in which dust was pitch black. (D, 46)

The boy began to perceive himself and his family as moles "huddled against each other" (D, 47). He thought about the death of his grandfather, who

disappeared in the ghetto, and about his father, who committed suicide in their previous hideout, after they left him alone and went to a new hiding place. They had left him because he was too ill to flee with his wife and son. But then the war was over and so was the nightmare: the boy, his mother, and all the cousins made their way to freedom.

Both novels show very precisely the situation of Jewish children in hiding places. Semel strongly emphasizes the interior situation of the child in the hiding place (the feelings of the girl in the potato pit) and the observation of the child by an adult (the memoir of the priest who decided to survive her). In Dichter's novel the attention of the narrator is focused on the outside world, and his observations and relating of events. The adults' relationships to him are made evident in dialogues quoted by the narrator.

### A Jewish Child

The child in the world of the Holocaust is one of the basic subjects in contemporary literature, not only that written in Polish.<sup>9</sup> The boy in Dichter's novel survives not only as a Jewish child but also as a human being. The heroine of the novel by Semel was not so lucky. The Holocaust destroyed her humanity forever. Although the boy lost his father, grandparents, many members of his family, and his friends, he saved himself, his internal world, and his Jewishness. It was possible thanks to his grandfather, parents and cousins, who were with him all the time – they did not leave or lose him.

Before the war the boy was raised in the cult of German culture: "In the living room, in a wicker *étagère*, there was a multivolume German dictionary bound in green leather. Its smooth, cold pages were covered with Gothic letters" (D, 7). In their conversations, his grandmother and mother recalled vividly their life in Austria, when they lived in Vienna, which in their memory was a city "where Jews were happy" and the "Danube flowed with milk and honey" (D, 7). Everything changed when the Soviet-German war broke out. First, the boy and his family heard news about Jews being deported from their

9 C.f.: Małgorzata Wójcik-Dudek *Reading (in) the Holocaust: Practices of Post-memory in Recent Polish Literature for Children and Young Adults* (Berlin: Peter Lang, 2020); Krzysztof Rybak, "Sparing Them the Trauma: Postmemory Practices in Contemporary Polish Children's Literature About the Holocaust," *Filoteknos* 8 (2018): 169–183; Małgorzata Wójcik-Dudek, "Memory Boom and Imaginarium of Holocaust in Polish Literature for Young Readers," *Filoteknos* 10 (2020): 309–323; Lydia Kokkola, *Representing the Holocaust in Children's Literature* (New York: Routledge, 2003); Hamida Bosmajian, *Sparing the Child: Grief and the Unspeakable in Youth Literature about Nazism and the Holocaust* (London: Routledge, 2002); *Global Perspectives on Death in Children's Literature*, ed. Lesley D. Clement and Leyli Jamali (London: Routledge, 2016).

homes by the Germans, about railway transports of people riding in unhuman conditions in stock cars, where they had to relieve themselves where they stood and where “children slipped onto the floor and suffocated under the feet of the grown-ups” (D, 25).

He heard about many Jews, who gave their children for a fee to Polish and Ukrainian families. Finally, the boy experiences the horror of the Shoah himself, when he has to escape together with his parents during an operation to round up Jews. At the time, he states, frightened and tired: “Mama I can’t go any farther. I don’t want to live” (D, 27).

During their next stay in hiding, he often analyzed his situation, and came to realize the antisemitism that dominated among non-Jews. He shared his reflections, in which special risks were posed by his non-Jewish peers:

I was most afraid of children. I was convinced that they would recognize me instantly in the street and hand me over to the Germans. Grown-ups might take pity on me, but not children. I dreamed that I was running away from them. I was running blindly, farther and farther, until I stopped because I didn’t know what to do next. (D, 30)

He was very interested in the fate of other Jewish children during the war. From his grandpa who visited him from time to time, he learned about them, and that “there weren’t any left in the ghetto by now,” that “the healthy ones were taken away,” and “the sick ones” were taken by “a gigantic German,” who “came to the hospital” and “ordered a nurse to pick them up and killed them, one after the other, with a shot from his pistol. He shot the nurse last” (D, 30). And he hears horrible news about his little cousin, whose family gave him to peasants for safekeeping:

“They took Romuś away,” [Grandpa – S. J. Ż.] said indistinctly.

[...]

“They took off his diaper to see if he was circumcised.”

“Who betrayed him?”

“The woman next door.” (D, 31)

The protagonist is tormented by the question: “Are there any Jewish children alive besides me?” (D, 31). He is afraid being alone in the world without other children. In Wilhelm’s subconscious, the fact that the Germans recognized Romuś reinforced his conviction that it was more difficult to survive as Jewish boy, leading him to dream that he had become a girl. In this dream, because of which his friend Marek Bernstein no longer wanted to play with him, being a girl enhanced in him the feeling of freedom: “I turned into a balloon. The

wind tossed me around in the courtyard where squares for hopscotch were drawn in chalk. Suddenly, I flew off in the direction of the oil fields. Way up high” (D, 47). But even this experience finished tragically – in his oneiric vision the balloon in the end burst...<sup>10</sup>

The months he spent hiding under a bed, then in the cramped space of an attic, and finally in a well, changed his physiognomy. When the war was over, after many months of hiding, he sees his own reflection in the mirror and notes:

In front of me hung a cracked mirror in a frame with daisies on its corners. My black hair, forehead, and the tips of my ears looked like they'd been lopped off with scissors. (My hair was curly, even though I'd tried flattering it all the time in the well, holding my hands on my head.) Black eyes filled with rage looked at me from under a crack in the mirror. The dry skin on my face was wrinkled. My upper lip was raised, revealing my teeth. [...] With a face like that I had survived! (D, 56)

It was like a picture from the antisemitic caricatures disseminated in Nazi propaganda during the war.

The boy was very knowledgeable about the risks posed by antisemitism, risks which did not pass after the end of the war in Poland. For this reason, he was still afraid of his Polish peers. He did not go out on the playground to spend time with them and *de facto* remained in his hiding place out of fear of the non-Jewish world:

Now the Germans were gone, but the children were still here. [...] I imagined that they would beat me as soon as I came out of the house. Before anyone could notice, it would all be over. (D, 57)

When they were near him, he responded nervously: “I heard children’s voices and withdrew into the far corners of the kitchen” (D, 59). Although he was no longer threatened by war – as he notes – when he went out with his mother into the streets, “out of the fear of the children” he “looked at the ground” (D, 60). After the Germans’ departure, he could not return to his own house in Borysław because “pan Skiba was living there now” (D, 55).

After settling with his mother and stepfather (in Lower Silesia), he continues to experience persecution from non-Jewish children. He is marked as a “kike” and a “scab.” At the sight of him, unknown boys recite a rhyme:

<sup>10</sup> See *Psychoanalytic and Cultural Aspects of Trauma and the Holocaust: Between Postmemory and Postmemorial Work*, ed. Rony Alfandary and Judith Tydor Baumel-Schwartz (London: Routledge, 2023).

Who are you?  
 A little Jew.  
 What's your sign?  
 A slice of challah.  
 Who gave rise to you?  
 Bad times.  
 What awaits you?  
 A strong limb.  
 What's beneath it?  
 Level ground.  
 And what upon it?  
 Piles of shit. (D, 130)

Next, in Queen Jadwiga School in Warsaw, the children harassed him (splashing him with ink, pelting him with paper balls), calling out that “Jews killed Jesus,” and that they were “Russian flunkeys” and “Communists” (D, 177).

The situation of the protagonist of Semel's novel was different. She was completely alone among unknown adults – Polish people. A symbolic and highly suggestive description of the position of a Jewish child can be found there in the form of esoteric poems written many years after the Holocaust:

Once upon a time  
 There was a little Jewish girl  
 And she had  
 Little Jewish hands  
 And little Jewish eyes  
 And a little Jewish mouth  
 And a little Jewish body  
 And a big hole (S, *Lullaby*, 53)

The nameless girl never says her name out loud “in the muddles of the darkness.” Similarly, to many children of the Holocaust, she was not “even allowed to pronounce it, because if she did, that would be end of her” (S, 27). The girl did not like the word “Jewish” or maybe she did not understand its meaning. When she was living with her assimilated parents during the war, she asked them: “What is a Jew?” – and then she commented on this question herself: “if it's such a terrible thing to be a Jew, why did you make me one?” (S, 14). Therefore, it is not surprising that she considered whether it was possible to “stop being Jewish at all.” She was aware that “if being Jewish was such a terrible thing, then being a Jewish little girl was the worst thing in the world”

(S, 15). For the farmers as well, the girl was first of all a Jew, a “Christ-killer” (S, 78). At the time of the Holocaust, she belonged to a community of which there would soon be “no trace in this world” (S, 78).

While hiding in the potato pit, she perceives herself not as a human being, but as an animal, because “only the worst creatures in the world lived under the ground. Moles and snakes and worms. And the worst of all were rats. She was worse than any of them though, if she had to be hidden away from all the people up above” (S, 16). In the darkness, which was “her old ally” (S, 16), she did not think about the death of other people but about her own death: “maybe [...] [she was– S. J. Ż.] really dead. Because only dead people get pushed so deep down” (S, 16). She “kept thinking that even God, whoever he may be, was ashamed of her. Otherwise He wouldn’t be hiding her in the dark” (S, 18).

But what really took place in the pit? What was it that traumatized the girl so strongly? What did she hear and what did she feel? An old woman or “the little-girl-who-once-was” told her a story in a children’s language.

The footsteps of the farmer’s son.

At five she could count already. Up to ten, and one more. Coming down, closer, his legs heavy, the wooden ladder creaking. The ninth rug is shaky. Ave Maria, Holy Mother, make him stumble and crash. But the farmer’s son knows about the weak rug, and tread carefully. She counts till she runs out of numbers.

She doesn’t know exactly how old he was. To her he was a man. How could she tell?

A breed of giants, mean, deceitful, treacherous. (S, 19)

The five-year-old Jewish girl was regularly abused sexually, or even literally raped, by an adult Polish male.<sup>11</sup> Since that experience, the girl “didn’t want to become a grown-up. Ever” (S, 17). Adults were cruel, ruthless, and horrible. They lied, they did not keep promises, and they murdered one another.

I have a big pit outside me  
 I have a little pit within  
 The big pit is mine  
 The little pit is the Stefan’s (S, 47)

The girl believed that only animals were honest. One of them was a rat whom she encountered in the pit and who became her friend. But she still

11 See *Sexual Violence Against Jewish Women During the Holocaust*, ed. Sonja M. Hedgepeth and Rochelle G. Saidel (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press; Hanover Mass.: University Press of New England, 2010).

did not feel that she was a human-being. What do the esoteric poems in the novel tell us about those two small pets, a Jewish girl and her rat? "One two. That's that. / One child. One rat," (S, 85) "Guess what it found / One child in the ground" (S, 85).

The way the Jewish child is created is completely different in these two novels. In *God's Horse* the protagonist is fully aware of his Jewishness and what it means. He experienced antisemitism, but he was always supported by Jewish adults. The unnamed girl from Semel's novel was always alone, outside of her Jewish background. Wilhelm, unlike the heroine from *And the Rat Laughed*, did not want to stop being a Jew; he was proud of his heritage, although he understood the consequences connected with this fact.

### Adults

The first adults presented in both novels are the parents of the children. In Dichter's book they accompany their son and hide together through the Holocaust. The boy's father was taking care of his son and wife. When they went to a new hiding place in the well, his father, sick and lacking hope, commits suicide. The child's mother plays a similar role as the father in this process of surviving. Dichter's young protagonist was surrounded by the love and care of his parents and other members of his Jewish family. But he also had a traumatizing experience when they had to change hideouts. The Poles were a threat:

Grandfather and Mother didn't turn around to look at me. Had someone recognized me and shouted, "Grab the little Jew!" they would have disappeared without turning their heads to look. (D, 39)

Jewish adults accompanied him all the time, especially when they hid in the well. The boy remembered:

We came up to the surface at night. First Moszek, with Max's help, then Nusia, me, Mother, and finally Kocio, who had no one to hold his legs from below. [...] We walked around in the orchard. (D, 49)

In Dichter's novel Poles play an important role, though this remains in the background. On the one hand side, without their help (which was always richly paid) it was impossible for him and his Jewish relatives to survive, but on the other hand, Poles could betray hiding people without any consequences, to denounce them at the police station or to the Gestapo or kill them. For the protagonist-narrator a special area where he experiences the antisemitism

of Polish adults is Borysław Street. On this street, when his mother was leaving the ghetto in a hurry (before the displacement action), “two women who were laundering linen in the river started shouting when they sight of her. ‘Catch her! She’s a Jewess!’” (D, 31). When he was in town with his mother and grandfather, the boy preferred to avoid looking at anybody, directing his gaze towards the pavement:

All I saw was legs. Cuffed trousers and work pants tucked into clumsy boots with foot wrapping sticking out of them, the bare calves of women standing on tiptoe, and the black, mind-caked feet of children pushing their way to the front of the crowd. (D, 39)

In the case of Semel’s protagonist, the Jewish girl did not understand the decision of her parents. She was not sure if they loved her, and only remembered that “Mother said be a good girl,” “Father said nothing” (S, 48), and then they turned their backs on her. After this event, the girl changed her attitude to God: “if in fact He does exist – God is a mother who turns her back” (S, 18).

The second group of adults, like in Dichter’s novel, are the Polish housekeepers who decided, in both novels, to hide Jews for money. But these people have a place center stage. The protagonist of Semel’s novel thought that the majority of them “hate Jews,” and did not know why they had agreed to provide hiding places. The Polish host, who is shown to be a real monster, is named Stefan. This is how he is presented by the narrator:

Stefan, that was his name. The farmer and his wife had all kinds of nicknames for him. Stefcho. Stefaniu. Stefanek. They were his parents. She heard them calling him up above. She could detect the affection in their voice. With her sharpened senses she could detect everything from below. He ate pork sausage, worked on the farm, amused himself with the cats and the dogs. On Sundays he went to church in his finest cloths. The village darling. (S, 20)

When Stefan approached the pit, the tension rose. The girl felt that in a moment she would be “prey for the Stefan” (S, 48). When Stefan was close, she thought only about his “tail” (S, 50), located “between his two legs” (S, 51). In the following poetic way, the little girl describes her reaction to these moments:

When The Stefan climbs down  
This is what I do:  
I bang my head and hope (S, 51)

In the beginning she understands it as “the game that we play / The Stefan, the child” (S, 52). She asks herself why he is such an inhumane person – when did “the sweet, rosy-cheeked child” turn into “a predator?” (S, 82). She makes

up a mythological story of a little Stefan who is a “Saint,” and is “as small as an elf”:

He was snatched from his bed  
By Mister Satan himself  
  
A horrible monster  
Was what his parents found  
Their sweet and cuddly baby  
Disappeared in the ground (S, 53–54)

“The Stefan” in the pit was not an elf from the myth. He “thrashes,” “bashes,” “slashes.” He was like a wild animal and the little-girl-who-once-was during this time vomits “in silence” (S, 54). He forces the child to perform oral sex, saying to her: “I’ll stick it in your mouth. / Swallow it. / And again, swallow it. Always swallow” (S, 21), raping and humiliating her repeatedly: “Open your Jewish legs. More. Much more. A Jewish hole. That’s what you are” (S, 22). In her perception, Stefan belongs to the Christian world: his prayer is the “Ave Maria” (S, 21) and she associates him with the Christian God: “Darkness. The farmer’ wife. A rat. Ave Maria. The Stefan. Darkness. The Stefan. Ave Maria. Darkness. The Stefan. Darkness” (S, 22). To the five-year-old girl, the nightmare seems to last forever: “the Stefan comes down,” “the Stefan goes up,” “yesterday is what came before,” “tomorrow is what comes next,” “down comes the Stefan,” “up goes the Stefan” – “that’s how time marches on (S, 55). Her only desire is for Stefan to perish, this would have been “the happiest day” for her (S, 57).

When the peasants’ family decide to bring the Jewish girl out, they take her to a priest. When she sees him, she thinks the cleric will be the next Christian rapist, the next Stefan. This association is triggered by the confessional from which the priest comes out:

Emerging from a black pit-box was another Stefan. [...] Six years old, the little girl understood they were about to shove her into another darkness. A black figure stuck a head-spike out of the other side of the pit-box. (S, 24)

This black figure was Stash – the parson in a Roman Catholic parish in a Polish village, the next Polish adult protagonist in Semel’s novel. He was a good man. He preached to his congregation:

[...] the Jews are part of the body of mankind. This part cannot be severed. That is the pit that all of us came from. Remember how you invite anyone who is hungry to join you in your holiday meal, and you even say: A guest in our home is God in

our home. After the meal you will pull the bundles of straw out from under the tablecloth, a symbolic wish for longevity. (S, 86)

When Stash becomes aware of what had happened to the girl in the farmers' pit, he is intent to cure her trauma. He wonders: "How many children of pits and of basements, children of cupboards, children of boxes and niches are coming out of their holes now? Who will wait for them in a light that is no light?" (S, 100). The girl, when he sees her first, is very scared and sad. She wanted to learn how to smile and said to Father Stash: "Teach me, please" (S, 94). And he did. But this therapy seemed to last forever – the situation of the little-girl-who-once-was was very complicated. On the one hand, she was very grateful to her teacher because "she never laughed like this in her whole life," but, on the other hand, when she tried to laugh, "she could hear a strange sound coming out of her, as if a weird creature was laughing somewhere in the dark" (S, 46). She did not smile because she was staying "forever in a pit" (S, 67). There was only one way out of this situation for the little-girl-who-once-was, traumatized by the Holocaust: she had "to break into [a – S. J. Ž.] Dream Machine" and begin a voyage toward non-memory. This meta-narrative chapter titled "Night of 31 December 2099" takes the readers to the future of the memory about the Holocaust. The protagonist also wanted to take Stash with her on this symbolic journey, which helped him to understand her traumatic situation better. The little-girl-who-once-was says to the priest: "You are my future, Stash. Maybe this argument will convince you to let me go. Something is waiting at the end of the voyage" (S, 67). For many months, Stash was traumatized by her story, which is why he also needed this "dreaming therapy" – the little-girl-who-once-was becomes an everlasting "remembrance" of Stash (S, 71). Maybe the one and only rescue for him was the planting of "a false experience" into his brain? At a certain point, Stash begins to identify himself with the rat from the potato pit. He becomes the rat:

Without a trace.  
This voyage...  
I must return to the pit...  
Need to go deep down. (S, 65)

During the Holocaust, and after a long therapy in the niche, where Stash tries to accompany the little girl as long as he can, she began to gradually believe and trust him. At last she says to him: "promise me something. [...] swear to me that you will never ever die" (S, 96). When after the war a Jewish officer from the Soviet Army takes her away, she reacts in the same way as

when her parents gave her to the farmers' family: "Stash! You're bad, Stash! The worst, Stash!" (S, 101). The priest notes in his memoir:

Her cries cut through me. I will know no peace, day or night. The beast of memory will remain trapped in the lair of my body, sinking its teeth into me and biting. But I am grateful, because the bleeding wound will keep me from forgetting her. (S, 101)

In this moment, he understood what was happening. He was as a mother who had forsaken a "nameless child" (S, 101), he was a bereaved father and she was his daughter: "Daughter. This is your true name" (S, 102). Paradoxically, she loved him so much and suffered so many times during the Shoah, that in the end she forgot him. Regardless of that, the priest hopes that "perhaps someday a miracle will happen, and you will find the strength to remember me. One vibrant moment of razor-blade memory. That is my only wish. I will rise out of the Tohu and Bohu within you. [...] Before the end – forgive me, my daughter, bles me, for I have sinned" (S, 102).

The adults in these two novels are both Poles and Jews. (In these two cases there were no Germans as protagonists). The tragedy of Jewish children is set among adults. In Dichter's book, Jewish people rescue the Jewish child. In the world of the Holocaust in Semel's novel the only Jewish protagonist is the unnamed girl surrounded by Poles – both bad and good. In both cases, the fate of the Jewish child is tragic. The girl from Semel's book is treated instrumental by everybody, all her life she will bear the imprint of the Holocaust. Therefore, the next generations will also suffer from the Holocaust. For the boy who stayed in Poland the Holocaust was not over when the war ended. He experiences how antisemitism remains alive in Poland after the Second World War.<sup>12</sup>

## Animals

Before the Holocaust, the little girl was afraid of animals that lived underground, especially rats.<sup>13</sup> What had been her nightmare became her friend

<sup>12</sup> See *Children in the Holocaust and its Aftermath: Historical and Psychological Studies of the Kestenberg Archive*, ed. Sharon Kangisser Cohen, Eva Fogelman and Dalia Ofer (New York: Berghahn, 2017).

<sup>13</sup> "Among the numerous animal phobias, the one targeting rodents, especially rats, has a name – *rodentophobia*. Rats in the anthropocentric order occupy one of the lowest positions. 'The Rat has acquired a low status because, as Marek Mikołajec states, it seems to embody itself/evil; What is defiled, what is dirty, is closely linked to the symbolism of purity and impurity, which is the fundamental order that organizes culture.'" [Marek Mikołajec, *Profanacje, rewizje – przeciw doktrynom: dwa opowiadania z debiutanckiego tomu Witolda Gombrowicza* (Katowice: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego, 2014), 89]. "In the Dictionary of Symbols under the entry 'rat' we read that this animal symbolizes,

in her hiding place. Paradoxically – from the postwar perspective – the rat was the one and only good remembrance of the Jewish girl from the pit. She mentioned the rat many times during her stay at the priest’s niche, and her voice always became soft when she spoke of it. After many years, she wrote in a poem: “I have a friend with a tail / And he has four legs” (S, 51):

I give you the name  
First just Rat  
Then My Pet

Then I give you one with panache  
Like Stanislaw or Stash  
Tell me yours, Little Girl  
You implore. (S, 50)

A very important part of Semel’s book is a legend about the rat, created by God but dissatisfied “with what God had given him” (S, 41). He did not accept audacity and preferred “the ability to laugh” (S, 41). The rat from the pit was a messenger from God, a kind of angel who wanted to be able to laugh. He was unable to succeed, but “tried everything he could to make her laugh” (S, 42):

He hopped around in the pit, he crawled out of the tunnel, he climbed back in, he sniffed at her smooth skin covering, he ate out of her hand, and she almost laughed, till the rat was convinced that pretty soon he’d succeed in laughing along with her. (S, 42)

Amazingly, his behavior showed that it was not a human being that was created in a divine image – it was the rat. In the darkness of the pit the rat met not only the little Jewish girl but also Stefan. He saw Stefan “bite her,” “digging tunnels inside her.” The rat compared himself with the young adult and “concluded that it was definitely a human creature” (S, 42). The world of the Holocaust, it is implied between the lines, was God’s worst mistake:

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among other things, a demon, the devil, rape, destruction, disease, pestilence, plague, famine, decay, death [See Władysław Kopaliński, *Słownik symboli* (Warszawa: Wiedza Powszechna, 1990), 409], and therefore everything that is the worst. The Rat has very negative connotations, mainly in Western European culture.” (I would like to note here Justyna Tymieniecka-Suchanek’s article: “‘Oto, jaki jest szczur,’ czyli jak podążać w stronę hipotetycznej wizji koegzystencji ludzi i szczurów...” [“Behold the Rat’ or How to Move Toward a Hypothetical Vision of Coexistence Between Humans and Rats”], *Teksty Drugie* 4 (2022): 169–170.

Because a world where children need to be placed in hiding, a world like that isn't just a glitch, it's the total collapse of all systems. A world like that ought to be wiped out completely and started from scratch. (S, 43)

To the little girl, the rat was the most wonderful creature and "the happiest creature on earth!" (S, 43). When she scared it in the darkness, the rat laughed:

His laughter made the ground shake. It was his first and last laugh, and it made the pit shake too from end to end till it shook so hard that the rat collapsed into the pit, and was buried without a trace. (S, 43)

The priest, Stash, reacts to the efforts of the rat and the child's reaction in the following way:

Blessed is the child who has heard the laughter of a rat. Somewhere in the heart of the light that leads to the traces of the life that was, this memory too lives on. To expect laughter in pitch darkness is complete madness. But the rat continues to gape.

And God saw that laughter was good, and left the flawed world as it was. Teach Him to laugh, Little Girl, and He will be forever grateful. (S, 96)

The rat became, for the little girl, the only real human being in the world of the Holocaust because only he loved her so much.<sup>14</sup> By contrast, Stefan became "the Rat" (S, 44), the girl's nightmare: "The Stefan also has a tail / It's between his two legs" (S, 51) – his mouth called her "the Whore." In a poem, the little girl talks to the rat about her tragic situation as a female:

Lucky you're a he-rat  
 And not a she-rat  
 Lucky you're a he-animal  
 And not a she-animal  
 Because only a he-rat  
 Can get out and move on  
 And every she-rat  
 Is prey for the Stefan (S, 47)

14 Kolář notices that the protagonist of *Painted Bird* by Jerzy Kosiński – a child of the Holocaust – also emphasizes relations with animals: "The Boy's approach to animals is understandable: in his exposure to dangers and in his muteness, he is like them. Actually, he is one of them: in his imagination he becomes an animal." Stanislav Kolář, "Animal Imagery in Kosiński's *The Painted Bird* and Spiegelman's *Maus*," 89.

This is what Father Stash thought about the rat in the girl's hiding place: "I was so happy that there was something human in the pit with her" (S, 42). This story became so deeply engrained in his memory that "the little girl and the rat are deep inside" (S, 45). This story stayed alive inside him: "the little-girl-who-once-was existed. The pit-that-once-was existed. Darkness. Nothing more. And the Stefan..." (S, 63). In this underground story the girl and rat were nameless, only Stefan had a name. This is because in this way the story, with all its horrors, will be better remembered "before it'll be forever buried" (S, 63).

In the girl's new hiding place, Father Stash, a Polish Roman Catholic priest, assumed the role of the friendly rat. The girl once told him that "she never ever left the pit. Only the rat did" (S, 35). The man wanted to cheer her up when she was barely alive in her niche, so he hopped, sniffed, moved his whiskers, pricked up his ears, beat his "hairless tail against the walls." In the end he concluded: "I am her human rat" (S, 90). The girl liked it very much. She pulled at her rat and said: "Stash, you're the best rat in the world" (S, 94). He also wanted the girl to keep smiling: "I will stretch out my rat tail, and I will laugh to you" (S, 102).

One day when Father Stash returned from the school, he found the girl "squatting in the niche, drawing on the walls with her piece of charcoal" (S, 96). When he tried to peek inside, she hid the picture with her body. He then discovered that it was "a charcoal drawing of the Last Judgment on the wall" (S, 97). The little Jewish girl had painted it in complete darkness. The priest could see in this drawing her own imagination of the Last Judgment Day. It was also an interpretation of her own story, which Stash quickly understood. In the girl's artistic imagination, "the hand of God reaches under the altar, tipping the scales in full view of the archangel Gabriel. Above them is the Holy Mother on her throne, holding a rat in her lap" (S, 97).

The same motive recurs in this fantastic vision of the future of the next generations: "I activated the location search engine. The implachip [an implant of memory – S. J. Ż.] probes put me in Eastern Europe, and the database crossed me with the ruins of a forgotten church that was uncovered only recently" (S, 65). This was the Madonna-of-the-Rat Church, and inside there was a strange iconography of "the Last Judgment Day, drawn with something solid, possibly a piece of charcoal. In the center was the Madonna cradling a gaping-mouthed rat. Next to her, the earth had opened wide, and a long procession of people was emerging, led by a little girl, her face a blur" (S, 65).

As the priest describes in his diary (December 25, 1944; Christmas Day), the Madonna painted by the girl was a Jewish woman with "the Star of David around her neck," which the priest "added using a twig that had been covered over with dirt." The rat was "not laughing out of joy or derision." The rat's

mouth was “gaping at the horror” of that which would be and that which had been. “It is the laughter of those who accompany the dead,” as they stared “into the pit” (S, 101). In the picture in the niche, the whole story of the Jewish girl was encoded: a Jewish woman, a Jewish girl, people, the rat, and the pit of the Holocaust. But the rat was situated where in traditional iconography one finds Christ. This imaginary vision of the Last Judgment Day is more horrible than the traditional one: although the people around “are rolling with laughter” (S, 101), this is not the laughter of rejoicing but a nervous laughter of horror. Was it “[a – S. J. Ż.] disgrace. A desecration” (S, 101)?

How did the Jewish girl know Christian iconography? When Stash realized how bare the walls were in his room, he removed “the icons from the dusty shelves in the sacristy and scattered them in the corners” (S, 83). The painted Christian saints were the only humans the girls saw for many months. “From time to time, she steals a glance at the icons, but leans tightly against the wall of her niche, so as to leave it free” (S, 83).

What is the meaning of the animal in Dichter’s novel? The protagonist of *God’s Horse* also lives during the Holocaust in the underground world. Nonetheless a rat but the horse is the key-figure in this book.<sup>15</sup> It symbolizes first of all the longing for freedom. The boy’s father, staying with his next of kin in their hiding place in the attic, often sketched horses in crayon:

During the day Mother sat near Father and watched him sketch. A horse’s head with crazed eyes. A couple of lines with his pencil. The mane, reins, the horse’s back, a saddle, a knight’s leg in iron plates. Then he started in a different place. A sword, a gloved hand and an arm. He sketched rapidly. Spears, wings at the shoulders. A galloping hoof. (D, 37)

This horse expressed also protest against the situation in which the Jews were forced to live. In these hastily made sketches, a horse together with a hussar bestrode it, which was usually meant to depict the strength and efficiency of the Polish military, in this place becomes a symbol of God or His messenger, who winged as a hussar rescues the Jews.

Then, during their move from the attic to a new hiding place, this time in a well in the country, the boy was reminded of how he sat on Moszek, who was carrying him on his back. He “sat on Moszek as if [he – S. J. Ż.] were riding

<sup>15</sup> In Dichter’s novel like in Semel’s, the relationship of a little protagonist to rats are depicted: “In the early afternoon I went to the cemetery with Mother to look for Father’s grave. Mother kept smoothing her hair. I had been never in a cemetery and I was afraid that rats were living there in underground labyrinths. When we were in the well I was always touching the damp wall to make sure that a rat wouldn’t emerge through it” (D, 60).

a horse, holding tight to his forehead" (D, 45). He understood this way as the path toward freedom, oddly enough, because it led to the next hiding place, and the perspective of being together with a wide range of relatives, not only with his mother. Since this time, he often had dreams, in which a horse played an important role:

Lying on my left side with my knees tucked under my chin, I imagined that I was a hussar. I was riding on the back of an immense horse with a sword in my hand. The hoofs were pounding. I could hear the sound of wings and the clanking armor of the men who were chasing me. However, I had forgotten about the lances, and I had to break off the attack. We moved off again with sword and lances. And the reins? While galloping I bent over the horse's mane and caught the reins between my teeth. (D, 61)

These images did not persist after the war. The word "horse" appeared also in another meaning and context. In one moment, his stepfather began to call him irreverently: "philosopher," "three-toed sloth," "prophet," "tzaddik Elimelech" (D, 151); yet he was so alienated from reality, that in fact he did not know if he was alive... And finally, he simply refers to him as "God's horse" (D, 151).

The animals it these two books play an important role and acquire new symbolic meanings.<sup>16</sup> In both cases they are found in the novels' titles.<sup>17</sup> In Semel's novel, the rat<sup>18</sup> is also a protagonist, the one who saved the girl's humanity and became the guiding light for a human heroine. He attains a messianic rank. The end of the world according to Christian mythology is nothing compared to the horror of the Holocaust. In this vision, people were a disap-

16 Cf.: Dobrosława Wężowicz-Ziółkowska and Emilia Wieczorkowska, *Biological Turn. Idee biologii w humanistyce współczesnej* (Katowice: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego, 2016); Joshua Patel, "The 'Biological Turn' in History Writing," *Exchanges* 4 (2) (2017): 280–297.

17 Kolář writes: "The use of animal imagery enables writers to explore the relationship between perpetrators, bystanders, and victims during the Nazi genocide and clearly exemplifies the predatory nature of Nazism." Referring to the figures of animals present in the titles of books about the Holocaust, he states: "The titles themselves call the reader's attention to animals that play very important roles in the novels' structures. Not only do they help to organize and unify the entire work but they also underscore the traumatic ordeal of the main characters and clarify the hierarchy of the war-stricken society." (Kolář, "Animal Imagery," 87).

18 Justyna Tymieniecka-Suchanek writes, that "[...] there are few animal studies devoted exclusively to rats (and mice). Usually these are single articles, scattered in scientific journals, or a few chapters in monographs." See for instance, in Polish literary studies: Piotr Krupiński, *„Dlaczego gęsi krzyczały?” Zwierzęta i Zagłada w literaturze polskiej XX i XXI wieku* (Warszawa: IBL PAN, 2016), 24–27, 71–104, 105–144. (Tymieniecka-Suchanek, 174–175).

pointment. The Stephan, an adult human-being, became a horrible monster, like a wild rat from the girl's pre-Holocaust nightmares. After the Holocaust, the rat and animals in general replaced humans. This is why Stash realized that if he wanted to maintain his humanity, the girl had to see a rat in him. The Rat replaced Christ and, as an animal, is the only savior after the experience of the Shoah. In Dichter's novel, the name "God's Horse" was given to the main protagonist – a Jewish child who survived the Holocaust, living through its horror. His situation after the Shoah changes. He belonged to those who remained of the Polish Jewry; the Communist period in postwar Poland gave him a chance for a normal life. He is the instrument in God's hands. The boy survived, he was like God's horse, who had a mission concerning humankind. This mission was the rescue of Jewishness. Whereas Semel's use of animals is more metaphorical, Dichter's image of animals serves as an allegory.

### **Perspective of Memory Studies, Animal Studies, and Trans-generation Studies (Conclusion)**

The Holocaust violated the traditional structure of reality and of culture. Historical memory of it proved to be useless in narrating this tragedy of the subsequent generations of Jews. The number of victims, the ways in which they were murdered, their inconceivable suffering, the indifference of bystanders, and the cruelty of the perpetrators proved impossible to express. Therefore, as twenty-first century literature on the Shoah speaks to the young generation of readers, it makes an effort to propose new forms of memory.

During the Holocaust, children were no longer children, adults were no longer adults, and animals were no longer just animals. Jewish children and adults became *Untermensch*, sub-children and sub-human-beings, similarly to rats, which were considered sub-animals.<sup>19</sup> As Gabriela Jarzębowska writes:

The description/extermination of these animals in sanitary rather than environmental management terms, which is a consequence and reflection of the process of symbolic exclusion of the rat from the vertebrate community and its degradation

<sup>19</sup> "In reference to the figure of *homo sacer* of Agamben, Robin Mackenzie proposes the figure of the *beast sacer*, i.e. the category of 'subanimal.'" (See Robin Mackenzie, "How the Politics of Inclusion/Exclusion and the Neuroscience of Dehumanization/Rehumanization Can Contribute to Animal Activists' Strategies: *Bestia Sacer II*," *Society & Animals* 19 (2011): 407–424). Quoted from: Gabriela Jarzębowska, "Retoryka deratyzacji w PRL: od czystki etnicznej i politycznej do czystki gatunkowej," *Teksty Drugie* 2 (2018): 123.

to the level of “sub-animal,” shows analogies with the processes of dehumanization in genocide programs.<sup>20</sup>

In this context, traditional anthropological research tools have nothing to offer in approaching the Holocaust literature, which is powerless in its dealing with the nature of the Shoah.<sup>21</sup> After Second World War, the concept of being human found itself in great crisis. Authors began to propose a new vision of humanity, destroyed in the Holocaust. Therefore, perhaps only post-human methodology<sup>22</sup> can produce analyses of the Holocaust, and the ontological status of it can only be addressed in animal studies.

The newest literature also shows that the Holocaust completely destroyed Jewish trans-generational relationships.<sup>23</sup> The second generation was so traumatized by their parents (mainly children of the Holocaust) that they could not be confronted with their ancestors' testimonies: this was only possible for the third generation. Thus, the latest literature has the ambition to act as a new inter-generational medium that would be capable of relaying the horror of the Shoah, but experiencing at the same time the utopianism of the wish to express the inexpressible. Since the Holocaust, the Jewish hiding place has become a symbol of coverture from antisemitism and, at the same time, of the disruption of relations between Jews and non-Jews. Throughout the diaspora, many Jews have remained in hiding, psychologically and mentally, until today... Life in post-Holocaust reality, together with the memory of the Holocaust, has proved difficult for the next generations of both Jews and non-Jews. Nevertheless, attempts are made in contemporary literature to tell the experience of the Shoah in many ways. Paradoxically, the Holocaust today is not only the experience of the first generation: the next generations did not

20 Ibid. C.f.: Adrian Franklin, “An Improper Nature? Introduced Animals and ‘Species Cleansing’ in Australia,” in *Human and Other Animals. Critical Perspectives*, ed. Bob Carter and Charles Nickie (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2011); Dinesh Joseph Wadiwel, *The War against Animals (Critical Animal Studies)* (Leiden, Boston: Brill/Rodopi, 2015).

21 *Annihilating Difference: the Anthropology of Genocide*, ed. Alexander Laban Hinton (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002).

22 See Rosi Braidotti, *The Posthuman* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2019); Rosi Braidotti, *Posthuman Knowledge* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2020); Zoe Jaques, *Children’s Literature and the Posthuman: Animal, Environment, Cyborg* (New York: Routledge, 2015); Andrew John Hicks, *Posthumanism in the Novels of Kurt Vonnegut: Matter that Complains So* (New York: Routledge, 2020).

23 *Generations of the Holocaust*, ed. Martin S. Bergmann and Milton E. Jucovy (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990); Dan Bar-On, *Fear and Hope: Three Generations of the Holocaust* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014).

experience it in reality but they were affected by it. The Holocaust is responsible for their psychological and mental suffering.

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Comparative literary studies on Polish and Israeli Holocaust literatures written by Jews (specifically, the novels by Wilhelm Dichter and Nava Semel) is making an effort to address many questions that arise in different fields of study. In memory studies, it has been asked: How can one live with/without the memory of the Holocaust? Is this memory necessary for subsequent post-war generations? Why do old and young authors write about the same events at the same time? What is the future of this memory and the new forms of it? In animal studies, the following questions have arisen: What kind of new truth about the Shoah can be obtained through literary portrayals of animals? What is the meaning of animals in the newest literary creations of the Shoah? Finally, from the perspective of trans-generation studies, the questions are: Is it possible to build mutual understanding between the first and successive post-Shoah generations? What role can literature play in this process?

## Abstract

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*A Jewish Child in a Polish Hiding Place. Children, Adults, and Animals in Nava Samel's And the Rat Laughed and Wilhelm Dichter's God's Horse*

The article offers a comparative analysis of two contemporary novels by Polish and Hebrew writers of two different generations: Wilhelm Dichter, a child of the Holocaust, and Nava Samel, representing the second post-Shoah generation. The article analyzes the novels with a view to how they portray the situation of Jewish children in hiding places in Poland during Second World War. The literary images of children, adults, and animals in these novels are compared from the perspective of memory studies, animal studies, and trans-generation studies.

## Keywords

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children, adults, animals, Holocaust, Polish and Hebrew contemporary literature, comparative studies, memory studies, animal studies, trans-generation studies